

Tony Vagneur: A Capitol affair

Tony Vagneur Saddle Sore

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Surging from granite just north of Capitol Lake, the beginning of a mountain stream courses through the rock-lined basin containing the lake and continues on down the valley, picking up velocity from mountain tributaries along the way. This is Capitol Creek.

Rivulets of water stream down from small valleys on either side, gorges with names like Charity, Cherokee and Maurin Basin, the creek gathering muscle as it surges, dropping over Capitol Falls and continuing downvalley past Jimmy Creek, Nicholson Creek and others, eventually converging with Snowmass Creek for their combined run to the Roaring Fork River.

The Capitol Creek Valley is a tough place. Not only has it gained notoriety for the dangerous and deadly peak hovering high above it, but people continually confuse it with the Snowmass Creek Valley. How many times have you heard someone say, "On Sunday, I'm going to the Snowmass Monastery for church." Or, "I live in Little Elk Creek — it's up Old Snowmass." Wrong. The Capitol Creek Valley is its own entity with its own personality, its own quirks and its own charm.

Steve and Molly Child, along with their son, Nathan, played hosts to a group of Capitol Creek folks, renegades you might say, people who either live or work in that beautiful valley and who have a keen interest in the history of Capitol Creek and surrounding areas. No, it was not a political meeting.

The guest list read like a Who's Who of local history, not just of the Capitol Creek Valley but of the Roaring Fork Valley, as well. It is not my intention to name-drop or single anyone out, but some names you might recognize were John and Laurie McBride and Michael Kinsley. Well-known Arizona/Colorado rancher David Chase and his lovely bride Kathy were also present.

Steve's dad, Bob Child, bought the Child ranch in 1961 and was instrumental in saving the valley from the ignominy of ski area development on Haystack Mountain.

If you're wondering what Capitol Creek and Aspen might have in common, there is more than you might think. Henry Staats, one of the first men to arrive in Ute City, I mean Aspen, was also the man who, in 1880, homesteaded what is now the site of St. Benedict's Monastery.

Staats might have become one of the silver barons always talked about in modern historical annals, except like many today, he found Aspen a bit rambunctious for his soul and escaped to the quietude of life on a plot of ground destined to house a peaceful, but determined hermitage of Cistercian Monks.

Additionally, B. Clark Wheeler, ambitious Aspen developer and founder of The Aspen Times, had his mitts on some Capitol Creek property back in the 1880s. Hod Nicholson, whose family is the namesake of Nicholson Creek, once served as Pitkin County sheriff while living in Aspen. His wife, Polena, grew up on the Gates place, which still contains that great, historic barn just below the old ranger station at the base of the Hay Park Trail. Hod's son, Hod, was a long-time owner of Aspen Laundry and Cleaners.

Enlightening stories, but when Dwight Maurin of Maurin Basin fame shows up, the accounts quickly get a little western. If I'm not mistaken, the Maurins first homesteaded in the area in 1888 and bought more property along the way to augment their large holdings.

Dwight's grandfather was a pugilistic cowboy who, you might say, was not content to let a smile or twist of humor settle a disagreement. May the best man win, and Maurin was usually that man. He carried a pistol on his belt and a high-powered rifle in the scabbard on his saddle. Things could get a little brutal, and I'd like to tell you about the showdown in the middle of the Capitol Creek road between two gun-toting people on horseback, or the dynamite carrying owl that scattered a whole herd of cattle (and cowboys), but this is a family newspaper, after all.

My old friend, Bubby Light, grandson of Fred Light who homesteaded much of the valley, would surely have broadened the smiles of everyone there, but Bubby couldn't wait — he crossed the divide several years ago.

The beautiful Child home, nestled at the base of Haystack Mountain, served quite admirably as a shelter from today's crazy world while we visited like the old-timer's used to — about 20 of us sat around and told stories and imbibed in some great treats, a potluck collection of everyone's favorite desserts.

Not only were the stories good but the camaraderie of sharing parts of one's life breeds a closeness that strengthens a neighborhood. Kudos to the Child family for putting this together and to the folks of the Capitol Creek Valley!

We should do something similar in each of the valleys touching the Roaring Fork.

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