



10-15-1981

## Cheyenne's Hermit of the Hills

Donita Lucas Shields

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview>

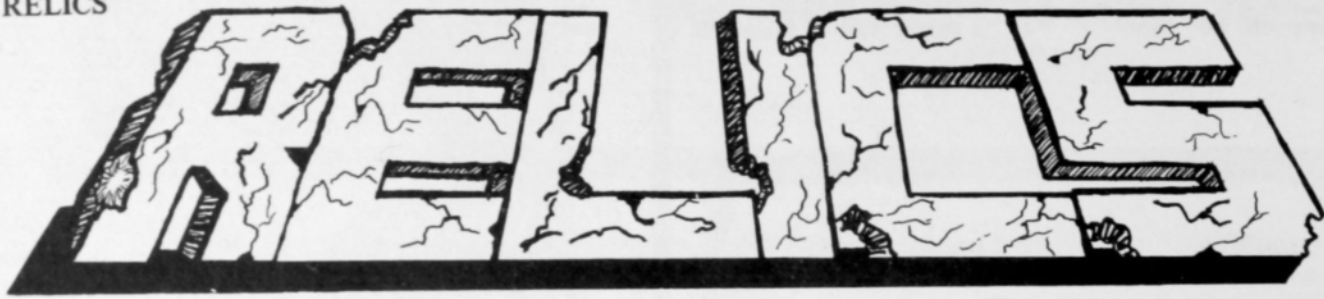
---

### Recommended Citation

Shields, Donita Lucas (1981) "Cheyenne's Hermit of the Hills," *Westview*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 18.  
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview/vol1/iss1/18>

This Nonfiction is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Westview by an authorized administrator of SWOSU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu](mailto:phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu).





LETTERING BY GREG CRUZAN

## .CHEYENNE'S HERMIT OF THE HILLS

— Donita Lucas Shields

"Go see Joe Muhlbacker's old place," advised a friendly Cheyenne native. "It's kinda unusual and peculiar, and Joe was a strange one."

Those descriptions were the understatement of the day, but then Cheyenne folk never brag about their history and their many accomplishments. They have too many of both to single out any one thing and describe it in superlatives. Muhlbacker's old place, however, can be described only in superlatives as the strangest and most unusual, at least in Cheyenne's immediate vicinity.

55 Following the rough, hilly oil field road according to vague directions, I became squeamish as I turned into little more than a cow path leading through a dry, rocky pasture. Turning off the main road, I noted the rusty, faded "No Trespassing" sign even though it was turned the wrong way. My town friend had failed to mention this sign. Bouncing along the crooked trail to the top of a red bluff, I sighted the Muhlbacker ruins atop the next hill, a tantalizing view. It was impossible to turn back after that first glimpse. Anyway, there was no place for a turnaround between the red boulders. Hopefully my faithful vintage Ford could make it back up the steep red cliff.

While drawing closer to the ruins, my emotions stirred with stunned disbelief. Nestled within the top of the red sandy hill is a square concrete half-dugout topped with a ten-foot-tall lookout tower protruding from the flat roof. In front of the little house stands a grotesque sculptural gibberish at least eight feet tall. At the side of this unbelievable artifact is a five-foot primitive but beautifully structured water fountain or bird-bath. Down the hill from this outlandish panorama are the ruins of what must have been the barn and another concrete room.

A distant viewing of Joseph Muhlbacker's ruins can never be enough. If a person is caught

trespassing, he might as well get his money's worth. A careful crawl through rusty barbed wire fence and a short walk wading tall grass and weeds and junk must lead only to even more excitement and stark disbelief. A four-tiered waterfall rock sculpture and a concrete retaining wall with three ornately trimmed compartments border the pathway leading to what may have been Joe's front porch. The porch and the roof over one room of his intriguing home have collapsed, but the remains reveal that the porch posts must have been molded to resemble human legs, knees, and feet. There is nothing now, however, but a few broken and crumbled chunks.

Stumbling down through the rubble toward the doorless entrance into the concrete room, the explorer marvels at the walls which are 3½ feet thick. When stepping inside the room, a person can only gasp at what must have been a place of beauty and splendor. All four walls and the ceiling are completely covered with carefully designed bas-relief and scrollwork surrounding smooth rectangular areas which were once said to have contained pictures covered with glass. Now only a few bits of broken, burned slivers remain.

