



# rites of passage

PEEWEE WESAW BREATHES NEW LIFE  
INTO OLD TRADITIONS.  
STORY AND PHOTOS BY ERIC GRANT

**A**gainst the pale light of dusk, George "Pee-wee" Wesaw scans the eastern mountain for signs of what tomorrow will bring. His observation is a daily occurrence, borne of a long-held tradition of his people, the Shoshoni, who once rode swift horses and hunted vast herds of bison that grazed this rugged range. They, too, sought clues from the sagebrush hillsides.

Tonight, all is at peace along the banks of Twin Creek. Wesaw finds comfort in the chorus of crickets rising from the willow patches, and feels the cool night wind build as it skims the tops of the cottonwood trees. It sweeps gently across his face. As he turns toward his house, he shifts easily from the darkness of evening into the flickering light of his television, which casts light and shadows across his yard.

In more respects than one, Wesaw is a contradiction of history, a man who rides each day in two different worlds, who walks the threshold of time. He is firmly rooted in what once was, yet he embraces all that his native state of Wyoming has become. His ancestors include Sacajawea, the 16-year-old Indian girl who helped Lewis and Clark find their way to the Pacific, and her husband Toussaint Charbonneau, famed French frontiersman. An uncle raised Chief Joseph, the great chief of the Nez Perce. The list goes on.

Unlike his forebears, Wesaw rides the native range not to hunt buffalo and trap beaver, but to push cattle to greener range.

"If I was an artist, I would paint myself half Indian and half cowboy," he says. "I am a cowboy. I am a warrior. I ride in both worlds."

Wesaw comes complete with all the trappings of the old and new West. His once black braids bear the gray twists of 55 years. His face is worn and etched, the effects of a lifetime of cowboying beneath the Wyoming sun. He rides with spurs, chaps and a lariat, yet he also dons a baby-blue baseball cap and a snap-button shirt. Each spring, when he takes his horses for purification in an ancient Shoshoni ceremony, he drives a Chevy pickup pulling a gooseneck trailer. On Saturday nights, he waits with anticipation for the airing of his favorite television program: Texas Ranger. "Like a good warrior," he quips, "Chuck Norris has good vision quests."

With few regrets, Wesaw says he's happy with the time and place that fate has placed him. He lives, works and rides on the Three Quarter Circle Ranch, owned and operated by his friend Tony Malmberg, a third-generation Wyoming cowboy and descendant of Swedish immigrants. It lies about 30 miles southeast of Lander, and encompasses a chunk of sagebrush range and mountain that totals 30,000

acres of federal and privately owned lands.

At one time, the Shoshoni ranged freely across this place and much of what is now the western United States. They fought the Crow and Sioux over hunting grounds in the Dakotas, Montana, Wyoming and Idaho. They rode horses bred for hunting or battle, and each tribe appointed a half dozen men whose single purpose was hunting bison.

"My grandfather used to say that as far as the eye could see, it used to be buffalo," Wesaw says. "I wish I would have seen that. The men who hunted them were the keepers of the food. My grandfather told me that these hunters would ride their horses right up against a buffalo, and the horse would lean on them. The hunter would place his foot on the buffalo's back, pull back his bow and release the arrow at a dead run. When the horse would hear the arrow release, he would turn off to the side as the buffalo hit the ground."

When white settlers began their westward expansion, the Shoshoni at first resisted. They foresaw how the influx of immigrants would diminish their hunting grounds and threaten their life. They realized the futility of resistance, however, and reluctantly embraced the sweeping change, allying with the whites against their old foes, the Sioux. For doing so, they received lands in central Wyoming from the federal government, some of which they continue to control today.

Still, for all of its vastness, the reservation is but a fraction of what it once was. For the Shoshoni, the ongoing and long-term separation from their land and their traditions has been a traumatic journey through time.

Several years ago, Wesaw and his brother Bedeaux set out to rekindle the old ways in hopes of restoring pride, direction and hope in his community. He believed that such a restoration would bond his people to their past, and prepare them for the future. He turned to the elders on the reservation and scoured the history books, seeking all he could about ancient ceremonies and customs. Research in hand, he set out to convince skeptics within and outside his community that it was time to bring about

a rebirth of the old ways, to begin the process of sinking roots in ancient soil.

