

FIRST DRAFT

The hunt for Navajo Sam

Leo Lyyjoki was, for the most part, a gentle, quiet man who helped friends cut firewood and enjoyed watching elk graze near his high-mountain camp.

But in the summer and fall of 1982, Lyyjoki — aka Navajo Sam — became a national sensation for robbing people of food on a backcountry trail near Telluride.



BOB SILBERNAGEL

“A scraggly mountain man, wild-eyed and brandishing a lever-action rifle, is afoot in the San Juan Mountains, robbing hikers and eluding a posse of sheriffs,” said one Daily Sentinel story that July

Adding to his legend, Lyyjoki disappeared into the hills above Placerville late the same year. Despite the fact there was a warrant for his arrest, he was never recaptured.

Articles about Navajo Sam were published from California to the East Coast, and he briefly became a folk hero. There were drinks named for him, and a folk song was recorded about him. A float in his honor made it into a Norwood parade, and one Western novelist modeled a character after him.

Two Grand Junction doctors were among Navajo Sam’s victims on the trail to Navajo Lake in Dolores County. So were a couple of college students from Durango.

But even his victims said they never felt threatened by Lyyjoki, although he carried pearl-handled pistols, a rifle and a bandolier of ammunition. They said he seemed more interested in haranguing them about government corruption and evil corporations than assaulting them.

Leo Lyyjoki was born in northern Wisconsin in 1931, the son of Finnish immigrants. He quit school at 14 and spent his early life logging in Wisconsin and Minnesota.

Two divorces cost him most of his logging equipment and his home, and left him bitter, mistrusting any government entity.

He and a friend moved to Colorado in 1975. He was living near Placerville when Art Goodtimes, now a San Miguel county commissioner, moved to the area in the late 1970s.

Lyyjoki befriended the newcomer and his young family,



THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Leo Lyyjoki, aka Navajo Sam, as he appeared to several hikers on a backcountry trail in 1982.

Goodtimes said last week. He helped Goodtimes cut and gather firewood.

At some point, he reportedly worked on the Navajo Reservation in Arizona and acquired the nickname, Navajo Sam.

By the early 1980s, Lyyjoki was living in the San Juan National Forest in what he called a “hooch”: a wood-frame structure covered with plastic.

“I went to visit him in the mountains several times, and we usually talked about politics,” Goodtimes said. “I used to take food up to him.”

Lyyjoki spent the winter of 1981-82 in his “hooch” near timberline, but it was tough on him. He lost a lot of weight, dropping well below his normal 200 pounds. And he suffered from severe arthritis.

That may be why he didn’t show up in Placerville in early July 1982, as other friends expected. They worried he had been injured or killed. At first they refused to believe he robbed anyone.

“I can’t see him stealing from people, and then telling them he was Navajo Sam when he knew that would just attract the law to him,” a friend named Elbert Short told me at the

time. As a young journalist working for The Sentinel, I was one of a number of reporters who went searching for Navajo Sam, hiking the trail where his robberies had been committed.

I didn’t encounter the backcountry bandit, but I did speak to several hikers who, like me, were hoping to meet him.

But Sam wasn’t spotted again until September, despite searches by the Dolores County sheriff and Lyyjoki’s friends. Then two hikers from Texas ran into him. This time, there was no robbery. The pair talked with him and gave him food.

As hunting season approached, Forest Service officials worried about an encounter between Sam and hunters with their own weapons.

They learned that Lyyjoki was camping near Woods Lake, in San Miguel County, and set a trap.

Two Forest Service investigators and two San Miguel County Sheriff’s Office deputies visited the lake, dressed casually.

They found Lyyjoki and said they were scouting the area to hunt. They admired his weapons and one asked if he could

examine Lyyjoki’s rifle. When Lyyjoki handed the gun to the man, he was quickly arrested.

He spent 19 days in jail before being released on Nov. 2, 1982. A Dolores County judge dismissed charges of aggravated robbery and felony menacing, saying prosecutors had failed to show probable cause to hold him.

Lyyjoki returned to Placerville with friends, but a deputy Dolores County district attorney refilled the charges in district court a few days later.

Nancy Lofholm, then a reporter with a Telluride newspaper, (she later worked for The Daily Sentinel and The Denver Post) conducted a very brief interview with Lyyjoki in Placerville just after charges were refilled.

“I remember he smelled really bad and was dirty,” Lofholm recalled last week. “He had on his bandolier of bullets and carried his rifle.”

