

Yellow Bird shares culture with the world

BY LUANN DART

Loren Yellow Bird Sr. proudly preserves his Sanish, or Arikara, heritage. He studies the rhythmic singsong music and the complexities of the language, with words like *tanáha* (buffalo) or *neéshu* (corn) that were life-sustaining to his ancestors.

As a park ranger at the Fort Union Trading Post National Historic Site near Williston, N.D., he's also familiar with the story of fur trader Hugh Glass, who was recently immortalized in the Oscar-nominated movie, "The Revenant."

So, when Yellow Bird was asked to offer his language and technical expertise to the movie's cast and crew, he was honored to help the Arikara culture be accurately represented in the film.

The legend of Glass

In 1823, Glass joined a fur company on a trapping expedition along the Missouri River. Glass became a legend when he was mauled by a grizzly bear – and survived. Two men, Jim Fitzgerald and possibly a young Jim Bridger, volunteered to remain with Glass while the rest of the expedition moved forward. But fearful for their own lives, the two men took Glass' belongings and left him to die alone.

Glass miraculously survived and managed to crawl, then walk, 200 miles to Fort Kiowa along the Missouri River in present-day



Loren Yellow Bird Sr. is a park ranger at the Fort Union Trading Post National Historic Site.

South Dakota.

Glass continued on his journey, seeking Fitzgerald and Bridger to gain revenge. One leg of his journey north took Glass from Fort Tilton on the Missouri River north of present-day Bismarck to Fort Henry at the confluence of the Yellowstone and Missouri rivers in far northwestern Montana. Fort Henry, built in 1822, was the precursor to Fort Union, which was built in 1828. In 1833, Glass and two companions were attacked and killed.

The story of Glass inspired the movie, "The Revenant," which was released in 2015 starring Leonardo DiCaprio and Tom Hardy.

Preserving history

Yellow Bird, a park ranger at Fort Union Trading Post National Historic Site the past 17 years, carries the voices from the past with him as he shares the history and traditions of the Arikara.

Growing up in White Shield, N.D., on the Fort Berthold Indian Reservation, Yellow Bird heard the Arikara language in his home.

"My mom would speak it to us. My dad was a fluent speaker, but he never really spoke it much to us," he says.

As he grew older, he became interested in learning the music and language, visiting with elders and members of the tribe to learn what



Hugh Glass once stopped at what is now the Fort Union Trading Post National Historic Site.

he describes as a difficult language to speak, with a complexity in how words are placed together.

“I was more focused on the music rather than the language, but it came along that way,” he describes.

With a degree in anthropology and history from North Dakota State University, Yellow Bird was researching information about traditional gardens being planted at the Knife River Indian Villages National Historic Site when he met a park ranger who eventually offered him a position as an interpreter at the park for three seasons before he began working at Fort Union.

At Fort Union, Yellow Bird was active in re-enactments and other historical aspects, so he became interested in a message from a friend about an open casting call for native actors in a historical movie.

“We do a lot of re-enacting up here and I’ve been involved with that, so I kind of jumped in and thought well maybe I’ll be lucky to get a part as an extra or something,”

he said.

He submitted information about himself, including a video of himself speaking Arikara.

Later, a co-producer called and visited with Yellow Bird, asking about clothing, historic weapons and items used during the fur trade time period. The producer was looking for someone with historic skills, such as starting a fire with flint and putting up a teepee.

During the conversation, the producer asked Yellow Bird about his ancestry.

“I said Arikara. It got silent and he said, ‘You’re an Arikara.’ I said yes. ‘You’re an Arikara?’ Yes,” Yellow Bird says.

Then Yellow Bird was asked if he could speak Arikara.

“I said I can speak it well enough to hold a conversation,” he says. “He called back and said, ‘What do we have to do to get you up here this week?’”

Soon, Yellow Bird found himself in Calgary, meeting with the director, Alejandro Inarritu.

“He showed me what he was doing and we talked about the history of the tribe and I told him some of the simple commands of the language,” Yellow Bird describes.

By August 2014, Yellow Bird had signed a contract to serve as a technical advisor for the movie. During the next 14 weeks, he spent time away from his job on film sets in Calgary, British Columbia and Vancouver in Canada, advising linguists about the language, as well as the props department about war shields, makeup people about Arikara tattoos and costume designers about clothing.

“I made some suggestions to make it as authentic as I felt it could be from my background,” he says. He also continued conversations with the director, and taught the actors how to speak Arikara.

“I felt like a yo-yo at times, but it was fun and it was exciting to see them create aspects of history or their vision of that time period,” he says.

Yellow Bird also worked with DiCaprio, who later won an Oscar for his role in the movie, leading DiCaprio in pronunciation of the language.

“There would be moments right in the middle of the scene when he would get frustrated and start yelling, ‘Where’s Loren at?’” And in the Canadian terrain, that sometimes meant crossing a mountain stream to get to the scene being shot, Yellow Bird describes.

“When they brought him on set, he had his area where he sat and prepared himself. A lot of people didn’t bother him. I asked if they ever talked to him and they said, ‘No, no, it’s Leo. We don’t talk to him.’”

