



JOEL GRIMES

Model Citizen

Jay Gammons is into replicas. That's why he's spent 30 years working on Gammons Gulch, which is a dead ringer for an Old West town and mining camp.

By MAGGIE KIELPINSKI

OUR "SHORTCUT" TO ORACLE via the tiny town of Pomerene might be serendipitous — what with the cloudless cerulean sky, wide-open above the cottonwoods and willows along the banks of the lazy San Pedro River, all framed by the Little Rincon Mountains. Curiosity has led us to Gammons Gulch and our chance discovery of six feet of restless energy: Jay Gammons. Here, we meet him and see his dream, a replicated Old West town and mining camp known as Gammons Gulch.

Visitors are rare midweek, but Gammons volunteers a tour. Outside the saloon, a hitching post stands ready, and an old ginger cat peers down at me from the roof. Across the street in the filtered shade of a mesquite tree is a water trough and pump.

As our guide leads us down the boardwalk, the hollow echo of my boots taps out the rhythm to the lyrics of Gammons' commentary, an intimate anthology of his artifacts and buildings. Not just a gaggle of false storefronts, each building is filled with authentic items, the result of 30 years of foraging.

Our tour starts at the saloon, which boasts a carved mahogany bar Gammons discovered in Jerome. At the adobe blacksmith shop, antique tools stand ready to shoe a horse or mend a broken wagon wheel. The backdoor of the jail has been recycled from the old Tombstone jail; the cell lock is from the Yuma Territorial Prison. And through the rear window, the view of a lone mesquite bush banishes any idea of escaping into this forbidding terrain. The mercantile, apothecary, barbershop and telegraph office are all painstakingly staged with period artifacts, including a water-stained letter that carries the Pony Express logo.

Back at the saloon after our tour, Gammons entertains us with a rousing rendition of Stephen Foster's *Ring, Ring the Banjo*. The metallic sound of piano conjures bawdy images of Saturday night in Gammons Gulch. The only things missing are whiskey and women.

Clearly, the streets aren't paved with gold, but Gammons is living his dream. "The place is getting more popular since they paved the road," he says. "One day I did the tour 37 times. That was a Budweiser night, and I don't even drink."

Gammons Gulch is quirky, a labor of love and a unique replica. But more than that, Gammons' enthusiasm and passion are inspiring — he embodies the ideals and drive upon which the West was founded.

Gammons Gulch is located in Pomerene, just north of Benson. For information, call 520-212-2831 or visit www.gammonsgulch.com.

PRATT'S
Q&A



Tanya Tucker Country Music Superstar

Having spent part of your childhood in Willcox, what was your favorite place to explore? The Chiricahua Mountains.

If you were trying to convince Willie Nelson that Arizona is one of the most beautiful places in the country, where would you take him? I'd take him on a pack trip to look for Cochise's burial site. We'd go horseback riding and have fun looking through the most fabulous and rugged areas of Southern Arizona. Maybe we'd end our week by hitting the whitewater rapids at Lava Falls. Willie is hard to shake, but that might stir him!

Is there an Arizona flavor or food that you miss most? Yeah, sure. We used to get chiles by the toe sack when they were in season.

Where in Arizona might an "outlaw" artist like yourself go to get inspired? The Grand Canyon.

Say you were stranded in the desert. Who'd be the better survival guide: Burt Reynolds or Hank Williams Jr.? Hank Williams Jr. He's an avid hunter, so we wouldn't go hungry, and God knows, "A country boy can survive!"

— Dave Pratt is the author of *Behind the Mic: 30 Years in Radio*