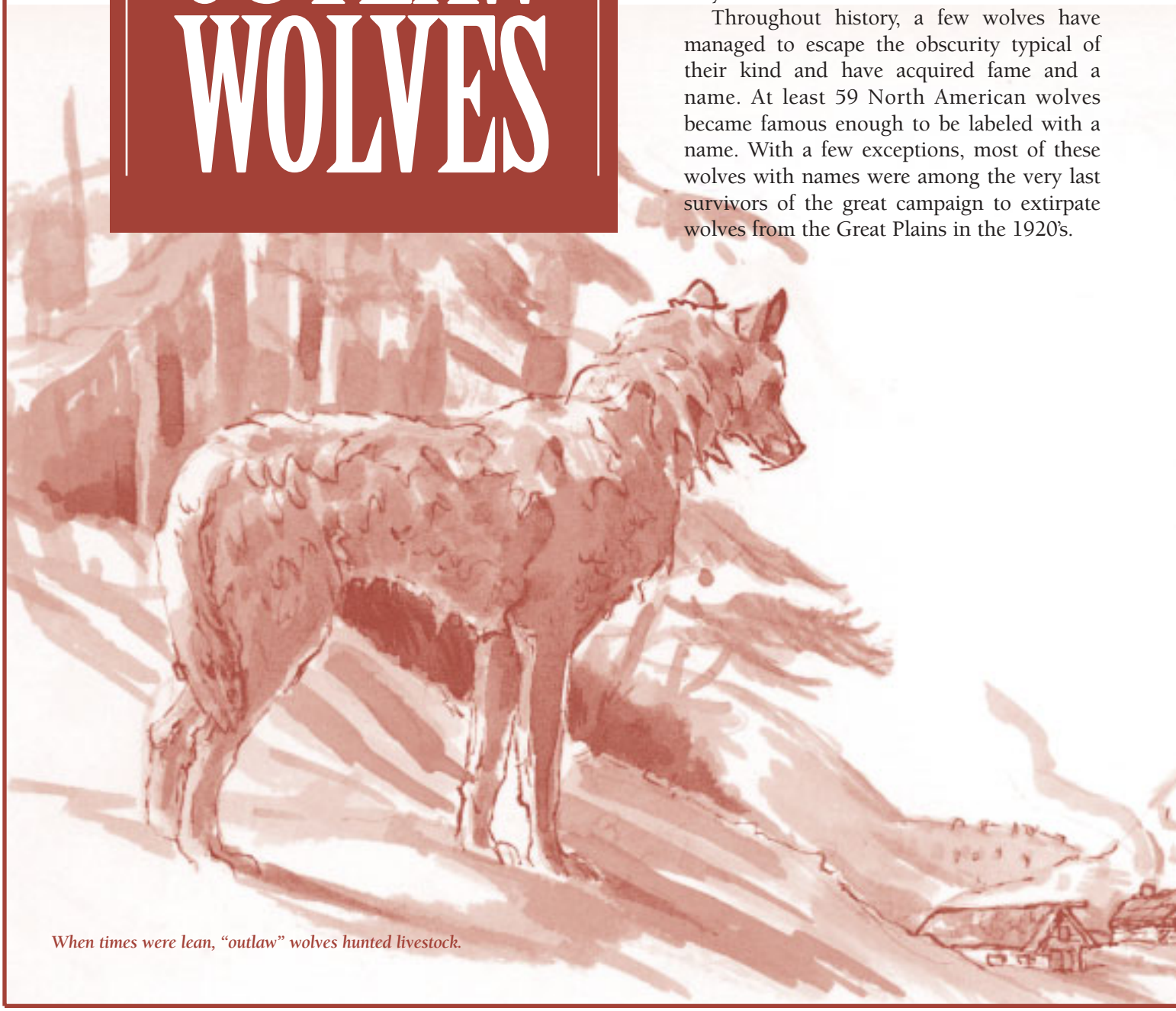
LEGENDS OF THE "OUTLAW" WOLVES

by STEVE GROOMS

What names they had! They were called such things as the Three-Legged Scoundrel, Lobo the Giant Killer Wolf of the North, the Phantom Wolf of Big Salt Wash, Badlands Billy, and the Werewolf of Nut Lake. Then there were all the "toe wolves": Old Three Toes, Old Two Toes and—you guessed it—Old One Toe. If these names sound a bit romantic, they were probably meant to.

