

## Myth #112: In Cold Blood: The Nevada Connection by Guy Rocha, Former Nevada State Archivist

The 2005 motion picture *Capote*, and the Academy Award winning performance of Philip Seymour Hoffman in the lead role, capture the hauntingly dark side of Truman Capote. The movie focuses on the making of *In Cold Blood* (1965), perhaps Capote's finest book. The brutal slaying of the Clutter family in Holcomb, Kansas on November 15, 1959 has a Nevada connection but you wouldn't know it because this movie that has exposed Capote's pathological behavior has also perpetuated one of his lies and created one of its own.

The gifted writer was a damaged and disturbed man who lied to and manipulated virtually everyone around him, including the two killers and the readers of *In Cold Blood*. Gerald Clarke, whose excellent biography was the basis for the Capote screenplay, exposed some of Capote's literary license in writing his so-called non-fiction novel. However, Clarke, like everybody else, believed Capote when he stated that murderer Perry Edward Smith, one of the subjects of *In Cold Blood* was a Cherokee Indian. The movie Capote depicts Smith in a prison cell interview telling Truman that his mother was Cherokee.

Readers familiar with *In Cold Blood* know that Smith and Richard Eugene Hickock were apprehended in Las Vegas and, after intensive interrogation by Kansas Bureau of Investigation (KBI) agents, confessed to the Clutter killings. While the Las Vegas arrest made national headlines, Smith's birth in Elko County to a mixed-blood, Western Shoshone mother and a non-Indian father is not common knowledge.

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CERTIFICATE OF BIRTH

Place of Birth: Elko Co., Nevada  
County: Huntington  
Birth Index No.: 1240  
Local Registrar No.: 1409

Full Name of Child: Perry Edward Smith  
Date of Birth: October 27, 1928  
Sex: Male  
Time of Birth: 28-001030

PERSONAL AND STATISTICAL PARTICULARS

SEX OF CHILD: Male	COLOR OF HAIR: Blue	HAIR: Blue	WEIGHT: 14 lbs
RELIGION: None	DATE OF BIRTH: 10/27/28	WEIGHT OF BIRTH: 14 lbs	HEIGHT: 19 in
FATHER: Lee John Smith	MOTHER: Florence Julia Buckskin	PLACE OF BIRTH: Huntington	CITY OF BIRTH: Huntington
RESIDENCE: Huntington	COLOR OF EYES: Blue	COLOR OF SKIN: White	AGE AT BIRTH: 25
ETHNICITY: White	ETHNICITY: White	ETHNICITY: White	ETHNICITY: White
BIRTHPLACE: Harrisonville, Mo.	BIRTHPLACE: Nevada	BIRTHPLACE: Nevada	BIRTHPLACE: Nevada
OCCUPATION: Rancher	OCCUPATION: Rancher	OCCUPATION: Rancher	OCCUPATION: Rancher

Number of children of the mother: 4  
Number of children, live and A and B: 4  
What periods are not recorded: 27, 28, 10

In fact, Smith was born on October 27, 1928 to Florence Julia Buckskin and "Tex" John Smith in Huntington Valley, southwest of Elko. The daughter of Nookie and Maggie Cortez Buckskin, Florence had grown up with her sisters on a small ranch near Mineral Hill in Eureka County. Tex and Florence met on the rodeo circuit and married in 1922. The couple had four children, Perry being the youngest. The bareback riding and roping team adopted the name "Tex & Flo." They lived hand-to-mouth until the couple retired from the rodeo business in 1933 and settled near Reno.

The hardscrabble rodeo family would break up in the mid-1930s. Flo fled to San Francisco area with the children after a violent clash with Tex during a visit to the Buckskin ranch in northeastern Nevada. A divorce ended a marriage long-plagued by alcoholism, adultery, and domestic violence. The children were placed in foster homes. Perry, first arrested at the age of eight, returned to live with his father after several confinements in institutions and children's detention centers.

After Smith finished the third grade, father and son traveled all over the West eventually ending up in Alaska in search of gold. At 16, Perry joined the Merchant Marine, later enlisted in the Army, and received a Bronze Star in Korea before completing his military service in 1952.

Smith wrecked his motorcycle shortly after his release from the Army, breaking his leg in five places. He became addicted to aspirin to kill the pain. Aggressive and violent like his father, Perry became a loner, although he would periodically stay with Tex, who alternately lived in Alaska and the Reno area. KBI agents worked with the Washoe County Sheriff's office and the Reno Police Department in tracking Smith down in December 1959.

Smith had been convicted in 1956 of grand larceny, jailbreak, and car theft in Kansas City, Kansas. He met Richard Hickock in the state penitentiary. Together they conspired to rob Herbert Clutter, Hickock having heard from another inmate who had worked for Clutter that the farmer kept a large quantity of money in his house in southwestern Kansas. Following his parole in early 1959, Smith visited his father in Reno in August and planned to go with Tex to Alaska before another angry falling out. On the road

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again, Smith spent four weeks in a Las Vegas rooming house until departing for Kansas City on November 11 to plan the robbery with the recently-released Hickock.

Truman Capote's portrayal of Smith is a sympathetic one despite the fact that Perry's dysfunctional family life and sexual abuse in the service had helped to create a monster. Some critics of *In Cold Blood* speculate that Capote, openly homosexual and a child abuse victim, identified with Smith's shattered childhood and developed an attraction to him. Clearly, Capote grew too close to Smith in the five years he came to know him on Kansas' death row.

Only sister Dorothy survived the family trauma and turmoil. Flo died a destitute, alcoholic whore. The oldest sister jumped from the window of a hotel and was crushed under the wheels of a taxi after a drinking spree. Perry's brother committed suicide after he discovered his wife had taken her life following a domestic dispute. Tex "Buckaroo" Smith was found dead on May 20, 1986 north of Reno at his residence in Cold Springs. Tex died at the age of 92 of a self-inflicted gunshot.

In the controversial book, moments before being put to death, Smith, in a scene embellished by Capote for dramatic effect, turned to Warden Crouse and said, "It would be meaningless to apologize for what I did. Even inappropriate. But I do. I apologize."

The movie Capote has Truman witnessing Smith's hanging in a final scene. That too is a lie. According to KBI agent Harold Nye, after witnessing the hanging of Hickock, Capote could not bear to watch Smith killed, running from the building where the executions were staged.

(Original version in *Sierra Sage*, Carson City/Carson Valley, Nevada, September 2007.)