



STARLESS KNIGHT — MORGAN STALLION
AMERICA'S FIRST BREED-1789

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GAP PUCCI: THE ONLY SICILIAN COWBOY WEST OF THE MISSISSIPPI

By Julia Arnold

What do you get when you put a Sicilian-American huntsman in the wilds of Wyoming, add a tiny log cabin with no electricity, running water, or telephone, and throw in a dozen or so Morgan horses? You get the unique Gaspari “Gap” Pucci, one of the few, self-described “true mountain men” remaining in the United States, if not the world.

Pucci has lived in Wyoming for most of his adult life, moving there to follow a dream long before it became the high-end travel destination it is today. He got his feet wet in the outfitting world by working for established big game hunting companies, and, with his characteristic grit and dogged determination, he soon realized his

goal of owning his own hunting company, Crystal Creek Outfitters.

Pucci is a living legend in the hunting world and a testament to the indefatigable human spirit. He worked as hard as he could, day in and day out, not only to survive the dangerous conditions where he lived, but to thrive and appreciate them. The now retired outfitter affirms that to flourish in the challenging lifestyle in which he and his wife Peggy chose to raise their two daughters, the whole family had to become “rugged individualists in order to survive.” That they did.

That spirit is still alive and kicking in Pucci. Now age 83, he spends his days on his expansive and remote Jackson Hole property, caring for the domesticated animals as well as the stray elk, moose,

ABOVE: Gap Pucci and a trusted Morgan friend at their wilderness home in Jackson Hole, Wyoming (photo © Bradly J. Boner, *Jackson Hole News & Guide*).



A recent photo of Gap and an equine companion.

or deer that might stop by, and toiling away on property upkeep (a never-ending job). In the middle of the night, while his body rests but his mind is awake, Pucci carves out time to finish his third and final memoir, which will chronicle his fascinating, authentic existence as a “big game hunting guide, outfitter, horseman, cowboy, shepherd, and jack-of-all trades.”

Today, Pucci claims he is the “only Sicilian cowboy west of the Mississippi,” and he is likely correct.

From a young age, Pucci possessed a deep passion for adventure and the wilderness, even though he grew up in a bustling Italian-American neighborhood just outside of downtown Philadelphia. Pucci spent part of 1958 and 1959 with the US Army Infantry mountain troops with a strike outfit in a remote outpost in the mountains of Alaska, where he says they “practically lived with wolves.” Sleeping in the snow and surviving temperatures that dropped below minus 50 degrees would surely dissuade most people from giving up modern comforts and choosing a life in the wilderness, and must certainly extinguish any glorified Hollywood image of life as a mountain cowboy. Not for Pucci.

“WE MARRIED ADVENTURE”

While on a trip to Wyoming in 1964, Gap fulfilled a dream of hunting big game. After meeting a young woman named Peggy

Ann McClung on a ranch south of Jackson Hole that summer, Gap quickly fell head over heels in love. Not too long into their courtship, in 1965, they were married. With Peggy, Gap found a fellow adrenaline-seeker who also loved the outdoors; she was just as interested in pursuing a life of adventure as was her new husband, though they couldn’t have predicted just how rustic things were about to get.

Their first home as an exuberant, newly married couple was no typical starter home in the suburbs. They occupied a tiny, poorly insulated 1930s log cabin (nicknamed “the bunkhouse”) in Granite Creek, miles away from the hot springs they managed and even farther away from any other homes or businesses. Of this time, Pucci acknowledges, “we didn’t really comprehend what we were getting into...but we learned very quickly that we had not just married each other but an adventure beyond our expectations.”

They used snowshoes to hike the 10 miles at a time to the nearest road that could then take them via truck the 40 miles to the nearest grocery store or laundromat. They used a wood-burning stove powered by wood they chopped themselves and hauled via a not-always-reliable snowmobile to heat their home and to warm their water for baths. And water didn’t come from a faucet—they hauled it in five gallon milk cans from Granite Creek, miles from their home.

Gap says, “You’ve got to be rugged enough to do what you’ve



LEFT TO RIGHT: A younger Gap feeding big horn sheep; Daughter Catherine, age 14, with the 1982 mare S H Erin Belle at the Teton County Fair.

gotta do.” In his first memoir, chronicling their early years, Pucci writes, “It was a matter of rugged endurance to make a living. You couldn’t have any quit in you. Of course, I loved my work. To me, it was an adventure overall, not an ordeal.” So, the adventure continued.

