

THE COP WHO WASN'T

**After 24 wild
years, Sheriff
Bob Braudis
turns in
the badge**

BY MATTHEW L. MOSELEY



Early one morning many Christmases ago, Jack Nicholson woke to a ringing doorbell at his Maroon Creek home. The actor opened the door and was repulsed and frightened by what he saw on the front step: an elk heart, dripping with blood. He called the police and prepared his kids for an immediate evacuation.

Sheriff Bob Braudis soon received the call. He shook the sleep from his eyes. *No need to call in the cavalry*, he thought. *Only one person is capable of this kind of deviance.*

He phoned Hunter S. Thompson.

"Of course I did it," said Thompson. "The bastard slipped into my town and didn't call me. He deserved it."

The Nicholson family stayed put. The sheriff went back to bed.

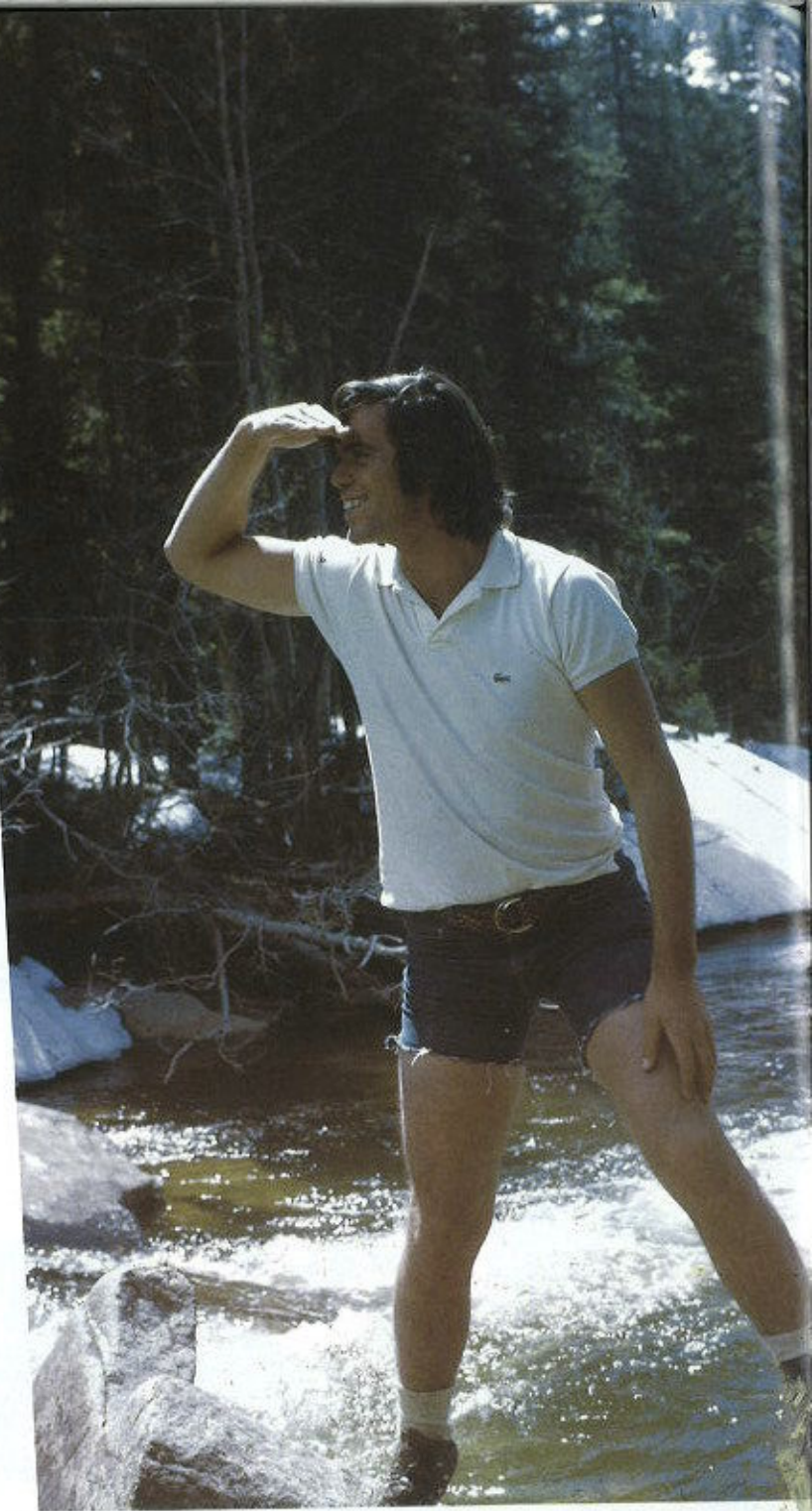
Just another day in Bob Braudis' Aspen.

