

[It is Wrong to Steal](#)

February 10, 2015 by [sterlingbennett](#) | [Edit](#)

My father, a man who was quiet, did somehow manage to instill in me certain attitudes toward Native Americans, beginning with little mentions of Indian children that would stare through his windows when he was a boy growing up in Arizona. Then he handed me Kenneth Roberts' Northwest Passage (1937) on the French and Indian War, and when I was sixteen, he handed me a mailing from the Exeter or Harvard Alumni Association, a story about one or the other of those two schools sending a letter to a New England Indian chief (actually a speech by an Onondaga chief Canassatego, on colonizing education, delivered in 1744, in Pennsylvania, on behalf of the Iroquois Confederacy of Nations) inviting him to send some of his young men to learn Latin, poetics and English. The chief politely wrote back, thanking the school and saying that they had found such education had not benefited their young men the way they had hoped it would. But on the other hand, if those schools would

send a few of their young men to him, they would learn to run fifty miles, argue persuasively in councils, shoot arrows with accuracy and be leaders of men.

While I was at Berkeley in graduate school, studying Germanic Languages and Literature, the most important person in my life was already dead almost twenty years before I was born, the Yahi Indian Ishi, whom Theodore Kroeber immortalized in her books, *Ishi in Two Worlds* and *Ishi, The Last of his Tribe*. As evidence of my reverence for this man I even instructed that my ashes were to be placed at the top of a certain cliff overlooking Deer Creek, Ishi's home canyon until he was flushed out by surveyors in 1911 and became the "Last Wild Indian."

In a recent review of a friend's book *A Terrible Beauty, The Wilderness of American Literature*, I referred to a short story I wrote and how it was evidence of my non-European side—my wilderness side, part of my wilderness cosmology that embraced the original peoples of the north. But I am aware that one form of colonizing is to romanticize the peoples in

question. And so, I ask the question, am I doing that in this short tale that follows. You decide.

“Those before me came first from New England and then later from Arizona, where my great-grandfather Edwin, a miner, and my great-grandmother Sarah went broke during the depression of 1890. That was when the Apaches of San Carlos, on the Fort Apache Reservation, east of Globe, began to starve and came and stood in a silent line at Sarah’s back door, where day after day, in sunlight and grayness, drifting powdered snow she gave away all the food they had, over and over, cooked and served each time in the same few blue enameled dishes until they, she and Edwin, had no money and also began to starve.

The winter of 1890-91 saw the price of silver fall and mines shutting down and the winter hard and cold, endless in its duration, with coughs and fever stalking the aging couple, finally driving them to their bed, where they huddled and shivered and clung to each other, too weak to go for help, their sons too far away

to know what was happening to them. The line of starving Apaches thinned and disappeared, until there was only the sound of the wind at the back door and penetrating cold outside and in.

A day passed, then two, and on the third day, a young Chiricahua sat astride a horse, leaned to look through the window of the bedroom and rapped on the glass. Twice each time, a pause, a rap rap. Then silence. The horse, a shadow across the window, stomped and stepped forward, then backward. My great-grandparents heard something heavy hit the ground, followed by something soft. A slaughtered calf and a man in moccasins. They heard the front door push open, movement in the front room, and then they saw a young face looking through the bedroom door.

Soon a fire was burning in the kitchen stove, and heat—at first just the sound of it—stole cat-like through the door into their bedroom. They drifted in and out of dangerous sleep. Then they awoke. They heard plates banging, the sounds of cooking, and then the young

Indian appeared with two bowls of beef soup with pieces of fried bread floating on top.

The boy helped them sit up, spooned from one bowl into two mouths, then spooned from the second bowl till that too was gone. He lay them back down, covered them with a hide blanket he had brought, put a pitcher of water near the bed to thaw in the temporary heat—then faded away. They heard the sound of horse's hooves on frozen ground, and then there was silence again.

On the following day, they heard the sound of more horses. Over the next several days, some say as many as twenty Chiricahua entered the house. They were warmly dressed and snow-dusted. A few of them had come all the way from of Agua Prieta and the mountains to the south—and deeper into Mexico. It was a place where the dangers of the coming hunger had been anticipated and food had been set aside for those in need.

Three grown women—one quite old—stayed with my great-grandparents for a week, nursing them and

cooking. They stuffed the open chinks in walls with bits of old blankets to keep out the cold. The young man, whose name was Walks With Snow, also came and went. The women rendered and cooked the calf and shared it with Sarah and Edwin—and with other Chiricahua.

When Sarah and Edwin could walk again, without the Indians' help, the women rolled up their sleeping robes and rode away with Walks With Snow. But first there was hugging all around and tears and thanks—from both sides because the Chiricahuas were the relatives of the starving San Carlos Apaches whom Sarah and Edwin had helped survive. Edwin knew something about the world and therefore as a precaution took great pains to bury any traces of the calf under snow some distance from the house.

The Chiricahua had not been gone more than a day, two at the most, when the sheriff from Globe arrived, with six heavily armed men, looking for an Indian who had been taking calves from the vast 40,000-section Madison holding on the south bank of the Salt River,

twelve miles to the northwest, land that had once belonged to everyone.

Edwin, who had been a brevet colonel in the Civil War, on the Union side, and who was at home on horses, accepted one from the sheriff, and agreed it was wrong to steal anything. He said he would lead them where he was sure they'd find the thief and took them—even in his still weakened state—some fifty miles due north, in the opposite direction from the route the Chiricahua had taken toward the Mexican border.

At some point, my great-grandfather, half hidden behind his great coat, scarf and fur hat, dusted white by snow, as the rest were, said he was too faint to continue and they would have to go on without him. He told the sheriff he would return the horse as soon as he could. He was sure, he said, they would find their man camped beside a certain stream which meandered vaguely northwest through a land he made sound real and distinct and so plausible that the party rode some twenty miles more before they gave

up and took a short cut back to Globe and to their snug and—because they were really mostly shopkeepers and merchants—warm and still fairly prosperous homes.”