

Calendar

Fake Fur

Mountain Man Reunion

'Booshway" is the term for "man in charge" among mountain men. "It comes from the French — *bourgeois*," says booshway Steve Ratliff, who is charged this weekend with running the 15th Annual Laguna Mountain Rendezvous — a reenactment of a Rocky Mountain fur traders' encampment.

"A fringed-buckskin jacket is the stereotypical uniform," he says. So are a calico shirt, leather moccasins, and at night around the campfire, a blanket-like capote. "But some of us dress up as Indians. There's a saying, 'We can out-Indian the Indians.'"

In addition to period clothing, beards are traditional but not

mandatory.

"Some mountain men, who took Indian wives, shaved every

day in deference to them," says Ratliff. "Indian men don't have facial hair, and that was what those women were used to. At the encampment there will be men who shave clean every day — with straight razors."

Participants achieve authenticity by keeping to one simple rule, according to Ratliff. "Nothing post-1840 is allowed. That means no nylon, no plastic, and no modern guns of any kind."

Black powder muzzle loaders are their weaponry of choice for the clay pigeons and metal targets. (No actual hunting takes place.) Ratliff was shooting with black powder long before

he heard about mountain men reenactors. Born in Northern California in 1951, he says, "I grew up with Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett." A little over three decades later, he picked up a flyer that advertised the group's first rendezvous. "The minute I got there, I knew I was home."

Like all mountain men, Ratliff has a nickname, "Runner," although he declines to divulge its significance. "The story of my name takes four and a half hours to tell. But I will say that you don't pick your own name. It's given to you around the campfire."

"Barkill" is Don Densford's nickname. Densford, president of the rendezvous organization, killed a "bar" — i.e., bear — with his muzzle loader. You may recall that, according to legend, Davy Crockett killed one when he was only three.

Densford, of El Cajon, is a retired truck driver. He learned about the rendezvous tradition by chance in the mid-1960s when, passing through Bridger, Wyoming, his truck broke down. "Everybody was dressed up. I thought they were making a movie," he recalls. In fact, a rendezvous was taking place in the town that 19th-century mountain man Jim Bridger had established as an outpost, which became an important stop on the Oregon Trail.

Densford tells the story of a group member whose nickname is "Dances with Wood." One night, getting up from the rendezvous campfire to walk into the woods to relieve himself, he was knocked down by a tree.