For those who don't know him, Braudis is an Aspen institution. For 24 years, he's relied on his own policing philosophy—and the intuition that kept Nicholson from having a coronary—to become a hulking, silver-maned, gap-toothed, and glad-handing embodiment of everything we value in this little mountain town. Many of us, anyway.

I've known Braudis for many years under different circumstances, from our friendship with Thompson to our involvement in the campaign to free convicted murderer Lisl Auman. The guy I've gotten to know is a bundle of wonderful contradictions. Tough and tolerant. Highbrow and low. Scholar and ski bum.

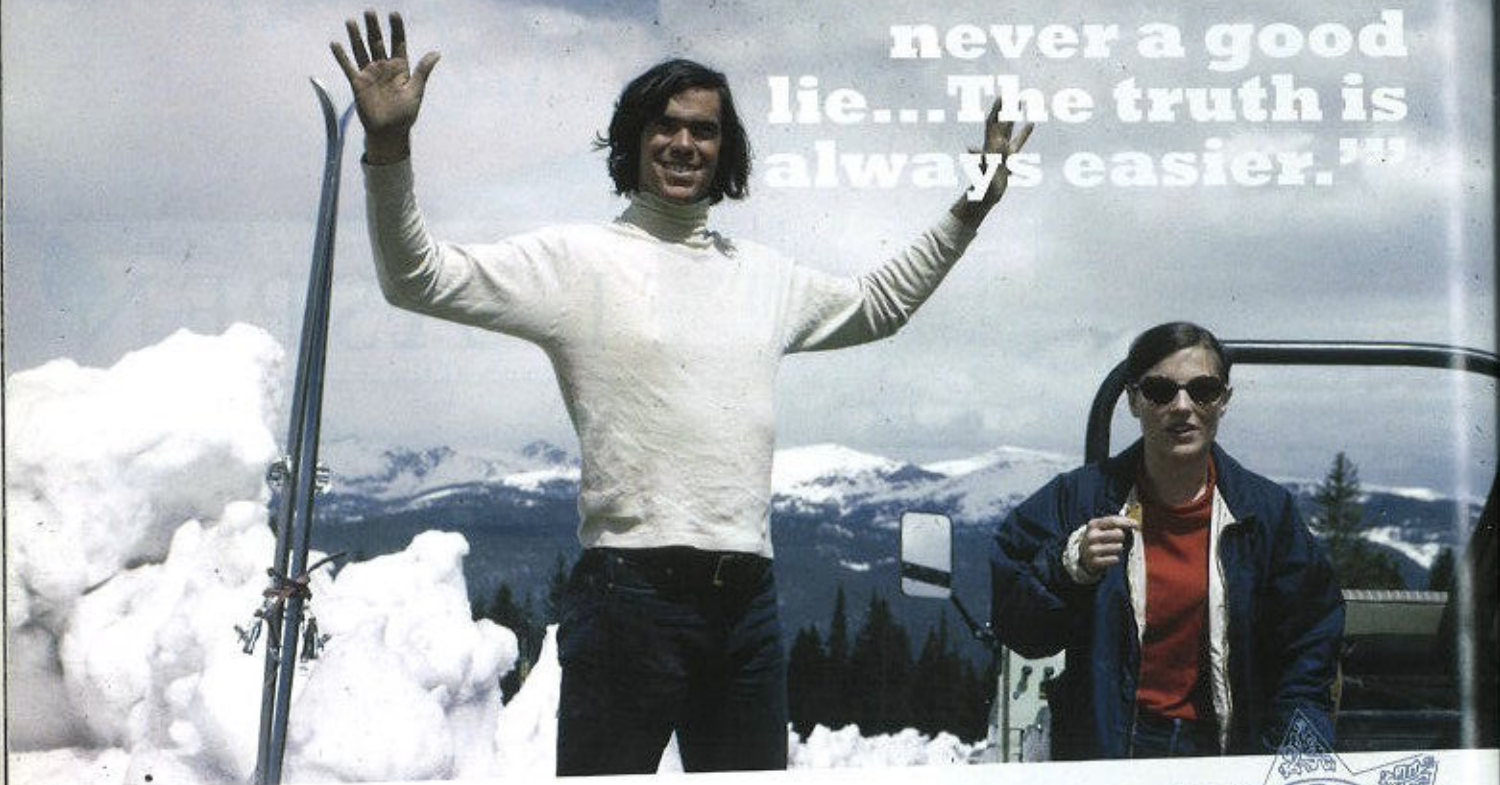
Many have wondered whether a guy like Braudis—whose circle of celebrity friends gained him the reputation of a rock 'n' roll sheriff—could have been elected anywhere else. Maybe not, but you don't keep an elected position for more than two decades without doing something right.

