Cosley, Trapper and Guide Extraordinary

By JULIA NELSON, Mountain View, Alberta

AFTER an eight-day search through the northern wilds of Saskatchewan, Constable J. McLeod and his Indian guide entered a trapper's log cabin 400 miles north of Prince Albert. This was on October 12, 1944. They found that Joe Clarence Cosley had dramatized his own miserable death as fully and effectively as he had his 74 years of vibrant, enthusiastic living.

The last of his hundreds of stories had plot, suspense, and a gripping climax. In the diary lying near his bones he had not written: "I am dying of scurvy." He told instead of a sinister curse, creeping and deadly, visited by some unknown power upon this lonely house. The trapper before him had died here, from the curse, of course, and daily Joe outlined his own suffering:

"I am steadily growing weaker . . . I can hardly write . . . I have reached the end . . ." He was conscious to the last, of the interesting pathos of the situation.

Joe Cosley was a professional trapper, a guide, a writer, a photographer, fancy skater, and trick shooter. He could be followed in the mountains by no man, and was probably more skillful on snowshoes than any other Canadian mountaineer. He spent over 50 years, on his own, in the forests and mountains of south western and northern Alberta, and northwestern Montana.

He was born May 24, 1870, possibly aboard the cabin sailboat in which his father, a Frenchman, Stephen Cosley, fished commercially in Lake Huron and nearby rivers.

While some of the twelve Cosley children were still small, their parents left the fishing industry, to homestead at Blind Rivers, Ontario. Joe's mother was a woman of taste and education, from a line of priests, nuns and teachers. She read and spoke French, English, and Indian and undoubtedly must have influenced the family toward refinement of intellect and manner, even on the remote and primitive location of their early farm.

The children were educated at a convent a hundred miles down the river. In September the Cosley boat, manned by Stephen, sailed off to school, collecting youngsters as it went. In June they all came home. So Joe cast aside his birch bark drawings of Indians and animals at the tender age of six, and entered the world of letters. His lifelong avidity to learn and excel was apparent when he returned after one term, and read fluently to his mother and family . . . from the Bible.

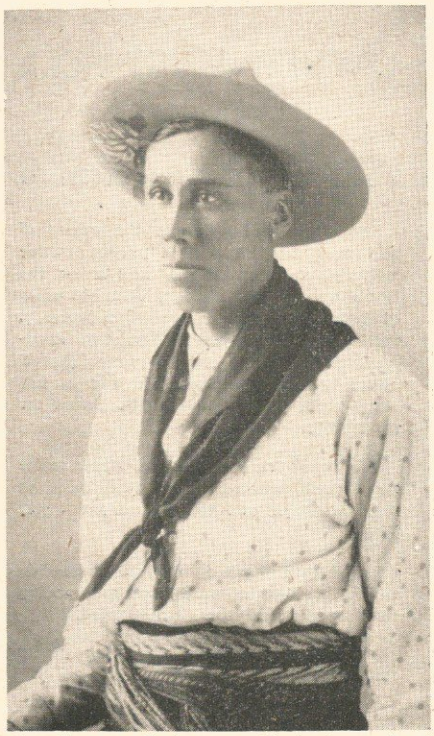
No one knows the extent of Joe's formal education. His father was drowned, his mother had left the farm, and Joe was out in Arizona by the time he was 22 . . . and in Kalispel, Montana at 25.

"The Cosleys," writes his sister, "were great trappers, hunters, and woodsmen". Joe, who had always wanted to 'come west' found the land of his dreams in north-western Montana. Here was an untouched region of mountain lakes and streams, . . . some of the most magnificent scenery on the American continent, for his artistic soul, and game aplenty for his traps.

Near or before the year 1900 he secured a position as ranger of this area from the U.S. forestry service, and was stationed at Belton, Montana.

The word 'stationed' must be used loosely in connection with Joe's activities. He built at once a log cabin outpost near the Canadian border, and travelled at will from one country to the other. In this ideal capacity . . ideal in affording him the contact he loved with people, the pleasant obligation of touring the wilds, he served an official term of about 14 years.

It was during this time that the people who met him learned to expect nothing usual from him. He knew and traversed, as has no one else, that vast and rugged lake and mountain area that is today Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park. As a surveyor records territory, Joe photographed, and drew, and wrote . . . not hoarding the product of his talent, but showing his pictures and telling his adventures to people in the little Canadian and U.S. foothill settlements, and writing letters to his countless friends, and to his relatives, with sketches of incidents as he saw and lived them.