Along the walls are deep, recessed concrete shelves. These storage areas must have been covered with wooden doors though there is nothing now except a few rusty hinges. At least one-half the height of the thick walls are underground with one-half above the surface. The upper parts of the walls contain two small windows, though no panes or shutters are now evident. One wall holds the caved-in ruins of Joe's fireplace with its concealed steel chimney pipe extending through the roof.

The most outstanding engineering and artistry of Muhlbacker's underground room is the center brace which holds the 2½ feet thick concrete roof intact and reaches on above the roof to

# 1920

## Joseph Muhlbacher



ILLUSTRATION BY PAT LAZELLE

continue as the lookout tower. A person can merely presume that Joe constructed this center sculpture from a large iron pipe and massive steel wheels. Where he obtained them, how he transported them to his hilltop home, and how he hoisted them into place and secured them will likely forever remain a mystery.

Joe coated these iron frameworks with a gorgeous type of knobby sculptured scrollwork to give a spiraling or revolving effect. This center brace shows his talent and skill more than any of his other sculpturings or moldings. Or perhaps it remains beautiful because it does not show the deterioration and vandalism as do his other endeavors. It is amazing how this work has withstood destruction and fire which apparently destroyed so much of the interior.

After climbing back outside Muhlbacker's underground home, it is impossible for anyone to avoid studying the macabre sculpture which seems to be guarding Joe's unusual living quarters. Some people have called the object a "Tree of Life" because one side is a male figure and the other a female. Their arms are entwined as living branches, and the legs supporting the figure represent the roots of a tree.

The most interesting tale concerning this baroque-type sculpture is told in a 1941 issue of the *CHEYENNE STAR*. The article explained that Joe called it his Teddy Roosevelt statue because he once heard President Theodore Roosevelt deliver a speech comparing American democracy to a tree with many different roots. According to Muhlbacker, Roosevelt stated that one root could not possibly destroy democracy unless it was severed. To make the statue authentic, Joe chopped off one of the supporting roots of his statue.

Likely the newspaper article is accurate because old timers claim that the male side of the statue once had the letters ROSENVELT embossed across the forehead, and indeed the sculpture could be said to show a slight resemblance to the old Rough Rider with his steel-rimmed glasses. The female figure still carries the name ZUFRAIGIS, but no one seems to remember what this name might have symbolized. Whatever this strange sculpture may represent, the sculpturing of the human body and the facial features was not one of Joe's finest talents. Viewing the tree of life figure is unsettling to all. Many local people have suggested that it be destroyed, but evidently no one wants the distasteful task of doing away with the oddity.

Standing beside the monstrosity of the "Tree of Life" is the five-tiered water fountain or bird-bath which has remained surprisingly intact throughout the years. The receptacle at the top of the large fountain appears at least three feet in diameter and is approximately eighteen inches deep. The four areas beneath graduate into even larger dimensions with each capable of retaining water, though none are as deep as the upper level. Muhlbacker designed the fountain of concrete with a rough cobblestone effect and trimmed it with small flint rocks. The outer rims of each tier are scalloped and ornamented with scroll-work. Situated at the side of the grotesque sculpture, the fountain appears a beautiful, graceful edifice.

Following the dim trail leading to the barn area, the sightseer finds another concrete half-dugout constructed at one end of the pole-type sheds. The entire barn area is embedded into the side of the sandy hill. Massive timbers hold up the brush-type roof of the shelters. Some of the timbers are two feet in diameter and are at least twelve feet long. The viewer cannot help but wonder if Joe hauled these enormous timbers from the Washita River four miles away. Such trees could not possibly have grown on his hilly quarter section.

Nothing except the walls and the two doorways now remain of the concrete room at the barn, but the smaller structure appears identical with the house with the exception of the ornate center brace and the bas-relief on the walls. The undecorated square concrete pillar now stands surrounded by caved-in debris from the roof. Joe did not reinforce this pillar with iron wheels as he did in the construction of the house

PHOTO BY DONITA LUCAS SHIELDS



View from the back of Joe's place.

roof. Evidently the solitary concrete brace could not withstand the heavy weight and stress of the thick roof. The outer edges are all that now remain of the roof. These crumbling edges are beautifully decorated with round flint stones embedded into the concrete.