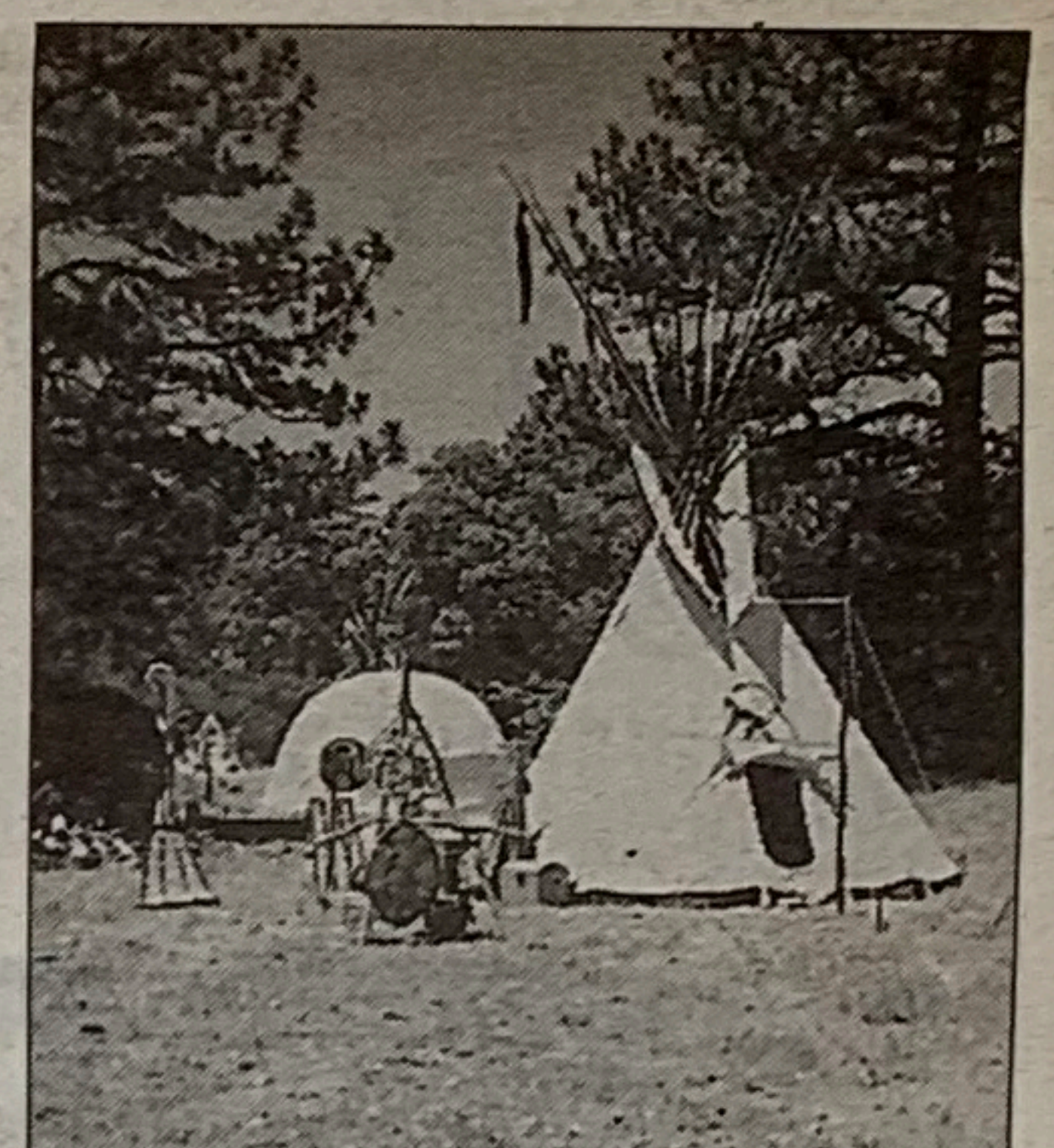
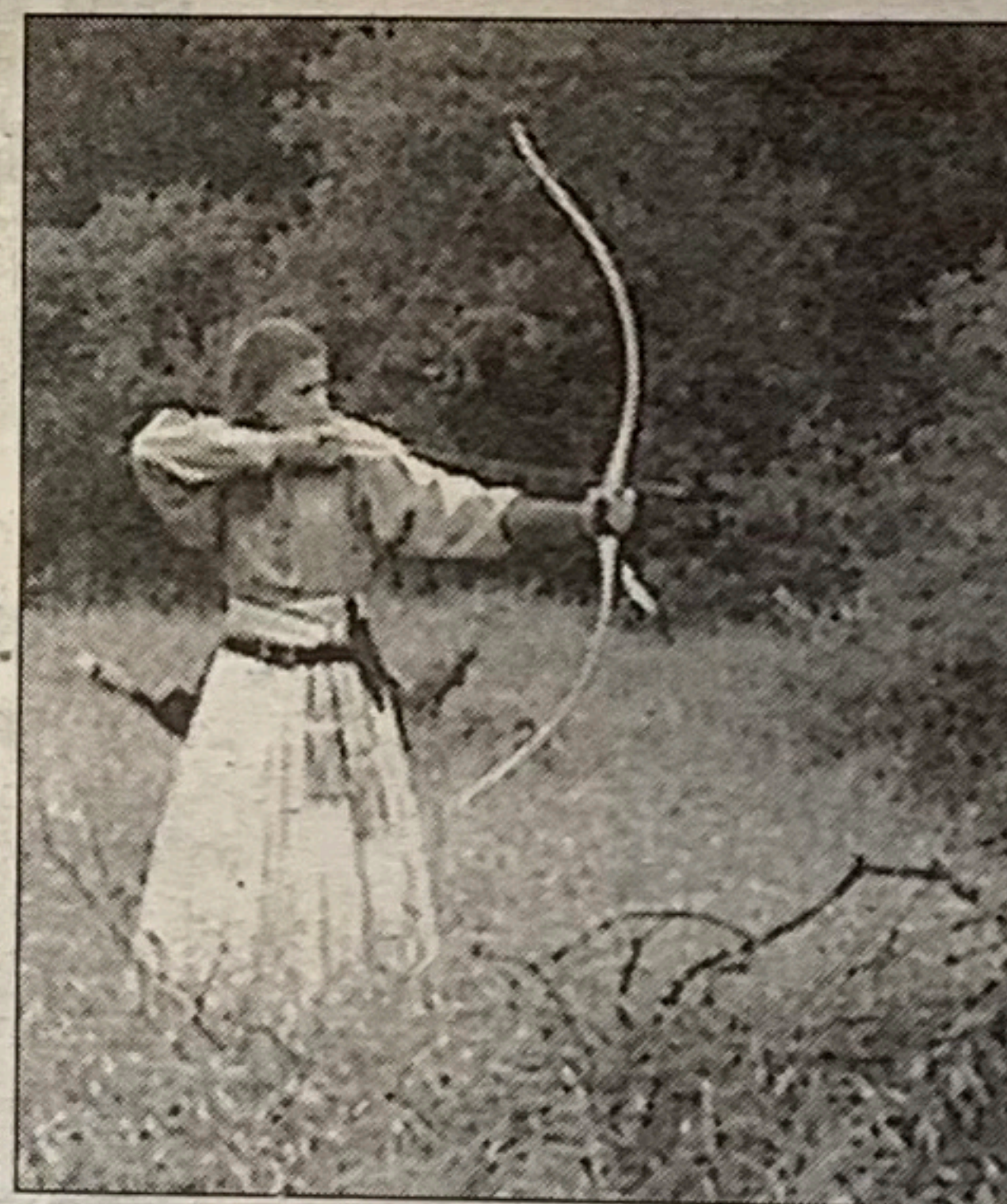
"Inebriated," explains Densford.