At the center of his effort was the Sun Dance, a ceremony banned by the federal government in 1908 because whites said it involved self-mutilation. They called it inhumane and feared "it would give us too much power," Wesaw says. The Sun Dance itself is

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an ancient rite of passage for teenage boys to pass through the threshold of manhood. It can be found in some form or another in the histories of almost all of the western Indian nations, and it is re-awakening across the West. Wesaw says the ceremony helps young men commit their lives to their family and community, providing them with a deep tie to their past and a solid footing for the present.

Five years ago, Wesaw became one of the first in his tribe to do the Sun Dance, an act he has performed several times since, and his chest and back still bear its scars. Since then, dozens of Shoshoni have followed in his footsteps, including his 12-year-old son Cameron Clarence Wesaw and his nephew Star Wesaw.

The dance typically takes place in late summer, when the moon is full, the growing season has peaked, and chokecherries are ripe. Prior to the ceremony, Wesaw's brother

**S** O FAR THIS YEAR, MORE THAN 80,000 PEOPLE HAVE COME TO COLORADO LOOKING FOR A NEW WAY OF LIFE AND IMPROVED PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE. THEY ALSO HAVE COME TO SHAPE THE WEST IN THEIR OWN VISION.



**THE RESULT IS DISPLACEMENT AND DISCONNECTION FOR MANY PEOPLE WHO HAVE ALWAYS LIVED HERE. WHERE RANCHES ONCE SWEEPED ACROSS VALLEY BOTTOMS, THERE IS FRAGMENTATION, A HASTILY PIECED TOGETHER PATCHWORK OF COWBOYS AND CONDOS, INDIANS AND MOUNTAIN BIKERS, SHEPHERDS, DEVELOPERS, ENVIRONMENTALISTS, LOGGERS, MINERS, RAFTERS AND OIL MEN.**

searches for a ceremonial tree. "He brings a maiden with him who prays for the tree, and then the dancers chop it down keeping it from striking the ground," Wesaw explains. "We load it up in a big gooseneck, and all the people carry it to the arbor." The tree is decorated with colorful cloth rags, some symbolizing a season, others symbolizing all the races

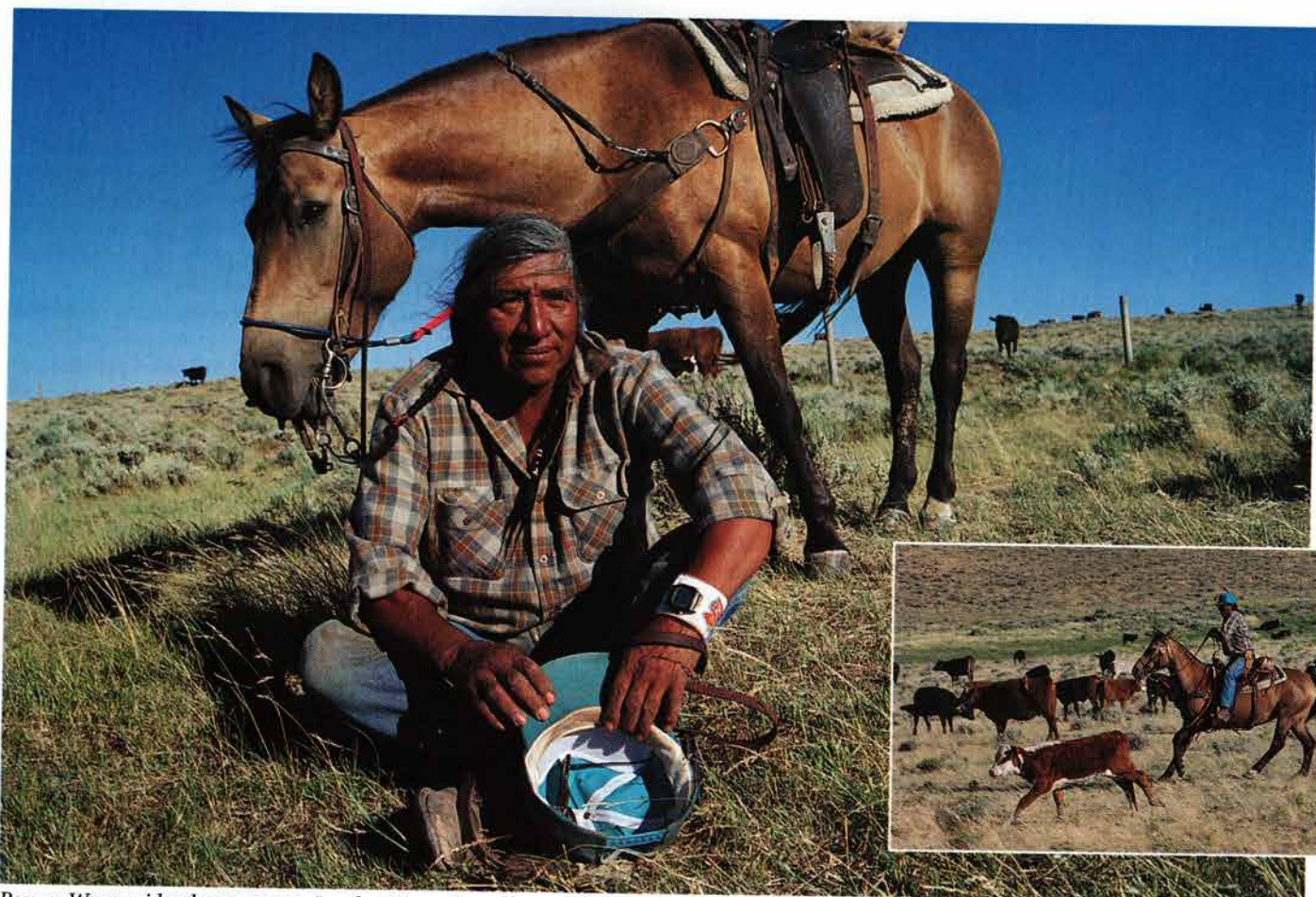
of the world. Wesaw says, "We call them all brothers."