The above seems a lengthy description of old Joe Muhlbacker's place, but the aged site is now practically destroyed. In a few short years it may be completely disintegrated for Joe did his sculpturing with materials which will not endure the elements forever. With the exception of igneous flint stones which he used for decorative trim, all other materials are of soft, sedimentary type, highly susceptible to erosion. He mixed his concrete with soft sands hauled from his own personal sand pit on his farm, and he constructed much of his structural forms with soft, red sandstone rock, so prevalent in the area.

Over the years these soft materials have eroded away until in many instances nothing now remains but rusty iron reinforcements and crumpled wire used for his base frameowrks. These rusting frameworks too will deteriorate in time. The cornerstone of his home bears the date of 1920, and it is readily seen how destructive forces of man and nature have wreaked havoc with his accomplishments during the past years.

Life at Cheyenne, Oklahoma, began for Joseph Muhlbacker on June 23, 1905, when he homesteaded on his claim two miles southwest of

PHOTO BY DONITA LUCAS SHIELDS



Dry-wall



town. He was born in Dheutschfiesteritz, Austria, on March 13, 1876, and came to the United States from Bremen, Germany, on June 9, 1901. Joe spent his first four years in the United States working the mines in the eastern states then one year in the state of Washington before settling at Cheyenne. On March 10, 1911, he received his naturalization papers in Roger Mills County and became a United States citizen. He was the only foreigner to ever locate in Cheyenne vicinity.

During World War I Joe developed the obsession that Germans would drop bombs from airplanes in his chosen country. It was for this reason, it is said, that he set to work constructing his bomb-proof house with its lookout tower and the concrete room attached to the barn. Rumors are that he also constructed a tunnel between the house and barn room, but no evidence can be seen today where the tunnel may have exited and entered from the two areas. It was also claimed that Joe spent hours upon his lookout tower watching for German planes. However, this seems somewhat far-fetched when observing how he must have toiled building his home and tilling his farm.

Joe lived alone and never married. People began calling him the Hermit because he lived such a secluded life. He seldom went to Cheyenne except to sell a few eggs in order to buy necessary goods to supplement the foodstuffs he grew

PHOTO BY DONITA LUCAS SHIELDS



The "Tree of Life" sculpture: a silent sentinel keeping watch.

58

on his farm. The longest trip he ever made from his home was to attend a community fair in 1911 at the little town of Berlin fourteen miles to the southeast. Yet he liked people, and they enjoyed him. Old timers as young boys can remember visiting Joe and eating with him. He always served them a delicious-tasting soup almost black in color. The concoction was probably borscht, a mixture of meat stock, cabbage and onions which he raised on his farm.

Old timers also remember swimming in Muhlbacker's farm ponds for in even the driest years Joe always had an adequate water supply. In fact he was the first to practice soil and water conservation in Roger Mills County, many years ahead of its time. With his mules and his crude Fresno he constructed the first terraces, water ways, and detention ponds on his hillside farm. His crops and garden always flourished though droughs frequently destroyed his neighbors' endeavors.

Joe's peach orchard was the finest in that area. People drove from miles around to buy his peaches since they were the largest and juiciest to be found. He never allowed anyone



Masonry technique was used in this side of the barn wall.

to gather the fruit for fear someone might damage his trees. Joe picked them himself while his customers waited and visited. Remains of this peach orchard are still evident at the foot of the hill below his house and barn.

Joe always enjoyed entertaining his friends by playing his quaint black accordion. His repertoire of musical numbers ranged from Strauss waltzes and selections from Haydn and Schubert to the simple dance jigs so popular in those days. He loved for people to dance when he played his jigs. Sometimes he took his accordion with him in his mule cart on his infrequent trips to Cheyenne and played for the town folk while they all sat under a shade tree.

When he entertained at his home, he climbed up on a concrete-embossed ladder and presented his concert from the top of his flat roof, a fine outdoor stage for his audience seated below. Bits and pieces of that steel and concrete ladder still remain where it once attached to the roof of the house. Old timers also remember Joe playing far into the night when he was alone. Many recall his music as a mournful but beautiful serenade, floating down on the still night breeze into the little town of Cheyenne.

