by Guy Louis Rocha

One doesn't spend almost six years on a book, the point of which is factual accuracy, and then give way to minor distortions. People are so suspicious. TRUMAN CAPOTE

I didn't have anything against them, and they never did anything wrong to me--the way other people have all my life. Maybe they're just the ones who have to pay for it. PERRY SMITH

It has been more than 50 years since Perry Edward Smith, an Elko County native, and Richard Eugene Hickock quietly entered Herbert Clutter's isolated farmhouse near Holcomb, Kansas. Armed with a shotgun and a hunting knife, they viciously killed Clutter, his wife Bonnie, and their two children, Nancy and Kenyon on November 15, 1959. "I liked the man; I really did," Perry told author Truman Capote. Herb Clutter represented everything in a father Smith never had. "I liked him right up to the minute I cut his throat."

Capote's award-winning account of the murder and murderers, In Cold Blood catapulted him to the peak of his career with its release in 1965. Ever since--and even with today's if-it-bleeds-it-leads media mentality--the fascination with what happened that night outside Holcomb continues unabated. Within two years after Capote's book was published, a motion picture by the same name, directed by Oscar-winner Richard Brooks, came out. The "semidocumentary" received four Academy Award nominations in 1968, including one for original music score by jazz/pop-legend Quincy Jones. Actor Robert Blake starred as Perry Smith, his first major film role. More recently, a TV mini production starring Anthony Edwards (Dick Hickock) and Eric Roberts (Perry Smith) aired in 1996.

In December 1997, Doubleday published George Plimpton's book Truman Capote: In Which Various Friends, Enemies, Acquaintances, and Detractors Recall His Turbulent Career. Plimpton, in writing about Capote and In Cold Blood in an book excerpt published in the October 13, 1997 New Yorker, explored "the story the author left out." Since the work first appeared 35 years ago, there have been scores of newspaper and magazine stories, books, and

documentaries dissecting not only Hickock and Smith's motives, but Capote's as well.

The Modern Library in April 1999 ranked In Cold Blood 96th among its top 100 nonfiction books.

The international best-seller created a sensation with its combination of novelistic and journalistic techniques, and has since been oft-imitated. Capote conducted extensive interviews and immersed himself in the case so he could write about real-life events as a novelist does--including the thoughts of the characters, for instance. The book's approach would later be widely imitated by writers like David McClintick in Indecent Exposure and Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein in The Final Days.

But these later writers were reporters using a novelist's tools in the writing. Capote was a novelist using a reporter's approach, and In Cold Blood suffered from the difference. While Capote claimed in a well publicized interview with George Plimpton in the New York Times Review of Books (January 16, 1966) the book was "immaculately factual", the novelist side of him, many times, permitted great liberties with the facts. And some would say he abused both conventions.

For example, we know Capote invented the book's final dramatic scene. According to biographer Gerald Clarke, Alvin Dewey, Kansas Bureau of Investigation (KBI) chief investigator, never met Susan Kidwell, Nancy Clutter's girlfriend who found her body in 1959, in the Holcomb cemetery before the 1965 executions. "By insisting that 'every word' of his book is true," Phillip K. Tompkins wrote in the June 1966 issue of Esquire, "he has made himself vulnerable to those readers who are prepared to examine seriously such a sweeping claim." Interviewed by George Plimpton, John Richardson, an acclaimed biographer of Pablo Picasso, claimed that "Truman had absolutely no respect for the truth." Richardson continued, "He felt that as a fiction writer he had license to say whatever came into his head as long as it had a surprising point or shape to it, or an unexpected twist to its tail."

Anyone who is familiar with In Cold Blood knows that Hickock and Smith were apprehended in Las Vegas on December 30, 1959, and, after intensive interrogation by KBI agents, confessed to the Clutter killings. "What I did in Las Vegas, the people I talked to out there, it just was not written truthfully," charged KBI agent Harold Nye. "It was probably an insignificant thing, except I was under the impression that book was going to be factual, and it was not; it was a fiction book."

While the Las Vegas arrest made national headlines, Perry Smith's birth in Elko County to a western Shoshone mother--Capote referred to her repeatedly as a Cherokee--and a non-Indian father is not common knowledge. Not surprisingly, he had spent considerable time off and on in Nevada before the Clutter killings shocked the nation.

On April 7, 1960, a headline in the Elko Daily Free Press read: "Former Elkoan To Hang May 13 For Kansas Murders." (Hickock and Smith's appeals, however, postponed their date with the gallows until April 14, 1965.) The Daily Free Press article stated that "Smith was a brief resident of Elko several years ago and listed the town as his home."