Participants fast, going without food or water for purification and preparation for three or four days. They also seek visions. "When it's your turn to begin, they stand you under the tree or lay you down," Wesaw says. "They cut your chest in two places, and stick a chokecherry stick through each of the holes. Then you lean back, pulling against the rope until your skin breaks. If you show pain, you cannot become a true warrior."

More painful than the dance itself, however, is that sweeping change that again is at work on

the desert range. The Shoshoni once again find themselves standing on the threshold of time. Not even the reawakening of ancient traditions—even the Sun Dance—can restore all that once was.

Wyoming, like much of the West, is besieged with transition, unmatched by anything it has seen since the days of the Gold



Peewee Wesaw rides the range near Lander, Wyo. where his grandfathers once hunted buffalo and fought the Crow and Sioux. Today he is a cowboy. "The word Shoshoni," he says, "means a lot of grass."



Rush and the Oregon Trail. The region is buckling beneath the weight of new immigration, and little relief is in sight. The newcomers, like their predecessors, seek opportunity here, only this time, those who come bear mountain bikes, skis, lap-top computers and satellite dishes, instead of picks, hoes and shovels. The states of Montana, Colorado and Wyoming have added more than one million people—a 20 percent increase—to their populations since the early 1980s. So far this year, more than 80,000 people have come to Colorado looking for a new way of life and improved prospects for the future. They also have come to shape the West in their own vision.

The result is displacement and disconnection for many people who have always lived here. Where ranches once swept across valley bottoms, there is fragmentation, a hastily pieced together patchwork of cowboys and condos, Indians and mountain bikers, shepherds, developers, environmentalists, loggers, miners, rafters and oil men.

Still, Wesaw says there are lessons to be learned from the previous 150 years. Change pulses in waves across the range like the buffalo herds of the old days. There is not much anyone can do but embrace it, shape it, hold on to what you can, and hope it all shakes out for the best.

For Wesaw, he finds comfort in an old story about how his people transformed into animals when they first heard of strangers coming across the water. "They feared the newcomers would kill them and destroy their life," he says, as he passes through the doorway into his house. Just above, the swoop of the night hawk signals the arrival of darkness. All is well for now, only the memory of buffalo persists.

"We will deal with change the same way we dealt with the people who came here before: learn how to live with them," he says. "I am just a cowboy, and that is all I will ever be. I ride each day where my ancestors once rode, and it makes me feel good. This place is my church, where I live each day with my ancestors and my children. I often think about how this might be the place where my grandfather had the war games, or that it might be a place where he hunted buffalo. When I see the deer on the hillside or the eagle in the air, I am happy to be here, because I am close to what once was and can see all that it has become." ■

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## NEW AGE COWBOY

TONY MALMBERG KNOWS IF YOU  
TAKE SOMETHING FROM THE LAND, YOU HAVE TO GIVE IT BACK.  
STORY AND PHOTOS BY ERIC GRANT

**B**ack in the early 1980s, Tony Malmberg wondered if he'd still be in the cattle business by the end of the decade. Calf prices had fallen through the floor, interest rates were high, and the rancher was faced with a mountain of debt. Things got worse when his father passed away suddenly, leaving him alone at the helm of his third-generation ranching outfit.