Pucci says the dictionary defines “wrangler” as a ranch hand who takes care of the saddle horses, but he explains it’s so much more than that. “Wranglers take care of the saddle and pack horses, often dozens of them, turning them all out to graze in the evenings and bringing them back in early mornings, and this itself is usually done on horseback.” Pucci has spent probably half his life on the back of a horse. And the other half caring for them.

Things rarely go according to plan when one lives and breathes air swept across snow-capped mountains packed with grizzly bears and mountain lions. Early on, Gap realized that one of the unwritten jobs for a wrangler, ranch hand, or outfitter, is that of search and rescue, which he assisted with many times while working in such a dangerous location.

No matter the depth of the snow, the miles spent on horseback, or just how elusive a particular hunt turned out to be, the Sicilian cowboy was always grateful to live and work in what he refers to as “God’s country.” Through all his years there, he remained in awe of the pristine turquoise lakes, the 11,000-foot snow-covered mountain peaks looming above his ranch, and the rich and abundant wildlife. Much of that looks different now due to development of the area, but the photos in his books preserve just how breathtaking it looked 50 years ago.

On January 8th, 1975, Gap realized his lifelong dream and purchased an outfitting company. He also purchased his mentor Larry Moore’s hunting camp, and then soon after acquired more camps in the Gros Ventre Mountains. In all, the area where his company was permitted to hunt according to hunting license and laws was three times the size of Granite Creek, where he had first worked as a wrangler.

It was during the early years of running his own hunting camp that his two daughters were born. The girls were born two years apart, both in the month of October, the very heart of Wyoming hunting season. Because this was still a pre-cell phone era, Pucci was nearly impossible to reach when he was out guiding a two week hunt. Therefore, news of his first baby, Catherine, being born was brought to him the only possible way it could be—by bush plane. Flying over the camp, the pilot dropped a note down to Gap. The note, scrawled on yellow legal pad paper and forever preserved in Gap’s first book, reads: “Gap you are the proud papa of a baby girl, 7#, born on Friday, 10-13-78. Mother and daughter are doing fine.”

Peggy and Gap’s daughters, Catherine and Teresa, naturally acclimated to their parents’ rustic, off-grid lifestyle. That wild way of life was all they knew. Gap fondly remembers his daughters riding horses from the time they were three and notes “they are the only little girls I know who would play ‘outfitter guide,’ packing their Barbies and gear on toy horses with rubber bands.” The untouched Wyoming wilderness was their own backyard, and he says, “they had a grand time!”

The girls often spent their days riding around the open fields on the backs of the friendliest mounts, especially the family’s Morgan horses, while Nino the German Shepard followed and watched over them. Without a babysitter down the street, a protective dog comes in handy. When they were old enough for school, it was 25 miles away through rugged terrain. They had no four wheel drive vehicle (which wouldn’t have worked anyway when the deepest winter snow was on the ground), so they used snowshoes, snowmobile, and sleigh to get to and from school each day.

Gap’s love for horses appears to run through his very blood, and they were a major part of the appeal of moving west. He enjoyed riding as a child and went on to learn more about horses and horse care while working with trainer Carol Clark and several veterinarians in Pennsylvania. He also took

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classes learning how to shoe them before moving west. Pucci credits horses, especially his Morgans, for keeping him alive all his outfitting years and holds a deep appreciation for the breed. “Horses are the only way I lived,” he says, whether they carried him up an almost vertical rocky mountain or through a wild west blizzard. He rode his first Morgan 55 years ago and says “I couldn’t live without my Morgans.”

His horses worked hard and yet often lived well into old age. Gap estimates that during his 38 years as a professional hunting guide, he rode horseback at least one thousand miles, each May through November.

His most special Morgan, the one he still gets emotional about and compares to a son, was his “prized stallion,” S H Starless Knight, who was in fact featured on the January page of *The Morgan Horse* calendar in 2000. In the photo, an American flag is draped over the coal black stallion’s back. To Pucci, “never was there such a horse born.” Pucci still owns two of Starless Knight’s sons.

