



Pillar & Post



A Chance to Give Back – Richard Peterson

After he was born in Julesberg, Colorado in 1945, Richard Peterson’s family would move to nearby Ovid when he was five years old. It was during these early childhood moments when Richard fell in love with the great outdoors.

“My brother, Don, and I became young outdoorsmen,” he said. “When not in school, we could be found hunting rabbits, ducks, camping out or chasing carp in the river during the summer months. It was a great place to grow up as a young boy.”

In 1958, they moved again after his father starting working at the Sprague Brothers Ranch, near Crook, Colorado. The Sprague ranch spanned 30,000 acres, with an additional wheat farming operation just south of Holyoke. “Much of the ranch was sandhill pasture south of the South Platte River, right where Interstate 76 now runs.”

“During the summer months, my brother and I—along with many of my cousins who also lived on the ranch—would help out as much as we could, herding cattle, checking windmills, fixing fence and whatever else might need doing. It was not all work, though. I still got in a lot of hunting.”

As Richard’s interests grew, he learned the basics of shotshell reloading, and he would read anything related to firearms, archery, camping, outdoor cooking, trapping, and log cabin building.

“As I grew a little older, I thought about becoming a forest ranger or game warden,” he said. “But I was a little weak in math and science, and the cost of attending CSU made it unavailable for me.”



“I think I found out about Trinidad State from the college brochures in our small high school library,” Richard said. “The Gunsmithing Program really got my interest, and it appeared to be affordable and something I would enjoy.”

After graduating from Crook High School in 1963, Richard headed south. “My first summer job after graduation was wrangling dudes at a guest ranch near Vallecito Reservoir, north of Bayfield, Colorado.”

After working that summer on the ranch, Richard began his fall classes at Trinidad State. “I took a job sweeping up the gunsmith shops in the Mullen Building after the classes to help pay my way. I also had a track scholarship, which helped ease the financial burden.”

Richard worked hard at his studies. “When I was a young gunsmithing student, I had three good instructors—Bill Prator, Louis Mrace and Harry Johnson. Mr. Prator’s area of expertise was in metal work, while Mr. Mrace was a good stock maker,” he explained. “Mr. Johnson, on the other hand, was an actual gunsmith who had run his own shop—he knew gunsmithing in the real world.”

“He tried to get the point across that while we might all aspire to be custom gunmakers to the rich and famous, the bread and butter will be found in the unglamorous work of cleaning and repair.”

“Finding this to be all too true,” Richard added, “most, if not all, of my classmates pursued other lines of work after graduation. If they were lucky they found gunsmithing jobs on the side—or as I did, later in life, working as a firearms expert in a retail store.”



After graduating from Trinidad State in 1965, Richard immediately enlisted in the US Army. “Both sides of the family have a history of military service,” he said. “But I also wanted to expand my horizons—try new things and see more of the world. And with the draft going on, it was not a question of if, but when, I would be called up.”

“My path to the military was roundabout,” he continued. “You’d think that with my two years of schooling the military would see me as a natural fit as a small arms armorer and gunsmith. But it was not to be.”

Richard was initially sent to Fort Leonard Wood in Missouri for basic training, and then to Fort Knox in Kentucky for advanced training as a tank radio repairman.

“Luckily, I had enlisted with a preference for parachute training, and that is at least one commitment the Army honored,” he said. “Jump school at Ft. Benning, Georgia lasted about three weeks and I rather enjoyed the thrill of going out the door and admiring the view from 1,200 feet.”

With his jump class nearing graduation, a couple of Special Forces sergeants came by to see if anyone would be interested in applying to their unit. Richard applied and was accepted. He then received Special Forces medical training at Fort Sam Houston in Texas, followed by weapons training at Fort Bragg in North Carolina.

With his training behind him and the conflict in Southeast Asia well under way, Richard volunteered to go to Vietnam in 1967.

“In retrospect, my year in Vietnam went well for me because I was assigned to a Special Forces “C” detachment in the III Corps area near Bien Hoa,” he said.

“I was given the task of setting up and running the armory. Special Forces camps were opening and closing on a regular basis, and when that happened all of the small arms would come to me for cleaning, refurbishment and re-issue.”