"It wouldn't be rendezvous without the ol' moonshine," says Ratliff. "Historically, it was the only time the men had access to alcohol. There was a great deal of drinking and fighting. It was not uncommon for men to be killed. The fur-trading companies sent it, along with the new supplies for the men. Resupplying the trappers was the practical reason for the rendezvous. Some of the liquor was probably a mixture of gunpowder, ground-up rattlesnake heads, and a little rum flavoring."

Whatever one drinks at rendezvous today, it should be quaffed from a period-correct tin cup.

Mountain men cooked their own food, heavy on the meat courses — buffalo, elk, mountain goat. Ratliff, Densford, and others cook their own, too, although some "traders" will be selling victuals.

"There are portable toilets. We make that concession, except that we



put them in inconspicuous locations," says Ratliff. "This is a beginners' rendezvous. Purists bring to their encampments only what they can pack in with horses."

Don Densford's wife, Joann, is treasurer of the rendezvous organization. It is surprising to learn from her that women in numbers are included. "A quarter of participants are women," she estimates. "A lot of them like to come up and shoot." One woman and her husband are in charge of the primitive-archery events. "We also have a women's tea, where we get together and talk about the research we've done, like about the different wars going on at the time."

The booshway is asked if there is a Mrs. Ratliff and if she enjoys the encampments. "She went to rendezvous once and almost shot me and hasn't been back since."

Last year 225 people camped and 400 more came as spectators. Similar numbers are expected this year. While

the event is underway, everyone who could be a source of further information will be at the encampment, without a phone, so no number is given below. If the website doesn't have whatever details about scheduled events a potential spectator needs, Densford advises, "Send a smoke signal."

— Jeanne Schinto

**15th Annual
Laguna Mountain Rendezvous
Thursday-Saturday,
October 25-27**

**8:00 a.m.-6:00 p.m.
(Friday, until 8:00 p.m.)**

Santa Ysabel

8 east to 79 north to Julian.

Through town to four-way stop.

Turn left on 78 to Santa Ysabel.

Follow red-and-black buffalo

signs to encampment.

Adults, \$20; 7-16, \$5; 0-6, free.

Family maximum: \$50

Spectators: \$3 a day (no dogs)

www.homestead.com/laguna_mntr/

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