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THE STEER THIS TIME OF YEAR

Aidan Morton

Jeff Stavish wasn't sure how he would fix the steer just yet. For starters, it stands at least 15 feet high. From ear to ear it's as wide as a Volkswagen Beetle, firm yet fragile, like a giant chocolate bunny.

The years of intense sun and heavy snow had taken a toll on the steer. The cream-colored paint was chipped, revealing layers of old stains and shades of past ownership. Its tail had been reduced to a papier-mâché mess of painter's tape and rotted Bud Light boxes that built it. The snow tore at its horns and dug craters behind its ears. Small clusters of holes, which Jeff assumes came from the barrel of a gun, pierced through the steer's vitals from either side. After all, it's 14 miles to Trixie's Antler Saloon in Ovando in one direction, 14 to the Potomac Bar in another, and 14 to the Filling Station in Seeley, without a whole lot but highway in between.

Through all of this, the cow out front of Stoney's Kwik Stop and bar stands tall and friendly, perched on a small green trailer in one piece at the junction of Montana Highways 200 and 83. The story goes that roughly 40 years ago a travelling salesman drove past the Kwik Stop with the two plastic bovines in tow. The then-owner hopped in his truck and chased the convoy down, dying for a new mascot. The steer has stood out front of the gas station ever since.

Summers are busy at Stoney's Kwik Stop. Tourists and truckers alike swing by for gas, beer, and huckleberry ice cream. Cars line up, bumper to bumper, down Highway 83 to save a spot in line for gas before heading to Glacier National Park or the lake for the weekend. Summer vacation means college students, minivan families, elderly couples in sunhats, and the occasional B-list celebrity from TV shows can all be found at Stoney's on a road trip during the serene Montana summers. Jeff used to stop in as a kid on his way to go fishing and get ice cream. It was busy then, too. The steer was there well before he was, and decades before his sister, Roxanne Ross, bought the convenience store and bar in 2019.

But Stavish doesn't think he'll be fixing the steer anytime soon. It's below freezing for half of the year at the Clearwater Junction, so he

spends most of the winter plowing the parking lot. No one stops to see the steer in the winter, anyway.

“It’s been here forever,” Stavish said beneath his mustache. “You don’t hardly pay no attention to it no more.”

For the winter, the Kwik Stop, like the neighboring Blackfoot River, is frozen still, yearning for the summer sun to thaw business and bring traffic and life back to the highways once again. The steer is a popular selfie destination in the summer, but there are only a few frozen footprints in the ice around it in the winter. For Stoney’s Kwik Stop and its staff, it’s a waiting game: hectic summers and then a nine-month-long winter intermission.

The Kwik Stop isn’t a ghost town in the winter, of course. Logging trucks and pickups rigged with snowmobiles and sleds roll through often. There are many commuters, too, looking for a cheap jolt of caffeine to get them to and from their busy lives in Missoula or Great Falls. But you can only sell so many drip coffees and Snickers bars before the cold quiet of the winter sets in and you miss the rush of summer business and the spontaneity of unfamiliar faces.

You learn to love your neighbor, be it that they’re 20 miles down the road, or have no neighbors at all. That’s what bartender Paul Clasby thinks, at least.

The bar at Stoney’s is a locked door away from the convenience store. Clasby opens the bar at 3 p.m., but he occasionally lets a few regulars in to loiter before he turns on the signs while he wipes the counter down. It was an old couple from Lincoln that day. They usually stop in and see Clasby on their way back from Missoula. Electric power stations and Keno machines hummed as the couple shouted country gossip and gripe at Paul as he swept and dusted glasses.

Living out here was more his speed.

“If I could be on the top of a mountain somewhere and fence it off, fuck, I’d do it,” he said.

Clasby grew up in Missoula, but he lived to hunt and watch the mud races in Seeley with his friends. He said he headed north when he noticed how quickly and crazily the town was growing. The only reason he goes back to Missoula is for the occasional family gathering and to buy dog food.

