

George Kovich Stories

October 6, 2015 - Wayne Iverson

I lived in Telluride from 1978 until 1981. I managed the Elk's Club for the last two of those years. I loved my Elks and George Kovich was my favorite. He had a circuit -- first he'd go to the Roma Bar, then the Elk's Club, and then sometimes the Sheridan Bar. He usually had a shot of brandy and a short Coors beer at the Elk's. I encouraged him to tell stories. I must have heard them all at least a dozen times each. I eventually recorded them, but the tapes were misplaced. These tales are from my memory.

George was Croatian, raised in Sanski Most, Serbia. He came to the USA when he was 18, moving to a Chicago neighborhood of his countrymen.

George wore a straw hat in Telluride in the summer that had a large chunk of it missing. I asked him about it one day. He said when he first came to this country, all of his friends called black people "niggers" and he thought it was ok. He bought the straw hat new and later went up to a black shoeshine person and said, "nigger shine my shoes." The black picked up a brick and threw it at George. It knocked out the piece of his new hat and bloodied his head. When his friends heard about it, they went looking for the black man, but he had disappeared. What does it say about George that he still kept and wore that hat some 60 years later?

George went to work in Al Capone's gambling houses in Chicago. He liked Al Capone and thought he did good things for the common people. George said that you had to know how to cheat to work there -- not to cheat the customers because the odds were in the house's favor, but to catch the customers trying to cheat the house. The trick to catching them was to watch the way they held the deck of cards when they dealt. You had to grip the deck a certain way to deal the bottom card and another way to deal the second card from the top. They dealt too fast to actually see the card come off the bottom or the second card. George demonstrated how it was done in the Elk's.

George attended the famous heavyweight championship fight between Jack Dempsey and Gene Tunney in Chicago in 1927. Jack Dempsey was born in Manassa, Colorado and supposedly washed dishes in Telluride and trained for one of his fights in Salida, Colorado. Al Capone allegedly offered to fix the fight, but Dempsey declined. The fight is famous for the "Long Count." Ironically, it was the Dempsey camp that insisted on using a relatively new rule that said a fighter had to go to a neutral corner after he knocked a man down and stay there until the man got back up. Dempsey knocked Tunney down, but did not go to a neutral corner. The referee did not start the 10 count until Dempsey did so. As a result, Tunney was down for 13 or 14 seconds. He got up, avoided Dempsey for the rest of the round, and eventually won the fight. People in Colorado who listened to the fight on the radio were furious and thought Dempsey got

robbed. After George moved to Colorado he got into a heated discussion with some Coloradoans about the fight. George was at the fight and could clearly see that Tunney could have gotten up at any time, but waited as long as the referee allowed. George took Tunney's side and said he nearly got lynched.

During the Depression, George leased a coalmine in Durango and delivered it to homes in the area. Most people could not afford to pay so George gave up the enterprise and moved to Telluride. He got a job working for a small mine owner and boarded on the property. The man never paid him so he quit. However, the mine owner would then accost George when he ran into him in town and say George had to pay his board. George would reply, "What do you mean pay my board. You pay me my wages and I'll pay my board." But the man claimed that they had two separate operations where George had worked. He ran the mine and his wife ran the boarding house. He claimed George had to pay her. One day they got into a fight on Main Street in front of what later became the Iron Ladle. The picture window got broken and George got into the most trouble because he was new in town. He was fed up. He wrote to his nephew in Duluth, Minnesota and said, "Send me fifty dollars, I want to get out of this son-of-a-bitchin' town. His nephew sent George a letter that contained five dollars, a photo of himself, his wife, and their 13 children, and a note that read, "Dear George, here is five dollars, go buy a rope and hang yourself. Look what I have to take care of. If you can't take care of yourself, you shouldn't be alive." George would then throw his head back and laugh harder than I ever saw him laugh. It seemed like he even laughed with his wonderful Croatian accent. I loved it. There never was a time when he did not have that picture on his person when I asked him to tell the tale.

My family came to visit me from Minnesota while I lived in Telluride. My dad flew B-24 bombers in WWII. His plane got shot up during a bombing run over Poland and it was clear that it would not make it back to Italy, so everyone bailed out. They landed in what later became Yugoslavia behind enemy lines. Luckily, the Partisans found them first and marched them to safe territory until they could be evacuated. Safe territory was in the town of Sanski Most, the very one that George grew up in. The two of them had a lively discussion about that familiar place.

I may have been the last Telluride person to see George before he died in 1981. I lost a city council election that year by one vote and decided to move back to Minnesota. I trained a new Elk's Club manager, went to an event in Los Angeles for a week, and returned to Telluride to see how my replacement was doing. It was then that I heard that the doctors had found George full of cancer and he didn't have much time left to live. George had moved in with his nephew and his nephew's wife in Denver. I got the address and went there for one last visit with that sweet man. I'm crying as I write this. We need to have a George Kovich celebration, perhaps at the next Telluride anniversary party. Please send me your George Kovich stories – freighttrainwayne@gmail.com.