"My grandpa and dad put this place together," he says. "I guess it was my job to pay for it."

It was no small task, considering Malmberg's Three Quarter Circle Ranch is a vast and complex enterprise. It encompasses 30,000 acres of deeded, state and federal lands located 30 miles southeast of Lander, Wyo. The ranch claims a wide array of native grasses and riparian zones, from upland sagebrush range to bottomland willow and cottonwood. For a man just shy of 30, the task of managing it all—plus a large herd of mother cows—seemed daunting back then.

Still, Malmberg found his way through tough times. And he credits in large part George "Peewee" Wesaw, a native Shoshoni he hired nearly a decade ago. Together, they put the ranch back on solid footing by improving the productivity of the land and increasing the diversity of the plant and wildlife species. The 1,000-head cattle ranch runs 65 percent more cattle during the summer months than it did when Peewee joined him.

"Peewee has taught me a sensitivity to the land, the water and the grass that I never had before," says Malmberg. "He always tells me

that white men ride with their eyes, not with their other senses. He's always sneaking up on me when we're riding. He emerges from the shadows and says, 'Whatcha doing, boss?'"

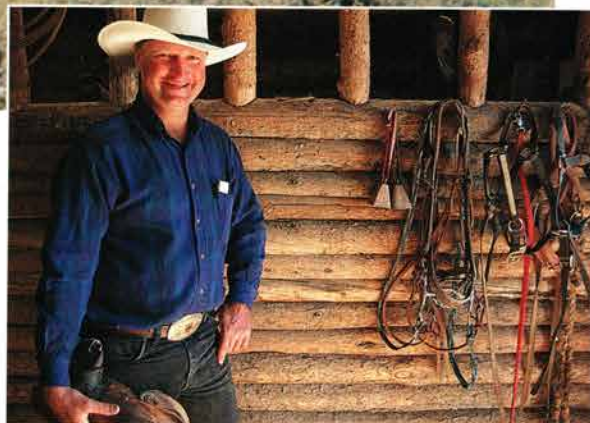
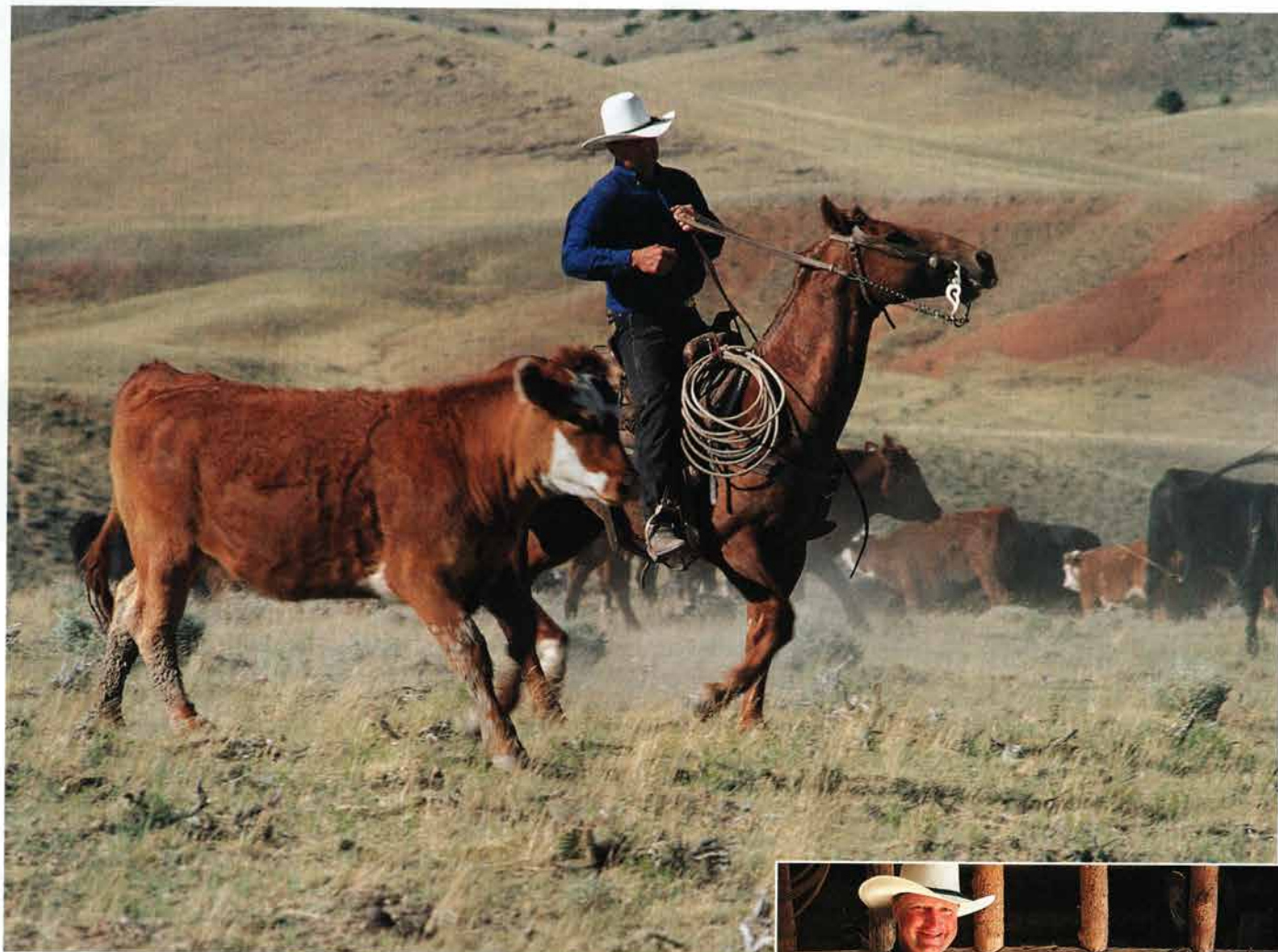
What both Malmberg and Wesaw have been doing lately is a lot of good, both for the land and their business. For their efforts, they recently received the Wyoming Stock Growers Association Environmental Stewardship Award. The award acknowledges cattle producers who strive not only to make their businesses more viable, but also to improve the quality of the land, streams and vegetation under their care.

