

A PIECE OF LAROCQUE

by Tom LaRocque

Shoshone museum houses wild animals

It may have been a dancehall at one time, she says. It may have been a saloon. People were living in the ancient rock building a few years ago. "It was built before they invented cement. There's a plaster of mud and sand on the rock two feet thick," says Leora S. Coffey. Now it is a museum. It is

the only museum in Shoshone, so you have to pay \$1.50 to get in. It may not be all of two centuries old, but it doesn't look any younger than that. Hanging above the sidewalk from its storefront entrance is a sign that says the museum is "OPEN," but it usually isn't. On the south wall is another sign with

paintings by Leora S. Coffey.

The signs bear life-size renderings of a musk ox and an eland. You know that because they are labeled "musk ox" and "eland." In large letters, the sign says, "Wild African Animals and Others — Mounts from the World." In smaller letters it says, "Owner and Operator, Leora S. Coffey."

It is that sign that greets northbound travelers on Highway 75, before their trips' final leg takes them over the deserts and lava fields forerunning Sun Valley. Countless Californians must have puzzled at that curious hand-painted sign. Blaine County people returning from shopping trips in Twin Falls must have gawked at it too. But most have passed by without stopping.

Those who have stopped and peered into its windows have seen an amazing array of animals. Wild African animals and others, as advertised, are poking their heads from every square yard of plasterboard wall in the place. There are the sleek gazelles, impalas and jaguars. There is the rare hartebeest, with its horns curved backwards at the tips. There is the eland, which is the largest of the African deer family, and the stinebock, which is the smallest. There is the South American tapir, which looks like a large-snouted hog staring down disdainfully from the wall.

There is a caribou from the Arctic, with its nose bruised from a fall from its mount. There is a thar from Antarctica; an oryx from Africa; a black bear from Idaho; a wild boar from Australia. There are the full, stuffed carcasses of two Siberian wolf "puppies," and a fully-grown musk ox. There are the skins of leopards and the antlers of moose. The clutter is almost frightening.

You can meet Mrs. Coffey if you can get inside the museum. The door is often locked because she still likes to travel, although she doesn't do much big game hunting anymore. She has perhaps 200 room keys from various motels on display in the museum, arranged like crystal hanging from a chandelier. "I just started collecting 'em a couple years ago," she says.

She is a smallish woman with gray hair and a Texas

accent. She'll let you guess her age, and if you guess 70, she'll say you're not far off. She lives in a cluster of rooms in the back of the museum, close enough to the animals almost to hear them breathe at night.

Her oil paintings fill the museum with colorful scenes of exotic animals and Western scenery and cowboys and Indians and horses and cattle and roundups and shooting and campfires. Her ceramic horses were judged the world's finest in competition in New York 40 years ago, she says. They, too, occupy the museum, standing among oil-painted backdrops. For sale near the door of the museum is a book on big game hunting in Alaska, with photographs and drawings by the author. The author is Leora S. Coffey.

"I bought this place and started working on it about three years ago, and my son said, 'You're crazy.' I had a big home in California and all I want now is a place to eat and sleep comfortably, and keep my things. I've traveled all over the world. There's no place you could think of that I haven't been. When I lost my husband in '45, I was very much at loose ends. I went to Colorado with a hunting group and hunted.

"Coming back home I thought, well, these friends of mine in Hollywood, they've been trying to get me to snap out of it, offering me different jobs and things. I could have got into the movies there, but I didn't want to. I decided, by gosh, this hunting just suited me better than anything. So I thought, I'm going to Africa, right off the bat. And I did. Then when I'd start back home from these trips, I'd think about the next place I'd be going. As soon as I'd get home, I'd take off on another tour.

"I was in the real estate business in California. I settled up all that country around Cherry Valley, out of Beaumont, and then I decided I wanted to get out of the real estate business. I'd been coming up here to *Idee-ho* for 20 years, and I wanted to get out of all that rustle and bustle down there, and to set up my animals where people would appreciate 'em. I had a museum down there, but people were always comin' in and gaggin' at me being such

a brutal person to kill all these animals. When that happens, I tell 'em, 'There's the door, you can get out just like you came in.' So I was pretty disgusted with California and I didn't know a better place to come than *Idee-ho*."

The second floor of the museum is generally off limits to the public. The narrow staircase is nearly insurmountable anyway, with the snout of a wild boar protruding directly over the stairs. But the other way up is the elevator, which she designed for her former home in California, she says. You step into a steel cage-like affair the size of a telephone booth, and throw an electric switch hanging from a cable. The cage ascends through a rough-cut square hole in the ceiling.

The second floor is a movie theatre of sorts, with rickety wooden chairs and lawn furniture facing a small movie screen. There she and her guests have viewed "Granny Get Your Gun," a Hollywood film about her big game hunting experiences, made in the 1960s, she says. The star, of course, is Leora S. Coffey.

She has a 25-year-old photo of herself standing beside a dapper, dark-haired man wearing a 1960s suit and an engaging smile. The man is undeniably Ronald Reagan, whom she calls an old friend. Another photo has Mrs. Coffey standing on a busy street corner. "That was when I went to New York City to be on *To Tell The Truth*, she says. She stood between two confederates on the old TV quiz show as panelists attempted to guess who was the real big game hunter. "Nobody guessed me," she recalls.

If the life of Leora S. Coffey has brought her a measure of celebrity, it is nothing she couldn't live without, she says. "I have so many people like you coming in here, wanting to write up these things. But they don't know what it's all about and they write up some of the dangedest things. I'm tired of that.

"I've been interviewed dozens of times. I quit lettin' 'em interview me. You're just lucky. You just lucked out."