

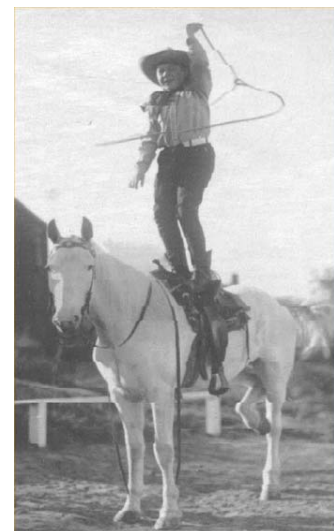
# “Cowboy Bob”

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Submitted by Michele Murray

Cowboy Bob used to provide a local spectacle. His teepee contributed to the funky mystique of Victor, Colorado as one approached the dilapidated little mining town from the back route along Teller County Road 81. If you didn't notice the skinny, ancient white horse grazing on buffalo grass nearby, you might think the teepee was abandoned or setup for intermittent use by summer hippies. Certainly, the authorities of Teller County noticed. They consistently tried to evict the occupant and remove Bob's canvas habitation for code violations. The teepee didn't fit into some people's idea of what a historic mining district should look like. Apparently, however, this teepee, (along with a few ramshackle tenements, shacks and shanties left over from another century's deluge of miners, prospectors, indigent families and transients of the previously thriving industrial town) seemed to possess its own resilience -- perhaps as a result of a certain displaced *other* cowboy's spirit that took to dwelling in Bob's teepee.

Some say Bob Klies, (“Cowboy Bob”), was always a child. Mentally or emotionally, he didn't quite fill the niche expected of an adult man. Supposedly, he attended college for a while in pursuit of an English literature degree before dropping out for undisclosed reasons. He held no job. Had no kids. No mortgage or car or health insurance, either. He didn't vote. His sister, Lynn, kept track of his welfare from her home down the mountain. He led his life playing at being a cowboy all day. He was a clean, polite, harmless dude who wore fringed gloves, chaps, cowboy boots, an old white Stetson hat and a cowboy-gentleman's vest everyday. And, he owned a white horse named, Thunder.



Cowboy Bob used to practice rope-tricks while standing on the back of his white horse. Sometimes, Bob and Thunder would mosey slowly down the middle of Victor's main street for an imaginary parade yet to come, alone in his glory with a lariat swinging in big loops from overhead to boot-tip. Cowboy Bob responded to imaginary applause and cheers of encouragement from a crowd of ghost people watching his imaginary parade. The invisible spectators lined the dirt avenue just the way they used to in an age long gone, in throngs of onlookers, shoulder-to-shoulder, five-deep as portrayed in black and white photos on the walls of Victor's Lowell Thomas Museum. Unabashedly, Cowboy Bob bowed to his imaginary fans as Thunder slowly plodded to the end of town past the Cripple Creek & Victor Gold Mining Offices.

Nearly everyone who drove in the vicinity of Victor had picked Bob up at some time or another along the highway as he hitchhiked from Victor to where ever it was he needed to go and back. He had no driver's license. Sometimes he carried his saddle with him. Sometimes a single bale of hay for Thunder. He was commonly thought to be a drunkard, though the few who knew him best knew he didn't drink -- at all. Cowboy Bob was simply naturally eccentric. His humor was too extreme to be accepted for base value by common folk without attributing his visions to something as banal as alcoholism.

In this way, Cowboy Bob was not unlike another locally historic figure: Bob Womack, the founder of the Cripple Creek Mining District. Neither Cowboy Bob, nor Bob Womack contracted, 'the fever' -- that is, neither man succumbed to the love of gold. If anything, they fell in love with the exotic people who came to the mining district burning with gold-fever. Their personal life's passion was to simply roam the wooded hills of the Cripple Creek and Victor volcanic complex on horseback riding through aspen groves and over the rounded shoulders of high-timberline meadows under the austere watch of Tavakiev (or, "Sun Mountain," to the Ute Indians, "La Sierra Del Almagre", to the Spanish, and known now as, Pikes Peak.)