But Lofholm panicked Lyyjoki with one of her first questions: What did he think about charges being refilled?

“He didn’t say a word. He just grabbed his stuff and he went up the mountainside like a mountain goat,” she said.

That was the last anybody admitted seeing of Lyyjoki in southwestern Colorado, although some friends later hinted that he had been held out of state.

Lofholm did a follow-up article for The Sentinel six years later. In it, Goodtimes and others reported Lyyjoki had returned to Wisconsin, but they declined to say exactly where.

An online document showed him living with a brother in northern Wisconsin in 1997. But he soon returned to the Southwest, this time to New Mexico.

Goodtimes said he visited Lyyjoki several times at his trailer home in Tres Piedras, New Mexico, near Taos, where, surprisingly, he worked as a security guard for some large property owners.

He died in Tres Piedras in October 2010, at the age of 79. An obituary listed him only as Leo Lyyjoki. Navajo Sam was not mentioned.

Information for this article came from The Daily Sentinel, the Museum of the West, My Heritage.com, and from Art Goodtimes and Nancy Lofholm.

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REGION SENTINEL WIRE SERVICES

Utah campgrounds closed by wildfire

SALT LAKE CITY — Recreational facilities and a reservoir are off-limits as firefighters continue to contain a northern Utah wildfire.

Officials with the Uinta-Wasatch-Cache National Forest said Sunday that the Smith-Morehouse Reservoir is closed to all watercraft so helicopters can use the water on the fire, which is burning 12 miles east of Oakley.

Also closed are the Ledgefork campground, Smith and Morehouse boat ramp and Mud Lake Flats.

But some other area campgrounds remain open. Authorities say smoke may be visible throughout the Kamas Valley. It was prevalent near the Smith and Morehouse Canyon.

Fire officials say crews are securing a hand line along the northern perimeter of the fire, which has burned five square miles.

The fire began July 28 and is only 20 percent contained.

Missionaries injured in crash in Africa

SALT LAKE CITY — Mormon church officials say four missionaries, including two from Utah, were injured in a vehicle collision in west Africa.

Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints spokesman Eric Hawkins disclosed details of the accident Saturday.

According to Hawkins, four missionaries and a local church member were riding in a van Wednesday in Sierra Leone that was struck by a vehicle trying to pass a truck.

Hawkins says the driver of the other vehicle was killed. Luke Dunn, of Salt Lake City, and Nicklaus Spaulding, of Nibley, were among the occupants of the mission van.

Hawkins did not specify the injuries of each person.

He says two were airlifted to Ghana for extensive care. Two others are hospitalized in Sierra Leone, and one has been treated and released.

School sees cases of viral meningitis

SALT LAKE CITY — Health officials are investigating multiple cases of viral meningitis at a Utah County high school.

The Utah County Health Department confirmed Friday nearly 10 students at Lone Peak High School are suffering from meningitis.

Department spokeswoman Aislynn Tolman-Hill says school officials won’t have to disrupt classes or take additional precautions. Tolman-Hill says the meningitis is not bacterial so an outbreak is unlikely to occur.

Meningitis itself is not contagious. Viral meningitis is an inflammation of tissue that covers the brain and spinal cord.

Symptoms include headache, fever, vomiting and stiff neck. Tolman-Hill says the symptoms don’t last too long, but young children and people with compromised immune systems are at a higher risk for complications.

Officials seek higher hunting, fishing fees

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

DENVER — Colorado wildlife officials are holding meetings across the state seeking support from sportsmen and other groups for a plan to double the cost of in-state hunting and fishing licenses.

Without the money, officials say they may have to put gates on state lands, shut down hatcheries and limit hunting licenses.

Colorado Parks and Wildlife officials have cut their budgets by about \$40 million since 2009, including \$10 million last year, and eliminated 50 jobs.

“No one wants to see raised fees,” wildlife manager Lyle Sidener said. “But if we are going to remain a premier destination for hunting and fishing, we have to make a choice about funding the future of our wildlife management and conservation.”

The division is falling behind on dam and fisheries maintenance, and if revenue keeps going the way it is, the budget will be short \$15 million to \$20 million by 2023.

Colorado Parks and Wildlife last raised residential hunting and fishing license fees in 2005. The price of a residential elk permit was raised to \$49 from \$34.

The division is seeking legislative approval to tie its in-state license fees to the consumer price index, which would add a few dollars every year to the cost of each license.