Muhlbacker may have been called a hermit by many, but a true hermit would never have accepted the publicity which Joe so thoroughly enjoyed. Joe became famous in 1941 when he was contacted by Mr. J. M. Dubois of Denver, a representative for Pathe and News of the Day for Universal Films. Mr. Dubois interviewed Joe for two days and made pictures of his unusual accomplishments. Universal Films called the newsreel "Stranger Than Fiction." Joseph Muhlbacker and Cheyenne became national celebrities.

Joe's fame, however, did not end with the newsreel. He became so well-known and created so much excitement throughout the nation that

Columbia Broadcasting System of New York City instantly invited him to appear on their popular interview show "We the People." Because of difficulty in understanding Joe's foreign accent, CBS also invited John C. Casady, Joe's friend and editor of Cheyenne Star, to accompany Joe to New York City.

CBS selected Mr. J. Walter Turner, the former president of Southwestern State College of Weatherford and then a teacher in New York City, to host and entertain Muhlbacker and Casady during their stay. Joe, of course, was an instant sensation during his great night of "We the People" broadcast, Tuesday, February 18, 1941.

Joe, having never left Cheyenne during the intervening years between 1905 and 1941 except for the fair at Berlin, must have felt like Rip Van Winkle awakening into an entirely alien world. Before leaving for New York City, he had never talked over a telephone, ridden in a Pullman car, eaten in a restaurant, or had never seen a movie. He could only have marveled at the tall buildings, speeding cars, and roaring trains. According to Casady, Joe enjoyed the luxurious bathtub of hot water in his hotel room more than any of the other modern conveniences.

However, Joe's greatest enjoyment occurred after returning to Cheyenne when he watched his own movie "Stranger Than Fiction" at the Rook Theater on November 14 and 15, 1941. On both evenings John Casady presented remarks concerning their New York City trip and the "We the People" broadcast. Joe also provided his first indoor concert from the stage of the Rook for packed houses both nights.

Joe then returned to the obscurity of his simple life on his hilltop farm. His ways never changed; he still never wore a hat or shaved; he was content with his simple ways and his plain foods. People continued seeing him infrequently when he rode into town in his mule cart or when they purchased peaches. He continued playing his accordion as before. Joe never interfered with others, nor they with him.

Joseph Muhlbacker became ill in 1954 and spent his final year in Cheyenne Hospital where he died July 14, 1955, at seventy-nine years of age. His remains, marked with a simple gray stone, are interred at Cheyenne Cemetery. Yet his stories and his greatest monuments are found at that hilltop homestead where he proved his claim and built his own rare shrine with his two bare hands, the crudest of implements, and the simple materials provided by the land he loved.

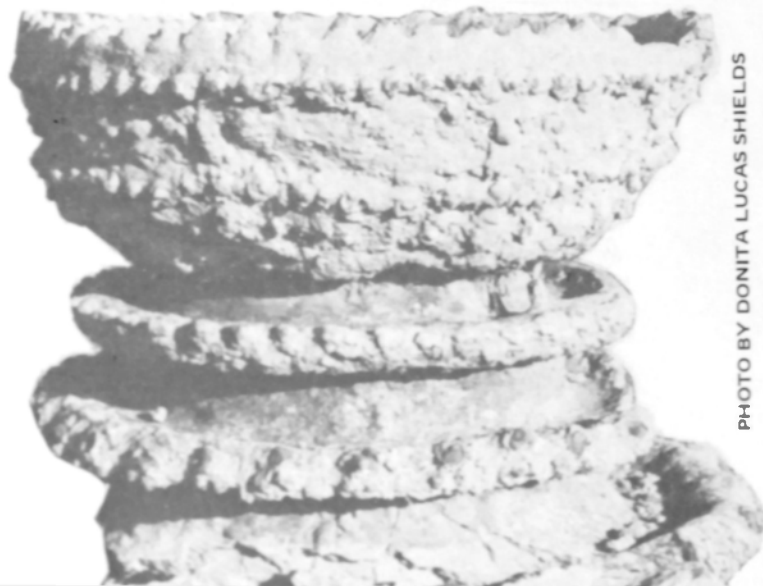


PHOTO BY DONITA LUCAS SHIELDS