The historic Bob (Womack) never intended for the region's pristine mountain valleys and ridges of the volcanic diatreme – source of the richest vein-hosted and disseminated gold deposit of its class in this hemisphere -- to be dug up, tunneled out, deforested, and scarred by a lacework of electric power lines and train rails. Mr. Womack's famous gold strike in 1890 resulted in an influx of 10,000 people within two years of the initial discovery! Bob Womack staked the first mining claim in the district: the El Paso Lode, known today as the Gold King Mine. But, he sold it for a mere \$500 before the year was out – a \$5 million dollar gross underestimate of its eventual worth – a value derived from a gold price of \$20 an ounce back then!

Historic Bob Womack wasn't a gold miner or businessman. He was a cowboy. Coincidentally, Bob Womack also rode a beloved white horse named, Whistler. Prior to the mad gold rush, Bob Womack and Whistler explored the hills between Mount Pisgah (behind what would eventually become the incorporated town sites of Fremont and Hayden Placer – the future merger of which formed Cripple Creek), and the Bull Cliffs above the future site of Victor, some six miles to the south. He was pushing cows for his spirited, independent, cattle-ranchin' sister, Eliza, who lived down the mountain and who kept track of his welfare from afar.

Historic Cowboy Bob and Whistler followed the bluebirds, badger, red-tailed hawks and elk from season to season, finding the sweetest springs, thickest grass, and prettiest shade for taking a cowboy nap in the middle of the summer's afternoon. That was his life's pursuit, his personal desire: Bob only wanted to ride his beautiful white horse in the surroundings of nature's supreme beauty. He had no great ambition prior to the day he stubbed his toe on a broken clast of volcanic diatreme rock, sparkling with visible gold tellurides into his cowboy eyes.

As the population exploded, the wilderness retreated. Historic Cowboy Bob was hailed as the district's founder, revered by newcomers as the Pioneer Prospector – a living example of the truest lucky streak ever known – a strike the rest of the population greedily hoped to experience themselves. The townspeople bestowed the title, "Father of the World's Greatest Gold Camp," upon Bob Womack. Those who befriended him tolerated his childish manner or mistakenly attributed his incompetence as a businessman to drunkenness -- the latter of which, was an easy assumption to make in consideration of the district's rampant abuse of firewater. Fortunately for

Bob Womack, two perceptive individuals of deep character and personal insight, (his sister, Eliza and the multi-millionaire Winfield S. Stratton), knew Bob as the person he really was and appreciated him for his true worth. They knew Bob Womack was simply a cowboy and a good person.

It is the nature of a cowboy to appreciate the moment as it is given. A cowboy places value on nature's treasures as are discovered: an empty bird's nest waiting in the naked bough of a scrub oak for next year's returning parents; a pair of newly dropped antlers, having been bumped from the itchy brow of a buck in the spring; a great horned owl's feather resting lightly on top of tall grass; the basting-stitch of a hunting ermine as it tunnels and emerges from the snow, again and again; fox scat carefully left on a flat rock in the middle of a deer path; falling stars in the daylight of a thinned, high-alpine afternoon sky; a rabbit's terrified scream; the Earth's offering of a precious mineral in the face of a newly broken rock. Those are things cowboys love.

In the heyday of his newfound fame, Bob Womack took to wearing a felt derby bowler hat, a gentleman's buttoned vest, and spats over his goin'-to-town shoes. He loved the attention of his fellows. He was funny and entertained them with country-style humor. He was clever and could perform hat tricks. He could tame an ornery burro with his pleasant, patient demeanor. He loved laughing, waltzes and the banjo. He was gregarious with a genuine sense of humility. And at night, while riding Whistler from hither dells to his humble cabin in Poverty Gulch, he felt his heart swell to see the Milky-Way, not knowing that he was looking through the thin edge of our spinning galaxy at an expanding universe and beyond to eternity.

Bob Womack loved wild flowers, big blizzards, river cobbles, drifting rainbows, the smell of a dog's paw. He loved clarinets, clover and crickets. Bob Womack loved a meadow of buffalo grass and wild iris, snoring horses asleep in a heap in the sun, leaping baby calves, snow cornices, trout under the surface of a creek, brand new aspen leaves, the purple hue of a deep winter's dawn. Mostly, though he loved being a cowboy.