“Even though we got rocketed from time to time,” he added, “my assignment was relatively safe compared to a twelve man “A” detachment, hanging on by their teeth near the Cambodian border.”

“The Tet Offensive in 1968 did make things a bit more lively, and I spent several nights atop a sandbagged bunker with the old M2 .50 caliber machine gun,” he said. “And the Long Binh ammo dump getting blown up made for a lot of fireworks. By this time there was a lot of fighting around the Bien Hoa Air Base near us, but no direct assault on our unit even though we were prepared.”



After his time in the Army ended, Richard returned home to attend the University of Colorado, where he would graduate with a B.A. in Anthropology. He then went north to attend the University of Alaska in Fairbanks, before returning to Colorado to work at the IBM plant in Boulder.



“But even while I was working in Boulder, Alaska was always on my mind,” he said. “I decided to save my money, and I later returned again to live in the bush for a year. I lived in a cabin that I helped build with my good dog, Zach, as my sole companion.”

“That year I spent in the Alaskan bush is a story in itself!”

After leaving the bush country, Richard would find work on drill rigs with the US Forest Service in Oregon. Later, he spent large parts of his career



on core drilling rigs with the Bureau of Reclamation at Grand Coulee Dam in Washington, and also at Roosevelt Dam near Globe, Arizona.

“It was dirty, hard outside work in the Washington mud and rain—and then later beneath that hot Arizona sun,” he said. “My co-workers were good to get along with, and the work paid well enough. And after my 6+ years working on the drill rigs, I’d managed to leave with all of my fingers—and about half my hearing.”

Richard’s final employment would be at the Cabela’s store in Sidney, Nebraska, where he spent 12 years as a product specialist in the gun department.

“I decided to take early retirement at age 60,” he said. “I now live in an old farmhouse just north of Crook, next to the Duck Creek State Wildlife Area. It’s not fancy, but it suits me just fine.”

“It’s got a nice insulated, heated shop where I can finally do the gunsmithing work that I always wanted to do—ever since I left TSJC. I learn something new every day, and I’ve got firearms repair jobs waiting in the shop. I guess the circle is complete.”



Despite life travels that took him to places far and near, Richard’s fondness for Trinidad and Trinidad State endures. “The campus was, and still is, beautiful—the groundskeepers are to be commended,” he said.

“And I especially like Trinidad’s unique ethnic mix of Anglo, Hispanic and Italian history—in a community where everyone gets along,” he added. “The geography of southern Colorado and northern New Mexico is also a nice change for a flatlander like me. And don’t get me started talking about that great Mexican food!”

Richard also noted how much he appreciates the stories of generosity relayed in the Trinidad State alumni magazine. He specifically mentioned the recent story about Chuck Stevens, given their shared experience as Vietnam veterans.

Richard also recently shared the good news of his own legacy gift, which he hopes will one day help deserving students.

“I still need to give some thought about how my small gift to Trinidad State should be directed,” he said.

“A gunsmithing scholarship named in memory of Harry Johnson would be nice, as well as something similar for future nursing students. But I’m glad to give back.”

“Several years ago—at what I believe was our first gunsmith reunion—a group of us walked up to give Louis Mrace a visit. He was a bit surprised to see some of his now-older students, but he enjoyed all of it. After all of these years, he still recognized me and knew my name. I couldn’t believe it!”

Even with a few specifics still to be determined, Richard wants his gift to support students with financial need.

“Sometimes a little help is all that’s necessary to get started on a career path,” he said. “This financial help also should be matched with work-study on the part of the student. Working yourself to achieve your goal makes the end reward more worthwhile.”

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Trinidad State established the *Society of 1925* to honor and recognize those who remember the College with a legacy gift in their estate plans. If you would like more information about legacy gifts, please contact Toni DeAngelis at toni.deangelis@trinidadstate.edu or 719-846-5520.

“I’m still enjoying fine health for my age,” Richard added, with a smile, “so it might be a few years before Trinidad State will benefit. But I enjoyed my two years in Trinidad, and I learned skills which I am using even today as a gunsmith.”

“I would like to encourage others to leave a legacy gift to Trinidad State as well, if it’s within their means to do so.”

Trinidad State gratefully acknowledges the generosity of Richard Peterson.