

# BOONDOCKS

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## THE TRUTH ABOUT ZANE GREY

This is the story of how the great Zane Grey doesn't even deserve to have an elementary school named after him.

It's a surprising story, because Zane Grey has been up as one of the most prominent and accomplished Arizonans ever—which may say as much about Arizona as it does about the man.

His accomplishment was pulp fiction, romantic Westerns mostly. Before he died in 1939, he wrote *Code of the West* and *To the Last Man* and the classic *Riders of the Purple Sage*. While no deeper than a sunburn, his books are vivid, creaking with saddle leather and reeking with sagebrush perfume.

The most undeniable thing about Zane Grey's writing is that there's an awful lot of it around. Eighty-nine of his books were published. Millions upon millions of copies have been sold. He's been translated into 24 languages and made into more than 150 movies. To this day, he has herds of fans.

The most ardent insist that Zane Grey is the most important American writer. They say he's been outsold only by the combined editions of the Bible. They say his books provide similar powerful lessons in good and simple virtue winning out. And, bottom line, with his romantic descriptions of the deserts and Rim country, they say he did a whole lot for Arizona.

Zane Grey's cabin, operated as a museum just east of Payson, attracts thousands of visitors a year from all over the world. They hear tales of the decade he used the cabin on hunting and research expeditions. He came each year in the fall for a month or so. Actually, you see, he chose to live elsewhere.

Still, Payson has always been Zane Grey's home country in Arizona, where he was best known and, you'd expect, best loved.

So shock waves went out a few weeks ago when folks in Payson snubbed the legendary Zane Grey. The local school board decided, on a five-to-nothing vote, not to put his name on the new elementary school—going against, among other things, the wishes of nearly a thousand students who had voted by a wide margin in two different elections that they wanted to attend Zane Grey Elementary. Now they'll be attending, ho hum, Payson Elementary.

Why, in a town where generations of kids did their first book reports on Zane Grey and the Payson Chamber of Commerce trumpets all about Zane Grey Country and the main thoroughfare is nicknamed Zane Grey Highway and they have the Zane Grey Shriners and the Zane Grey Kiwanis Club and the square-dance club is the Zane Grey Twirlers—why had the school board done it?

Publicly, those involved trot out soothing reasons, like it was only logical to name the school after the town, and think of the substantial savings from using the name the old school had for years, because no new stationery would have to be printed up.

But if Payson Elementary was such a superior name, why bother to hassle with student elections? As Johnny Ketchem, principal of the old school, says with a chuckle, "Any one of us could have come up with that name in about two minutes."

No, behind all the logical reasons are

unpleasant memories of Zane Grey that still linger among the older families of Payson. Among people who knew Zane Grey in, you might say, the imperfect flesh—who remember he was a human being after all, prey to all the sins and faults we associate today with leading citizens, but which history and legend tend to obscure.

Payson is that kind of town—conservative, centered like a horseshoe on a stake around ranching families that go back to territorial days, and who serve as keepers of the culture.

They know the downside of Zane Grey: He was an outsider, born in Ohio, educated in Pennsylvania, one-time resident of New York. Then he settled in California. That about sums it up.

The guy was a dentist. A dentist, for God's sake. And then an author—a runty one who made all the heroes in his books way over six foot tall. That tells you something.

By the time he got to Arizona, Zane Grey was vain. He was world-class rich and insufferably arrogant. He'd cruise

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through in a black limo with vanity plates. The front plate announced HERE COMES ZANE GREY. The rear plate said THERE GOES ZANE GREY.

On his lavish hunting expeditions, he'd take along a bathtub and mountains of goods to keep him comfortable, and a couple dozen cooks, wranglers, guides and "secretaries" or "nieces" that were his concubines of the month. Because despite the ideals of virtue presented in his books, Zane Grey proliferously cheated on his wife, Dolly, and lived about as simply as a sultan.

Zane Grey was a hypocrite, nothing like the heroes in his books. He'd wax on about "my beloved Arizona." But for years he figured he was above the law when it came to hunting here.

"I never did have a very good opinion of him," says Mae Haught, member of the pioneer family that sold Zane Grey his land, built his cabin and guided him on hunts. Mae Haught is 87, has a granddaughter sitting on the school board, and she remembers what happened between Zane Grey and the son of her father-in-law's first cousin:

"Ed Haught used to take care of Zane Grey's ranch and his cattle. He was also a game warden. He wouldn't let Zane Grey hunt bear unless he had a license. A license cost \$15 back then. Zane Grey refused to buy one. He didn't have the guts to fire Ed Haught. He went back home and turned it over to his wife and had her write a letter telling Ed Haught he was fired. I thought that was pretty low-down. . . . He wanted everybody to think he was Mister Grey. Well, that don't work in this country."

In a final telling incident in 1930, Zane Grey blew his top when he was denied permission to go on a bear hunt a few weeks before the season opened. He appealed to the governor and got turned down. He couldn't wait, you see, because he was leaving on another of his around-the-world trips. He left Arizona in a huff and vowed he'd never return. People around Payson back then thought, fine. Some of them still think the same way.

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## BY RAY RING