Talking to Pucci today, it’s clear he admires all the horses he’s worked with over the years, but it was almost always his Morgans who carried him over thousands of miles of terrain, nine months out of the year, every year, during his guiding days. He says, “I rode my first Morgan over 50 years ago, and I have stuck with them for over 50 years.” They take on mountains with endurance and intelligence, he explains, adding “there is no other breed that keeps up with them in the high country. It’s straight up and down here. This is what Morgans are meant to do.”

In his two published books, the former wrangler shares many fond Morgan memories. In his first memoir, *We Married Adventure*, Gap writes, “I’ve especially come to love the Morgan breed of horses. They’re strong mountain animals, sure-footed... I’m a traditionalist and prefer horses for riding and as beasts of burden.” When he wrote the first memoir, he still had a 31-year-old Morgan who just wouldn’t quit—a living example of the breed’s

strong spirit. A spirit that mirrors Gap’s own.

In his second memoir, *We Do the Damndest Things*, Pucci recollects the real danger of riding up steep rocky mountains, where the elevation thins the air and is hard on a horse’s heart and lungs. “It takes a good mountain horse to make a climb like this one,” he writes, “and the Morgan excels in this high mountain rocky country...they will get the job done. They have no quit in them and will give you everything they’ve got.”

His love for the breed goes deep: “I have gone through 50 head of horses in my life. Never again will this wilderness area see the strength of Morgans like that. We worked with them and we loved them. I guided hunters from all over the world using Morgans. This is dangerous country to ride in—drop off, high mountains—you need a smart horse.” And, he adds, “they have excellent hard feet made for the mountains.”

“We cannot get along without horses in this wilderness,” he writes, “and we learn to take good care of them.” He often treated his hard-working horses to the barley and alfalfa cubes he kept on hand at the end of a long day. He still carries those cubes around to distribute to his herd every day.

Though Gap’s Morgans were primarily working horses used as guides for long and treacherous Crystal Creek hunting expeditions, not all of them were strangers to the show ring. Gap won prizes at these fairs, too. He has especially fond memories of a striking S H Starless Knight in the show ring, who was crowned Teton County Grand Champion.

Whether working or showing, “they’re my love,” he says, simply.

The occasional physical injury aside, Gap credits his horses for saving his life and providing for this family. In one of his memoirs, he writes, “They built my business and paid the bills. They were my friends...I recall with fond memories how they carried me through thunderstorms, blizzards, and lightning, where I could often not even see my mount’s ears! There were many miles



Horses were essential not only for hunting expeditions, but for survival.



Snow in the mountains: A handwritten note with these photos of Gap and Peggy's first cabin says snowfall that winter 50 years ago was 500 inches. "I measured it," Gap states.

of night riding where one had to rely on the horse's instincts to get me safely back to camp."

Though Pucci may not be guiding customers across the rugged Wyoming terrain anymore (he retired and sold his company in 2008), he is still remarkably hardy. He currently owns six horses, whom he feeds and cares for himself. He also spends hours a day, every day, feeding and caring for the other animals on his property including his dog and 27 peacocks.

Pucci lives alone now in the same cabin where he raised his family and still spends most of his days, and many nights, working with his hands (rarely wearing gloves no matter the cold), caring for his animals and his property. He now has a telephone line (which occasionally works), electricity (if a wild animal doesn't chew through the wire), and running water, but the idea of acquiring a computer is laughable to the old cowboy.

His two published memoirs, full of photos and gripping and humorous stories documenting his lifestyle and unique existence over the years, have earned praise from readers around the country. His third book will focus on his later years. All three books acknowledge the author's love for the Morgan breed and showcase photos of his "mountain Morgans" over the years.

The first two memoirs, *We Married Adventure: Together Against the Wilderness: Life in Jackson Hole, Wyoming* (2011) and *We Do the Damndest Things: Jackson Hole Ranch and Outfitter Stories* (2015) document his fascinating journey as he started out in

Jackson Hole, built his company, and raised his family. The second book won first place in the biography/autobiography category by the Wyoming State Historical Society. The society honored the book "in recognition of outstanding accomplishments and contributions to Wyoming's legacy."