“Had to get the fuck outta Missoula,” Clasby said between bites of a cheeseburger. “Too many people, too many stupid people.”

He loved the parties and trouble he got into at Seeley, but he’s too

old and broken for that now. He mans the bar instead.

Clasby is tall, stocky, and stiff from a fallen tree that broke his leg in a logging accident five years ago. His Liberty overalls stacked upon his ankles and hung from shoulders like those of an offensive lineman. His overalls pulled tight and his belly pulsed in a chuckle when asked about the steer.

“It’s been here as long as Scruff has,” he yelled jokingly at the Lincoln man in the chair. Scruff, whose upper body is almost entirely masked by a thick, wiry beard, didn’t take his eyes away from the Keno machine.

He has worked behind the bar at Stoney’s for roughly ten years. The bar is packed in the summer with ranchers, fly fishermen, seasonal employees at the dude ranches nearby, and just about anyone that’s thirsty for cold drinks and a good time.

But on that day, hours passed with only the Lincoln couple to keep Clasby company. They reminisced about parties and bar stories from summers past. He burned the afternoon away by wandering around the bar, wiping windows and tabletops, looking at a sink full of dirty dishes, and sneaking out to the nearly empty parking lot for a smoke. He threw his ball cap aside, pulled up a chair, and rested his face in his hands.

On the other side of Stoney’s, Leilani O’Donnell sees a similar flow of traffic through the convenience store during the off-season, but with a little less enthusiasm.

“It’s way quieter in the winter,” she said. “Life seems to slow down.”

O’Donnell looked short behind the cash register and the backdrop of a towering stack of Copenhagen and Black and Milds. But her thick dread locks, tied neatly on the top of her head, make her a few inches taller. Small tattoos of red and green slipped out of the cuff of her shirt and on to her wrists and fingers when she reached for credit cards, almost hidden by a collection of silver rings.

Her three boys call the cow out front of Mom’s work “Bo.” She’s seen drunks stumble from the bar next door and try to shimmy up Bo, usually to no avail. She remembered one night seeing a man make it on top of the steer, riding it like a bucking bull. A ladder made all the difference.

O’Donnell was raised Mormon in Nevada. She said she wanted to start over in Montana, but Missoula was too much of a rat race. So, she moved her and her boys out to a small cabin near the Kwik Stop. She doesn’t mind the winter, that is, until one of the boys forgets to throw a log into the stove while she is at work.

An apple sat on top of a romance novel in her corner behind the

counter. That's for when she has free time. She usually sits and thumbs through her book, peering out the window at the folks who come and go. Truckers that come in to chat. Cars soaring east and west at the intersection, always in a hurry. Always a right or left at the steer.

O'Donnell usually works the weekends, but occasionally takes on a Thursday or Friday shift. She runs the cash register, cleans the bathrooms, and sweeps up and down the aisles, taking conversation when she can get it. The rush hour in the winter is always the same, before and after people go to work.

She enjoys the quiet in the offseason, but that doesn't make it any easier.

"You really see who can tough it out here and who can't," she said.

Her workday starts at 2 p.m. and lingers on until 10:30 p.m. The last hour of her shift is always the worst, she said. But it's the little things about her job in the winter that she finds mundane. The same people, filling their cars at the same pump, coming in and buying the same things. People that work the same jobs coming in, using the bathroom, and then leaving with a chime of the doorbell and a "goodnight," even though her day is just beginning. She said you run out of things to do. People to see. She ends up sweeping the floor twice.

In January, it's easy to think that the steer dreams of the day it can turn its back on show business. Step off the trailer, cross the highway to summer in fields of green grass and alfalfa. The steer probably would, too, if he wasn't pinned to ground with long, rusted steel stakes. But all it takes is a new coat of paint, a brushed-on smirk and a clean cardboard tail to make the steer look like weathering the winter is worth its summer fame. For now, it will have to settle for snow-covered pavement and ice salt, because it's a long time until summer and it doesn't look like it, or the staff at Stoney's, is going anywhere.