Joe Clarence Cosley, age 22 (note earrings).

He kept a regular diary throughout the years, filled with sketches and writing, elaborately illustrated and decorated . . . thousands of pages there must have been, of his firsthand accounts of woodland life. He wrote reams of poetry, some of it published, and a trunkful of short stories in various stages of completion.

And he trapped . . . skillfully, openly, and extensively. With less than 30 pounds of supplies, mainly tea, salt, and beans, and his snowshoes, revolver, and .22 automatic, he would follow a 200-mile winter route in a circuit of mountain and foothill trapping. At a few places he established dugout shelters. He might have averaged about one night in ten in these shelters. Between them he sought the heavy lower branches of large snow-laden pine trees, and with his back against the trunk, head resting on his knees, he would relax under these tree-roofs and sleep where night overtook him. He lived on the wild meat of the forest.

Discovering a trail of a marten, he could follow it for three days without food of any kind. He would catch the animal, skin and eat it over a hurried campfire and return to his circuit. For marten meant money, and money was important to Joe.

When he came out of the hills, usually in April, in perfect health, and laden with luxuriant furs of marten, otter, mink, beaver, and weasel, often well over a thousand dollars worth, he would spend extravagantly for clothes, scarves, boots, fancy shirts, and guide equipment.

He was a man of striking appearance, six feet two inches tall, slim and supple, his hands and fingers weirdly long and tapered. When he first came west his hair hung to his shoulders, a dark and mystic backdrop for the small golden domes that threaded his ear lobes. Swarthy, full-lipped, with high cheek bones, he was called an Indian by every newspaper that featured him, and many did. All of them guessed, however, at his tribal origin. He was Chippewa, Flathead, Cree, or any other likely tribe. But guesswork it was, for Joe told no one he was an Indian, and hotly resented being called one.

Joe's great grandmother was an Ottawa Indian girl, who married Sir Alexander Anderson, in eastern Canada. One of their daughters married a Spaniard, Don Louis Cody, and from this union came Joe's mother, who married the Frenchman Cosley. Joe has not been accurately called an Indian; his nationality, like his personality, was indefinable.

As a guide — and guiding summer tourists and campers was another of his fancies while in the ranger service — he was extremely popular. It was an experience, say those who know, wholly apart from camping, to ride a trail with Joe Cosley. Not only did he explain in detail every sign and sound in the woods, but he gave the common and botanical name of each flower and fern.

With touching gallantry he named lakes after some of the women who first admired them . . . Bertha, Helen, Lois, Elizabeth. It is claimed that this last, one of the most beautiful in that chain of mountain scenic gems called Belly River Lakes, he named in honor of 'Teddy' Roosevelt's daughter, Elizabeth, when she and her party toured that country under his guidance.

With characteristic ego he named Mount Cosley, the Cosley trails, and Cosley Lake, changed by later mapping to Crossly Lake.

The appearance of his pack outfits were a matter of great pride to him. Only the best would do, in equipment, saddles and horses, and he could throw a diamond hitch around a pack so fast one could scarcely see it done.

A rather tragic incident resulted one summer, from a little pack trip Joe took, just for fun. He had celebrated July 4th in fine style, at Browning, Montana. His reputation, his position, and his alligator leather saddle, silver mounted spurs and bridle, (the spurs were attached permanently to his fancy riding boots), attracted admiring crowds at all celebrations. Joe was not a show-off, but he was a showman.

The fanfare was over, however, when he led Black Bess, his saddle mare, and Jingo, a trained pack horse who could ease through narrow forest trails and never so much as bump a pack on the trees, slowly and carefully along the precipitous southern slope of Ahern pass

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Showing part of the group of 25 members of the Alberta Palomino Association who were the flag-bearing group at the Calgary Stampede Parade again this year. The Kenway Saddle and Leather Co. generously supplied Resistol Sunburst hats and Forest Green Tem-Tex shirts to make for a colorful display of horses and riders.

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toward the home cabin. Jingo, blind in the left eye, and tied to Bess at the saddle horn, slipped on a patch of ice. Trails at the top of Ahern are rarely thawed entirely by early July. Bess hung valiantly for a few desperate seconds, dangling Jingo, pack and all down the side of the mountain. Then the earth broke under them, and they tumbled a thousand feet down into the valley.