He hand writes all of his memoir drafts on at least a dozen yellow legal pads and has them typed by friend and editor Jake Nichols. It is up to Jake to get this chicken scratch typed into Microsoft Word, and doing so requires someone who is not only computer savvy with a writing background but also someone who can understand, decipher, and anticipate what it is Gap is trying to convey, which his friend Jake steadfastly does.

Jake relates an editor's tale saying Gap once wrote, "The stallion snickered to his mares," Jake, thinking Gap meant "nickered," changed it. "But," Jake says, "Gap took a stand on that one and even though it could be confusing for a reader, I relented for the sake of keeping what is uniquely 'Gap-speak.'"

Pucci's brain appears to work just as hard as his body: he has read and recited poetry throughout his life, and often repeated in his head the classic Robert Frost poem, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," while riding back to camp at dark after a long, busy day of guiding. "No other work describes the challenge of a hunting outfitter better than this," he has said about the famous poem.

Pucci is also a poet, though again he may not call himself one. His poem, "Diamonds in the Snow" (published here), written in



S H Starless Knight—1987—(Chatham x Mortana Penny) was Gap Pucci's heart horse and sire of Morgans used in his wilderness expeditions. This photo appeared on the AMHA calendar in January of 2020.

DIAMONDS IN THE SNOW

By Gap Pucci ~ February 2019

As I plunder through the snow
 The night is cold and crisp.
 A wolf lets out a lonely howl. He echoes through the night.
 My, he's mighty close!
 A stallion stands on guard each night.
 He snickers to his herd, the mares they gather by his side.
 They seem to sense his might!
 One can hardly see him.
 He's as black as all the night.
 The shrill sound of the stallion's voice cracks the lonely night.
 The wolves, they answer back.
 Soon we're surrounded by the pack, getting ready the attack.
 Old Shep lets out a horrible growl. She guards her family well.
 The wolves they snarl and fuss and answer with a howl.
 The stallion stands his ground!
 With flowing mane, he shakes his head.
 His ears laid back, he blows and blows, stomps his feet.
 Then bucks and rears and strikes the air.
 With wild eyes and nostrils flared, he bellers in the night as if to say,
 "My name's Revenge, I'm the son of Starless Knight."
 A Morgan horse, for sure. The Master's hands are raised up high.
 The wolves they circle round.
 They see the pistol in my hand, the stallion by my side.
 At last they've met their match.
 We'll fight them to the end! Now it's 23 below,
 five hundred elk go thundering by in snow that's belly-deep.
 To angel's heights they fly, with wolves in hot pursuit.
 Now, God loves all his creatures. He beds them down each night.
 So, please, be careful with my friends as they wander through diamonds in the snow!

the dead of night on his trusty yellow legal pad, was inspired by a close encounter with a wolf on his property one cold night. The emotion behind his words rival any professional poet.

Despite all the challenges of raising a family in the vast, isolated wilderness, Gap remains deeply grateful for the opportunity and believes the hardships only made them stronger. "As I think back on some of the hardships all four of us went through, I realize they were not insurmountable. Perhaps adversity merely strengthened our resolve," he writes.

Through the years, Peggy and Gap wanted the government to understand just how crucial the outfitting business was to the history, natural preservation, and economic development of Jackson Hole and, because of their work, one of their old cabins—where they lived together as a family of four—is now in the national registry. It is honored for its role in the establishment of outfitting and hunting in northwestern Wyoming and America at large. The site is now known as the John Wort/Gap Pucci Hunting Cabin.

Looking back, with the benefit of hindsight, would he change anything? Would he do any of it differently, knowing what he knows now, the dangers he barely escaped, the hours of physical labor that have since wreaked havoc on his aching joints? Absolutely not. In his second memoir, *We Do the Damndest Things*, he sums up his life experience with gratitude. "I'd rather be doing hunts and riding my Morgans than be president of an oil company or Governor of Wyoming. It's been a privilege and a rewarding way to make a living raising my fine family and meeting some of life's most interesting people." Many of the people whose lives Gap touched would certainly say meeting him was a deeply rewarding privilege as well. ■

Gap Pucci's memoirs We Married Adventure: Together Against the Wilderness: Life in Jackson Hole, Wyoming (2011) and We Do the Damndest Things: Jackson Hole Ranch and Outfitter Stories (2015) are available for purchase on amazon.com.