Yellow Bird did visit with

DiCaprio about the tribes, and “he talked to me about his passion, the environment.”

“We gave the bro hugs and the fist bumps, and said, ‘Hey man, have a good scene,’ ” Yellow Bird describes.

Yellow Bird often helped rewrite the Arikara dialogue, making it easier for the actors to learn and speak.

“Leo looked at those words at one point and said, ‘Loren, can you read these?’ and I read the translations for him. He said, ‘Those words are epic. Is there any way we can cut this down? That’s a lot to remember.’ ”

Yellow Bird also had encounters with Hardy, who posed for a photo for Yellow Bird’s son, who was a fan.

When Hardy asked him about his role in the movie, Yellow Bird had a surreal moment.

“I told him I was teaching the native language and he said, ‘Oh, you’re Loren.’ I said, ‘Yeah, Tom, yes, that’s who I am,’ Yellow Bird says, laughing at being recognized by one of the stars.

Yellow Bird has shared his expertise with others also, serving as a scholar at a satellite college for Texas A&M in Qatar, where he gave lectures on the Arikara language and culture for 10 days in 2013.

“My audience looked like I was speaking to the United Nations, it was so diverse,” he says. “I moved a lot of people about the struggle that we have as a people in trying to maintain these things.”

Yellow Bird is grateful for being able to share the Arikara’s experiences, and also for the experiences he’s gained.

“Who gets to do stuff like that?”

My son tells me that all the time when I’m having a bad day or things aren’t going as well as they could. He says, ‘Dad you’ve done a lot of stuff. ... You’ve worked with one of the top actors in the world. Who gets to have that kind of story? You taught him our language and there’s nobody else who has done that,’ ” Yellow Bird says.

A single father of six children ranging in ages from 7 to 24, including 14-year-old triplets, Yellow Bird lives in Trenton, where he continues to teach and write about his culture.

“It was really an amazing experience. I feel very blessed and fortunate,” he says. (Meter No. 7338) ■

Annual meeting highlights



Alec Johnson speaks on behalf of scholarship winners.

Members found great food, fun, prizes and cooperative information at Lower Yellowstone Rural Electric Cooperative’s (LYREC) 80th annual meeting. The evening started with bucket truck rides and an informative safety presentation. Greg Mohr and his crew served more than 800 meals to LYREC members, families and guests prior to the business meeting. All in all, it was an

amazing evening.

Scholarships

The most exciting portions of the evening were the scholarship awards. LYREC began presenting scholarships at the 2003 annual meeting. Throughout the last 14 years, \$150,000 has gone to members’ educations. The funds for the scholarships come from LYREC’s unclaimed capital credit account.

This year, there were 20 lucky scholarship recipients. Alec Johnson and Ethan Graves both won a scholarship at the 2015 annual meeting. They expressed their gratitude for the scholarship and shared what the scholarship meant to them.

If you were one of the 12 students who signed up at the annual meeting



Ryder Peterson shows **Ethan King** how high the bucket can go!

and didn’t receive a scholarship, we hope to see you again next year. If you were one of the lucky recipients and have not turned in your registration confirmation yet, please do so ASAP.

Co-op news

Jason Brothen gave the manager's report in which he updated the members on the new construction of two substations and a transmission line that is projected to be completed in early 2017. He also reported that LYREC is using a new metering system and is planning to have all of the meters switched over to PLX meters in the next two to five years. Brothen reported that LYREC has a new GIS mapping system. He also reminded the members to always call 811 before they dig, and to update their contact information with the office. Brothen informed the membership that e-bill has been replaced with SmartHub. Brothen presented Richard Tremblay, Aaron Eide and Lee Alvstad with their 10-year service award and Blade Jankovsky with his journeyman lineworker certificate.

President Allen Thiessen spoke about Basin Electric Power Cooperative's possible rate increase. Thiessen updated the members on the Clean Power Plan and how it will affect the cooperative. Thiessen reported that LYREC has been doing a cost-of-service study and will be putting together a strategic plan this year. He also gave a tribute to past trustee G.B. Schmierer.

Gary Wiens, assistant manager for the Montana Electric Cooperatives' Association (MECA), explained the importance of ACRE to the membership and encouraged them to get involved. Wiens also updated the attendees on state and federal legislative issues.

Directors elected

After no floor nominations were made, President Allen Thiessen announced that John Redman

was re-elected for District 3 and Dennis Schmierer was re-elected for District 4.

Join LYREC Thursday, June 1, 2017, for the 81st annual meeting. ■

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If you find your meter number hidden in this issue, it is worth a \$25 credit on your next statement. The meter number will appear within the four Lower Yellowstone Rural Electric Cooperative pages. Give us a call during the month your meter is listed, and claim your \$25 bill credit.

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Operating report

Year to date:	April 2015	April 2016
Total miles energized	2,142	2,073
Total number of meters	6,062	6,114
Kilowatt-hours sold	96,535,819	98,050,110
Revenue	\$8,855,634	\$8,887,457
Total expenses	\$7,141,960	\$6,854,658
Operating margins	\$2,254,444	\$2,708,603