Sick with shock and regret, Joe finished the trip on foot and returned the next day with a friend, to salvage the remnants of his outfit. Ragged patches of the expensive saddle leather were stripped from the wreck, to be carefully sewn, later, on to new equipment. From the bottom Joe climbed the rock and shale right to the fatal top, picking up as he went the scattered contents of his pack . . . camera, clothing, and equipment. He even found shoes, torn by jagged rocks, from the horses' feet.

To tourists who peered shakily over the trails' edge that summer, Joe would point out two objects. They looked, from that distance, like shattered toy horses . . . mute and pitiful proof of mountain treachery in high places.

But to Joe, master of wilderness travel, the passes, valleys and slopes were thoroughfares. Ranchers in the Canadian foothills had him often as a guest in their homes. He was delightfully entertaining . . . courteous, clean, and charming, and it was no trouble at all for him to call and chat for an hour when he came down for his mail. For him it was a morning's jaunt on snowshoes, straight through as the crow flies. It was a strenuous all-day trip, in the winter, of over 20 miles even on horseback, for anyone else.

One of the best of his own descriptions of travel in the mountains he wrote upon the incident of his meeting with Kootenai Brown, historic first settler of Waterton Lakes Park, in Canada. From the 4,000 odd words he used to tell it, excerpts will show his elaborate style, and the sensitiveness with which he saw and felt.

"As time wore on, September slipped away almost unbeknown to us," . . . He and an associate he called Porcupine Jim had been hired to stake some mining claims in north-western Montana . . . and October came with its Indian Summer . . . During those warm days which followed, migratory birds appeared. What delightful companionship! The trees were filled with chirping sounds. In this jumble of noises were familiar songs of robins, thrushes, and warblers. They serenaded each other in various parts of the forest with such sweetness that we, in temporary oblivion, imagined spring had come . . . The mountain chickadees sang their two-note familiar ditty around us, to give us the sign that they were delightfully contented with the progress of a glorious summer. These birds usually sing only in the springtime and are not heard at this season with their "Spring Soon," the first high, the last

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low, as it came from the tree tops. It could not have been the older ones, uttering "Spring Soon!" For they knew too well that spring wasn't coming now, so I could only attribute this untimely strain to their progenies of trivial mind, who knew no better.

"Then, one day while out replacing corner stakes to the claims fire broke out and razed our cabin to ashes. Everything was consumed save the saddles and pack outfits which were under a spruce some distance away. Deprived of blankets and coats, and with neither shelter nor food, we were turned adrift in the woods and obliged to pick berries to satisfy our hunger. That night a fire was built, and we sat before it until morning.

"What a sad misfortune! I no longer held an especially agreeable interest in the climatic conditions, or the beauty which it imparted to the verdant land, and dense deep-black forest canyons!"

This precipitated their meeting with John George (Kootenai) Brown; as they felt it would be wiser, in the face of an approaching blizzard, to come on over the mountain into Canada and get fresh supplies, than it would to attempt a long trip back to Blackfoot.

"The snow was driven hissing through the trees, and intense cold came with the change . . . By morning the depth had reached more than three feet." . . . With difficulty, but no serious mishap they covered the distance to a trapper shack owned by Brown, where they stayed overnight. They shot geese and ducks and caught fish for provisions, then travelled on south, to the site of the present Waterton resort town.

"A hot breath of chinook now swept gently over the land, bringing into existence many little streams from melting snow . . . In the folds of profound silence I sat, enjoying the warmth of the lazy air. After a time I arose, took my rifle and strolled out of camp. There was a slight odor of perfume from exposed buttercups which were badly crushed, but yet seemed to live for a purpose, I suppose to linger awhile to exude from their hearts sweet odor and waft it, with other dying blossoms, on the air . . . This place was far from the leather-scented trail of man . . . and as I stood where now stands a magnificent hotel known to all comers as the Prince of Wales, I marvelled at the grandeur of landscape . . . glaciers of far distant rugged peaks glittered like diamonds when the sun shone through patches of blue. It was here that Kootenai came to hunt and fish."

After a few more miles of riding they came to the resident cabin of Kootenai Brown, and he welcomed them with warm hospitality.

"He was a small man, agile in movement and quick-eyed. A stetson buckskin sombrero crowned his head, a bright red rose and a few green leaves painted on the under right side of the brim. He wore a voyageur's sash, long fringed, hanging loosely at his side, a brocaded silk muffler about his neck, cowboy style. He had long hair that fell gracefully in wavelets over his shoulders. A gray mustache, terminating in points, curved slightly upward. He had the appearance of a typical frontiersman."

(To be continued)