Throughout history, a few wolves have managed to escape the obscurity typical of their kind and have acquired fame and a name. At least 59 North American wolves became famous enough to be labeled with a name. With a few exceptions, most of these wolves with names were among the very last survivors of the great campaign to extirpate wolves from the Great Plains in the 1920's.



When times were lean, "outlaw" wolves hunted livestock.

Illustrations by JOAN OULLETTE

This drawing depicts a "wolfer" around 1900 with his hunting dogs. Men who hunted wolves in this time period were lured by a bounty equivalent to two year's salary.

These were not ordinary wolves. These were the ghostlike wolves that no hunter or trapper could defeat, and some of the frustrated men pursuing them believed they had supernatural abilities. Because each of these "outlaw" wolves was responsible for destroying great numbers of livestock, they were regarded as a menace to society, much like the bank robbers and gunslingers of the Old West.

Like human outlaws, these wolves sometimes carried rewards on their heads and were hunted relentlessly until finally destroyed. The skillful and enterprising men who triumphed over a famous renegade wolf might acquire the sort of notoriety associated with someone like Pat Garrett when he killed Billy the Kid, or Frank Hamer when he ended the careers of Bonnie and Clyde.

When a notorious old cattle killer was finally destroyed, its demise would be celebrated in newspaper stories all over the region. The stories would note with approval that the death of this wolf made the world safer for livestock.

Yet the disappearance of the last and most famous wolves often seemed symbolically linked to the passing of all that had been wild and exciting in the region. Some stories about the deaths of old outlaw wolves carried a note of regret, as if the writer understood that a world without these wolves would be a less interesting place.

Some of the men who triumphed over famous wolves reflected the same ambivalence. Consider the reflections of Earl Neill, the man who shot the White Wolf of the Judith Basin:

And do you know, I almost didn't shoot. It was the hardest thing I think I ever did….I thought swiftly that these were the hills over which he had hunted. I knew that it was the cruel nature of the wilderness—the fight for survival of the fittest—that made him the ferocious hunter that he was. I thought of all the men that had hunted him, of how his fame had gone out all over the country, and I almost didn't shoot.

An even odder confrontation ended the career of Rags the Digger. Rags was named for his shaggy coat and amazing ability to discover traps and dig them up. He seemed to be flaunting his contempt for the trappers pursuing him. Trapper Bill Caywood finally derived a way of using that quirky habit to his advantage, luring Rags into a setup that clamped two big traps on him. Rags dragged the traps painfully through heavy brush, leaving a trail that impressed Caywood with the courage of the old wolf.

When Caywood got off his horse to confront Rags, the wolf astonished him by walking toward him. Caywood's rifle failed to fire twice. Caywood wondered if the wolf was going to attack him, then wondered if Rags might be seeking his help in getting the traps off. Rags kept limping closer. The rifle fired on the third try, and Rags died with his muzzle almost touching Caywood's boot. Stroking the pelt of the shaggy wolf he'd pursued for months, Caywood said, "You poor, lonely old murdering devil!"

The many legends passed down about different outlaw wolves are surprisingly similar. At least four qualities were commonly ascribed to these wolves with names. Above all, they seemed exceptionally wary, intelligent, and elusive. They seemed to have paranormal powers for evading their hunters. Lured by a bounty equivalent to two year's salary, countless cowboys and "wolfers" pursued the White Wolf of the Judith Basin without success. One man pursued the Custer Wolf four years before giving up. Another gave up after five years.

Many of these wolves were terribly destructive, engaging in what we now call "surplus killing." Livestock losses ascribed to the Judith Basin Wolf totaled a third of a million dollars (in today's dollars). A wolf named Blanca and a pack member reportedly killed 250 sheep in a single night. Some renegades maimed livestock they did not kill, for example, by biting off part of their tail (called "bobtailing"). Some ranchers claimed they were driven out of the livestock business by the depredations of famous wolves.

Although wolves are one of the most social species known, most outlaws were loners. Many were alone simply because the rest of their kind had been wiped out, but others seemed to live alone by choice. One odd exception was the Custer Wolf. After his family was destroyed, the Custer Wolf never again associated with wolves, but for some time ran with a pair of coyotes, apparently using them as part of his defense system.

Some stories about the deaths of old outlaw wolves carried a note of regret...