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 brothers and sisters on a small ranch near Mineral Hill in Eureka County. A long-time Pine Valley rancher, the late Harry E. Webb, wrote of Florence and sister Emaline's exploits in killing a mountain lion in 1916 at ages 15 and 16 respectively ("Teenage Lion Hunters," Nevada Magazine, July/August 1981). Tex and Florence met on the rodeo circuit, married in 1922, and had four children, Perry being the youngest. The bareback riding and roping team adopted the name "Tex & Flo." They lived "hand-to-mouth" and carted the kids all over the West in a pick-up truck until the couple retired from the rodeo business in 1933 and settled near Reno.

The reason Truman Capote referred to Florence Buckskin Smith "as a lean Cherokee girl" may be hidden somewhere in his papers housed at the New York Public Library, and deposited there after his death in 1984. Did Perry, or his sister Dorothy who cooperated with Capote in writing the book, claim that Flo was a Cherokee to spare the western Shoshone family embarrassment and ridicule? Or, more probably, did Capote again exercise some poetic license in writing his controversial "nonfiction novel," protecting the family, and perhaps figuring most Americans would more readily recognize a Cherokee Indian? (See Robert Augustin Smart, The Nonfiction Novel, 1985).

The hardscrabble, rodeo family would break up in the mid-1930s. Flo fled to the San Francisco area with the children after "a terrifying contest [with Tex] in which horsewhips and scalding water and kerosene lamps were used as weapons" during a visit to the Buckskin family ranch in northeastern Nevada. A divorce followed that ended a marriage long-plagued by alcoholism, adultery, and domestic violence. The children were placed in foster homes. Perry returned to live with his father in Reno after several confinements in institutions and children's detention

centers (he was first arrested on his eighth birthday).

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. Slight of build, he suffered a number of brutal sexual assaults by fellow servicemen according to Capote.

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. Like Tex, Perry became a loner, although he would periodically stay with his father, who alternately lived in Alaska and the Reno area. KBI agents worked with the Washoe County Sheriff's Office, Reno Police Department, and the federal post office in tracking Perry down in December 1959.

Sometimes aggressive and violent like his father, Smith had been convicted in 1956 of grand larceny, jailbreak, and car theft in Kansas and was sentenced to 5 to 10 years. He met Richard Hickock in the state penitentiary in Lansing outside of Kansas City. Together they conspired to rob Herbert Clutter, Hickock having heard from another inmate, Floyd Wells, who had worked for Clutter that the farmer kept a large quantity of money in his southwestern Kansas home. Following his parole in early 1959, Smith once more wandered throughout the West. In August, he visited his father in Reno and planned to go with Tex to Alaska before another angry falling out. On the road 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 strangely a sympathetic one that belies the fact that Perry's dysfunctional family life and violent sexual abuse in the service had helped to create a monster. Some critics of the book and first movie, speculated that Capote, openly homosexual and a product of a troubled youth, identified with Smith's shattered childhood and developed an attraction to him. Certainly, Capote grew too close to Smith in the five years he came to know him on Kansas' death row. Pulitzer Prize-winner Ned Rorem, commenting on a dinner conversation with Truman Capote in 1963, noted when describing "the two young murderers," that in the case of Perry Smith, "he seemed clearly in love with him."

George Plimpton, in Truman Capote, quoted Harold Nye, KBI agent, as saying "they had become lovers in the penitentiary. I can't prove it, but they spent a lot of time up there in the cell, he spent a considerable amount of money bribing the guard to go around the corner, and they

were both homosexuals. . . ." Adding to the speculation: after witnessing the hanging of Hickock, Capote could not bear to watch Smith, his alleged lover, killed, running from the building where the execution was staged.

Only one person survived the family trauma and turmoil. Flo died a destitute, alcoholic whore. The oldest sister fell 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.

And what of Perry's sister, Dorothy, the only survivor of this damaged family? As a young mother living in the Bay Area, she had openly questioned her brother's life of crime in letters written to him while he first served time in the Kansas State Penitentiary. When told that his sister did not want him to have her address while he awaited trial in Finney County for the Clutter murders, Perry responded "I wish she had been in that house that night. What a sweet scene!" Dorothy Florence Smith (maiden name), referred to in the book as Mrs. Barbara Johnson to protect her identity, now lives in Florida with her husband and will turn 87 on August 4, 2013.

In the novel, moments before being put to death, Smith, in a scene embellished by Truman 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."

Some might ask the same of Capote.