Bob Womack believed his days of riding Whistler through the high timberline were waiting for him again, just around the corner. One day, when all the gold was finally harvested and the

townspeople moved back to where they came from, he would return to his life's original passion. One day, he would be a cowboy again. Bob Womack died at his sister's house in Colorado Springs in 1909, seven years after his last friend, Winfield Stratton, had passed. Bob Womack was 65 years old when he died and he had not cowboyled anymore in the Pikes Peak region since his famous gold strike.

Womack's friend, Winfield Stratton, had been a miser millionaire with a reputation for overseeing every one of his business' cents origin and careful investment. He was extremely efficient, responsible, and successful. Though he was a bachelor and lived alone in a small, yellow, framed house just outside of Victor at the base of his colossal Portland Mine, he loved the children of the mining district. That's maybe why he loved Bob Womack. Winfield Stratton died alone. He left his millions of dollars in trust to an estate named after his father – a man he hadn't seen since he turned his teenage back on him and left home many decades before. The Myron Stratton Estate still operates and provides a home for orphans and retired miners today.

Winfield S. Stratton's house and his mine's head-frame still stand outside of Victor, seemingly immune to decay. The structures overlook a grassy meadow of buffalo grass and wild iris. Opposite the little yellow house, is a teepee. No one lives in it now. There used to be an old, white horse grazing there, too. The teepee was the home of a childlike man the locals called, Cowboy Bob. And that brings this story full circle back to the beginning.

When Cowboy Bob (Mr. Klies) was found dead in his teepee, word flew about town that he drank himself to death. An autopsy revealed he had died of an epileptic seizure. One rumor had it that he fell drunken into a fire and burned to death without ever gaining consciousness. Another rumor insinuated that he took his own life out of desperation and loneliness – possibly drug induced – over realizing the dire outcome of his wasted life. In a small mountain town like Victor, it would be impossible not to speculate with great imagination, some embellishment of circumstances (perhaps for the sake of justifying one's own temporary existence or to make one's life seem more interesting?) – especially in comparison to such a free-spirited, happy, creative individual as Cowboy Bob.

The turn-out for Bob's funeral was astounding! More than *two-hundred* people crammed into the Victor Elks Lodge for the services. Mourners came from other towns and out of state! Thunder was there, too, displayed in a state of revered prominence. Bob had touched the lives of many people with his soft mannered ways and honest devotion to his dreams. All Bob ever wanted was to be a cowboy -- and he was. He would have been proud of the final words in his eulogy: "*Bob was a cowboy.*" When the service ended, Thunder was put in a corral behind the post office. Later, Bob's sister collected the rickety old animal and took him home with her where he lived one year more. Then Thunder died, too.

Every summer, during the Victor Gold Rush Days, there is a parade on main street (which is now paved). The sidewalks are lined with bystanders standing five-deep from the curb. They are tourists and summer residents who come to Victor to experience a real mining town. The local vendors provide old-time ice-cream sodas, beer by the keg, mining game contests, (such as hand-drilling and double-jacking), greased pig wrestling, too, but the biggest attraction is what you might see in the parade.

Victor's parade might include a real gold bullion on display in a company truck. There might be Arabian horses attempting to escape their master's control, or someone's fanciest car or boat all dolled-up with a grandkid or two riding inside. Victor's children always march in the parade, too, (they are the town's purest gold, after all). There will definitely be a few dogs grinning and wagging their tails, trotting down the middle of the road from one side to the other (the slobber-brigade). But, in a special parade year, a cowboy standing on the back of a white horse will come slowly plodding down the middle of the street lightly hopping into and out of a lariat loop, until they both disappear at the end of town. It's the ghost of someone held dear in our hearts, someone who won't be forgotten for a long time. Just mention the name, "Cowboy Bob," and you can make the local people smile.

*\*NOTE: The historic details of reference utilized in this story are derived from Marshall Sprague's astoundingly comprehensive novel, "Money Mountain," and from personal communication with a distant relative of Bob Womack (one "m"): Linda Wommack (yes, two*

*“m’s”). The details of personal insight are solely the product of this author’s hallucinations and pigments of her inflammation.*