During the last 10 years, they've developed a system of intensive grazing where they put large numbers of cattle, sometimes numbering at 1,000 head, into small pastures to graze for a short period of time.

"By concentrating numbers, we have been able to force our cattle to graze areas that they never grazed before," Malmberg says. "By doing that, we're getting more production, our plants have become more dense, with more variety. Ten years ago, this country was solid prairie June grass. Now, we see Kentucky bluegrass, western wheatgrass—big pockets that were never there before, growing up higher than your stirrups. Plus, we've eliminated a lot of bare ground."

Nowhere are the ranch's efforts more visible than along Twin Creek, a tributary of the Wind River that cuts through the heart of the ranch. "Although riparian areas account for three percent of the total land area on the ranch," he says, "they're responsible for producing 35 percent of our forage."





*Facing bankruptcy in the early 1980s, Tony Malmberg has succeeded by working with the environment rather than against it.*

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Up until a few years ago, the stream would overflow its banks each spring, tearing away vegetation and topsoil. Malmberg compounded the problem when he dynamited several beaver dams. “I knew I had made a mistake when I did that,” he recalls. “The water came up and then it wiped out our bridges, water gaps and fences.”

Now Malmberg welcomes the beaver, and even finds ways to enhance their habitat. “Twin Creek hasn’t come up over its banks in five years,” he says. “My job as a rancher in this arid environment is to slow water down,

starting on the upland ranges by preparing the soil and increasing the plant density. That stores the water better than it used to. The beaver help by holding it up and storing it. We have hayfields that I used to irrigate; now, they’re sub-irrigated by the beaver ponds. The slower the water is, the more feed I grow, the more money I make.”

Wesaw adds that the Shoshoni way is in replacement. “If you take something from the land,” he says, “you have to give something back. That is what Tony is doing.”

Malmberg continues working hard, for the

land and his business.

“This has become a very diverse place,” he says. “We have the Shoshoni influence, we have environmentalists dropping by every week to learn more about well managed lands, and we have the influence and knowledge of the old-time cowboys. Biodiversity is good on the land; the more species you have, the better off you are. And we’ve found diversity is good for the long-term stability of our community; the more different types of friends you have, the better off you are.” ■