Wildlife officials say a long-term decline in hunting and fishing participation is reducing funding and costs are climbing. Jeremy Bock, a Kremmling native, said he wants to pass on his love for outdoor sports to his children.

“Basically anything that helps hunting and fishing in Colorado, we support,” Bock said. “Unfortunately, you gotta double-up to catch up. When you get behind is when things get bad.”

“Just look at the value of our hunter dollars,” he added. “I’d pay \$1,000 to spend a week in the woods with my daughter. There’s nothing better.”

Ruling keeps public access to Telluride trail

By CHARLES ASHBY
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Hikers of Gold Hill Road on the Upper Bear Creek Basin in San Miguel County won’t have to worry about not being able to access those trails near Telluride.

That’s because the Colorado Supreme Court last week denied a review of a Court of Appeals decision that upheld a San Miguel District Court’s ruling to keep access through the area open to the public.

The case, which dates back several years, stems from an attempt by the Gold Hill Development Co., and one of its owners, Thomas Chapman, to block ac-

Company owes \$67,000 in court costs

cess across two mining claims.

Grand Junction attorney Earl Rhodes, who represented San Miguel County in the case, said the high court decision puts an end to the whole matter.

“My view is that this is the end of the road for Mr. Chapman,” Rhodes said.

“He has lost and there is now an award against him for costs. There is now a published decision by the Colorado Court of Appeals that provides guidance to the state of Colorado and affirms the right of the public to use trails in the high country.”

The area is a popular one for serious backcountry hikers and has been highlighted in numerous outdoors publications.

As a result of the decision, the company now owes the county and other defendants in the case \$67,000 in court costs.

The case began when Chapman’s company sued Telluride Ski & Golf LLC and TSG Asset Holdings over the use of mining claims in the area.

Later, the county got involved in the case and even spent \$186,000 in parks and open space money to finance the case.

“It is a relief that the litigation is over and the trail remains open to the public,” said San Miguel County Commissioner Amy Levek. “This really is a big win for public access and the recreational uses so valued by those who live and visit here.”

“Kudos to the county staff and others who did some amazing historical research to show that the county and public had legal access to the Gold Hill Development Co. parcel,” she added. “While I respect property rights, there are times when government needs to stand firm and not be bullied. We’re grateful that the court system agreed.”

BLOTTER COMPILED BY SENTINEL STAFF

Woman arrested after golf club assault reported

Grand Junction police responded to Whitman Park on Sunday afternoon, in response to a report that a woman was beating a man with a golf club.

Sgt. Derek Rosales confirmed that Melody Fullerton, 37, was arrested on suspicion of domestic violence, second-degree assault and a warrant.

Police located her at 125 S. 10th St., No 4, after searching the area of Whitman Park.

Rosales said no golf club was found, but that the investigation indicated that Fullerton may have assaulted her boyfriend with some sort of blunt object, possibly a metal bar.

According to the Mesa County Sheriff’s Office:

■ Deputies are investigating a report of vandalism that was made Aug. 15 in the 400 block of Anjou Drive.

■ Anthony Romero, 48, of 925 Belford Ave., was arrested on Aug. 26 after deputies investigated a report of a woman screaming at a man to get out of her house in the 2950

block of Parkway Drive.

According to law enforcement, Romero was the ex-boyfriend of the woman, and he was arrested on suspicion of harassment, obstruction of telephone service, domestic violence and first-degree criminal trespassing.

Romero also had a warrant for failing to appear in court and faces possible introduction of contraband for items he had when he was booked into the jail.

The Grand Junction Police Department did not release criminal activity logs over the weekend.

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We're wearing
jeans for charity
at The Daily Sentinel
Ask me how you can help!

we've got heart!

The employees of *The Daily Sentinel* have joined together to adopt a local non-profit organization/charity of the month. We want to help raise awareness and badly needed funds for these organizations that are dedicated to helping people in our community.

AUGUST JEANS FOR CHARITY ORGANIZATION:

The House

At any given time, nearly 160 teenagers are homeless in Mesa County. They sleep in cars, tents and are at serious risk for many forms of abuse. Karis, Inc., with the support of the Western Slope community, operates **The House**. The only licensed shelter for homeless youth on the western slope, **The House** provides teens with warm meals, safe shelter, medical and mental health support, education, and a host of other services, supplied by caring adults. Please join with us and send your tax deductible contribution to **The House, P.O. Box 2837, Grand Junction, CO 81502.**

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