

# Brooksie

*The poetic satisfaction of a simple life. Words and photos by Jessica Brandi Lifland.*



*If you mention cowboy poet reciter Jerry Brooks to most people who know her, they'll likely say, "Who?...Oh, Brooksie! No one calls her Jerry." I spent four days with Brooksie, photographing her as part of a larger project that is a visual exploration into the lives of "Cowboy Poets of the American West." Although Brooksie is not known for her own writing, she is one of the foremost reciters of classic cowboy poetry and any project on cowboy poets would seem incomplete without her. She plays a big role in keeping the poems, and thus the culture, of westerners of past and present generations alive. Her performances are powerful. She was top of my list of cowboy poets and I was hoping to get to know her better, and so I found myself in my little Subaru, descending into the depths of Utah canyons late one June evening in search of Brooksie.*

**I**t is that brief period between seasons when spring turns to summer. Deep in Clear Creek Canyon in southwestern Utah, tall red rock canyon walls glow yellow in the morning sun. A winding road runs alongside the property where Brooksie lives. The road touches only a few other neighboring ranches and the Fremont Indian State Park, which boasts some exquisite examples of petroglyphs and pictographs.

Along the road you could easily pass by the old Waters homestead on your way to Fremont State Park. The homestead cabin sits on a narrow piece of land separated from the rest of the adjoining ranch by Clear Creek, carver of the canyon. The cabin, now renovated, once belonged to homesteaders Joseph and Charlotte Hunt. The property Brooksie lives on was homesteaded by the Waters family and is now owned by their grandson Allen Levie and his wife Lani. Just past the cabin sits Brooksie's humble but tidy trailer. Brooksie lives on and manages this property for the Levies, since they are elderly, retired and have

moved closer to town. She sees them regularly and says, "They have become precious to me."

When I arrive at Brooksie's trailer, it is morning and the sun is shining. On a bench outside her trailer, Brooksie puts on her work boots and smokes a morning cigarette. A jar of what will be sun tea steeps on a ledge beside her. Trooper, her trusty dog and best pal, sits next to her, looking forward to the day's work and a run alongside the truck.

After her cigarette, Brooksie slowly gets up and heads towards a pickup. Wearing a loose white button-down shirt and jeans, she is a petite woman with a square jaw and bright blue eyes that dance when she laughs. Despite her size, she is strong and has never flinched for a moment at doing physical work right alongside the men. She moves slowly but steadily. Working for more than 20 years in the Utah mines has left her body "just tore up." She is 55, but says she feels much older. She has severe back pain that now restricts her to doing only light physical labor.

"It was like fate that I fell into this deal,"

she says, referring to her life on the ranch. “Just as I had been told that I was disabled and had to retire [from the mines] and I didn’t know what I was going to do, the owners offered me this opportunity. They needed me as much as I needed them.”

Out in the field Brooksie heads over to the irrigation system, checks the lines and then turns some heads on and others off to flood a pasture. The entire property is about 80 acres and much of it had fallen back into sagebrush and timber before she took over.

“It’s a great satisfaction to see what can be done with the land to bring it back into production. I like to see it greening up. I like to watch it grow.”

Her next task is to clear some light brush from an area which the landowners hope to use for more grazing. The morning passes while she works. Brooksie has conversations with Trooper. The cows and steers come over to say hello. She says the number of head varies from year to year, but there are anywhere from six to 46 head of cattle on the property and she knows each member of the small herd by name, or at least by personality and appearance.

When the sun hits a high point in the sky, Brooksie heads in for lunch. Later that same afternoon, she heads back out to another part of the property to do some fencing. She uses the power of the tractor to pull up some old fence posts. She hires some young men to do the heavy work of planting new posts. An afternoon drizzle marks her hat with little polka dots of rain. She laughs and her blue eyes sparkle. When asked why she likes fencing, she replies, “It’s really straightforward work. You can turn around, look back and see what you’ve accomplished in the day. Every clip tight, every wire level, and every post straight.” She says that Red Steagall describes it best in the poem, “The Fence That Me and Shorty Built.”

The rhythm of the workday slows down. She rides the tractor back towards her home, parks it and walks over to feed her horse Bart. She hasn’t ridden him in a while. She says it is because both of them are getting older—that, and because of the pain. They are still great pals though.

In the evening, the canyon walls change from yellow to a red glow. She takes Trooper in the truck and heads down the road to check the water on another piece of land. After that she decides to drive along Clear Creek Canyon and point out all the cliff drawings for me. She knows the history and legends for each and every one. As the last of



the daylight wanes, she returns home, sits on her porch, smokes a cigarette and takes off her work boots. Then she heads inside to have a beer and warm up supper.

Brooksie's simple demeanor and lifestyle can be deceiving. She has a profound literary knowledge. Of all the classic cowboy poems, there are few she hasn't mastered for recitation or absorbed to a great depth. An entire room of her trailer is filled with books she has read. When asked what made her love language so much, she replies, "I was brought up with the power of the spoken word. My mama's family were storytellers and my dad was a preacher."

Originally from Massachusetts, her family moved around a bit when she was a child as her father was assigned to different congregations. She is still close with her brother, Cecil, although he lives back East in Harrisburg, Penn. They see each other whenever they can. Cecil has been in a wheelchair since birth, the result of spina bifida, but, like Brooksie, he allows nothing to get in the way of the life he chooses to lead.

Brooksie considers herself a bit of a loner. She likes the solitude of life in the canyon. "When the wind sweeps over the tops of the canyon and passes by, it's as if the rest of the world can kinda pass over me like the wind." She admits she's a bit shy, yet her sense of humor, dry wit and talent keep people gravitating towards her. When at the cowboy poetry gatherings, she is always surrounded by admirers.

Brooksie says she, like many Americans, is doing her best roughing out these tough economic times. She is like so many others who have recently fallen through the cracks. She has no health insurance and her retirement is nearly gone since the economic crash. She says she doesn't benefit from any of the existing government programs because she doesn't fit within their rules. The fact is, Brooksie doesn't really fit within anyone's rules. She walks her own path, does things her way.

Back at the trailer, it is after dark. She finishes a simple supper and relaxes in her living room. She sits in a rocking chair and reads by lamplight, Trooper at her feet. They spend the remainder of the evening like this, perfectly content just to be in each other's company. ■

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