The famous wolves often ranged over great distances. Several were thought to have roamed territories comprising several hundred square miles. This made them less predictable and harder to find.

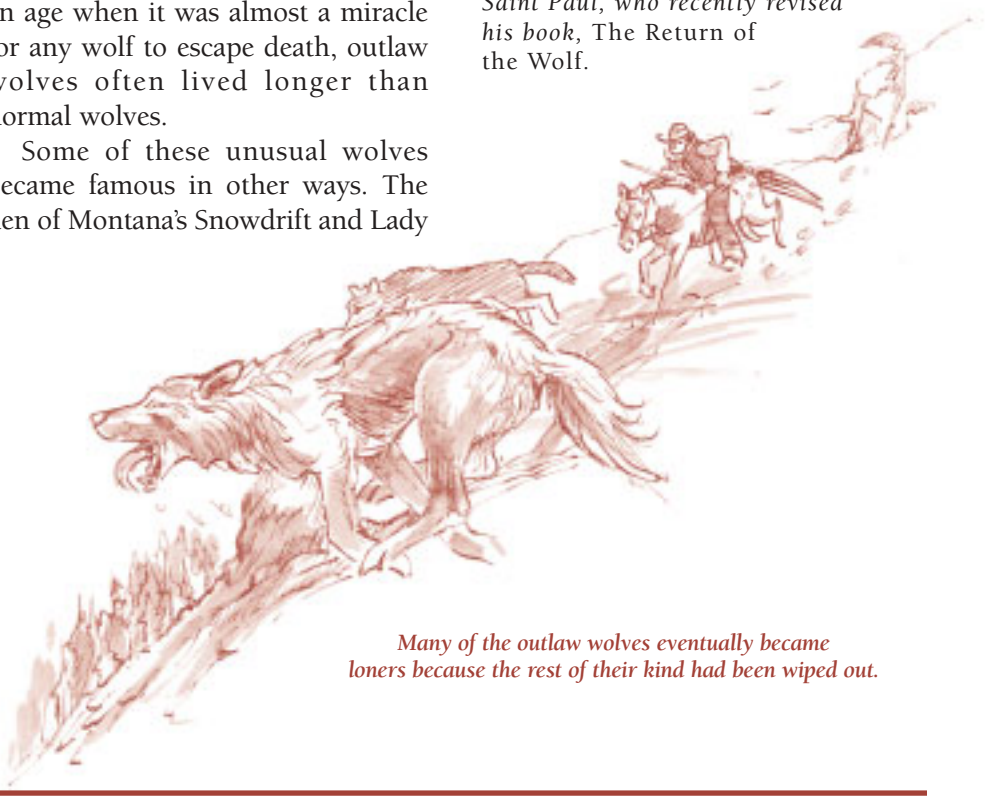
Most outlaw wolves were physically distinctive. Many had missing toes, having lost them to traps. Most were reputed to be exceptionally big, but when a notorious wolf was killed, it often turned out to be unglamorously average. A remarkable number of outlaw wolves were white, possibly because so many of them were so old. The infamous Judith Basin wolf, a gaunt and hoary old animal when killed, was estimated to be 18 years old. Ranchers claimed Old Whitey of Bear Springs, Mesa depredated a region of Colorado for 15 years. In an age when it was almost a miracle for any wolf to escape death, outlaw wolves often lived longer than normal wolves.

Some of these unusual wolves became famous in other ways. The den of Montana's Snowdrift and Lady Snowdrift was raided, and the pups were brought up in captivity. Two were trained to perform in Hollywood movies. Another became the camp mascot for Jack Dempsey as he prepared for a heavyweight championship fight.

A white wolf trapped as a pup on the ranch of William "Buffalo Bill" Cody was raised as a pet. It later escaped and became, according to a newspaper report, "a great white marauder" for ten years. When it was eventually killed, this wolf wore the collar the old buffalo hunter had placed on his neck.

Wolves are among the most interesting and exciting animals on earth, and these famous old "outlaws" were some of the most fascinating wolves ever to have lived. But what is the modern student of wolves to make of these old legends, many of which seem improbable or downright unbelievable? To find out, see part II of this story in the next issue of *International Wolf*. ■

Steve Grooms is a writer living in Saint Paul, who recently revised his book, The Return of the Wolf.



Many of the outlaw wolves eventually became loners because the rest of their kind had been wiped out.