Braudis moved to Aspen about 40 years ago and spent eight years as a ski bum. He fondly remembers the time he lived with eight other guys in a tiny place (though it was still expensive). "We skied all day and chased pussy all night," he says, noting that things haven't actually changed much. "The kids who are moving to Aspen are just as excited today as



"If you have a drug problem, you should go to the doctor, not to jail."

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they've always been."

In the mid-1970s, Braudis was a divorced father with two daughters to support, so he looked for steadier work. He applied to the sheriff's department and became a deputy. In his first week on the job, Ted Bundy escaped from the Aspen jail, and Braudis was given a deer rifle and told to search high-country cabins where the serial killer might be holed up. (Braudis came up empty.)

After several years in the department, he spent two years as a county commissioner—"Land use sucks," he says—before being elected to the sheriff's job.

And there he found his calling. He was calm amidst constant disaster and heartbreak. He endured a daily slog of fires, plane crashes, overdoses, thefts, ski accidents, and avalanches, as well as the rare murder. Braudis called that part of the job a "hierarchy of nightmares." But the rest, he said, was just plain fun.

He also became a fixture in the town, and he counted the rock stars, actors, and writers who lived or visited here as his pals. Hunter S. Thompson was one of his best friends. But most of his circle was the everyday working folk who make up the daily life of the Valley: shopkeepers, plumbers, and the dough pushers at New York Pizza.

His accessibility was what most distinguished him

from other elected officials, especially those in law enforcement. His phone rang rapid-fire with tips from a network of people all around Aspen: concierges, cooks, waiters, bartenders, and taxi drivers. "Nobody packs heat in this valley without me knowing about it," he said. "People trust me."

He said he learned about honesty from Thompson. "Hunter always said, 'Tell the truth,'" Braudis recalls. "'There is never a good lie. Always tell the truth. The truth is always easier.'"

It wouldn't have come as a surprise that, as sheriff, someone as big as Braudis used it to his advantage. "Most guys his size, when they get a gun and a badge, become a bully," says Braudis's friend Tim Mooney, the former road manager for John Denver and Jimmy Buffet. "Bob is humble. He is not a normal human being—not because of his physical size but because of the gift of his stature, his humility."

But that isn't to say he was soft. When you messed up one too many times, even if no police were around, Braudis knew about it. It went something like this: The guy got a call from the sheriff saying, "Aspen has really



enjoyed having you, and you had a really good run, but maybe it's time to be moving on. Thanks for playing." *The Aspen Times* might put the guy's picture on the front page of the paper. If the dude wasn't gone in 48 hours, he was fair game.

Braudis' good friend, Gerald Goldstein, an accomplished attorney, believes that other cities could learn from him: "He lays down rational rules that everyone can understand and live by, which lends itself to a friendly, kindlier folk who live in harmony." He notes Braudis' willingness to accept different lifestyles so long as they don't infringe on the lives of others.

But that laissez-faire attitude was not without its critics.

Braudis, who went through rehab in 2006 for an undisclosed addiction, believes the so-called war on drugs

was lost 30 years ago and that drug addiction is a medical issue, not a legal one. "If you have a drug problem, you should go to the doctor, not to jail," he has said. He has no problems with the notion of medical marijuana dispensaries in Aspen.

In 2005, the federal Drug Enforcement Agency made a very public drug bust at Little Annie's and the now-defunct Cooper Street Pier. Aspen Police and the DEA failed to inform the sheriff. It pissed Braudis off royally. It recalled the tense relations between the DEA and Braudis' predecessor and mentor, Sheriff Dick "the Dove" Kienast, who ruled town during the 1970s, when the drug agency dubbed Aspen "the cocaine capital of the world." Kienast shared Braudis' hands-off philosophy.

The blowback against the 2005 bust was strong. Residents showed up en masse to testify at City Council to show their support for the sheriff. Braudis won his last reelection in 2006 with 82 percent of the vote.

Some believe that Braudis' retirement spells the end of an era, another in a long line of "end of eras" for Aspen. Not so, says the sheriff. Aspen will continue to be the funky haven it has always been, he says.

He'll still be around town. He may write a memoir. Or kick back for a while on a beach. But one thing's certain: There'll be no more calls for him about serial killers. No more fatal crashes to investigate on Highway 82. No more animal parts at Jack Nicholson's front door.

Bob Braudis is a free man. **A**

The Business of Being Bob

Favorite sandwich: The Cuban at Ute City Grill in Aspen.

Favorite band: The Moody Blues.

Favorite car: 1967 E Type Jaguar XKE. "I drove it through the mountains at the speed of light."

Favorite ski run: "Any powder run—the more virgin the better."

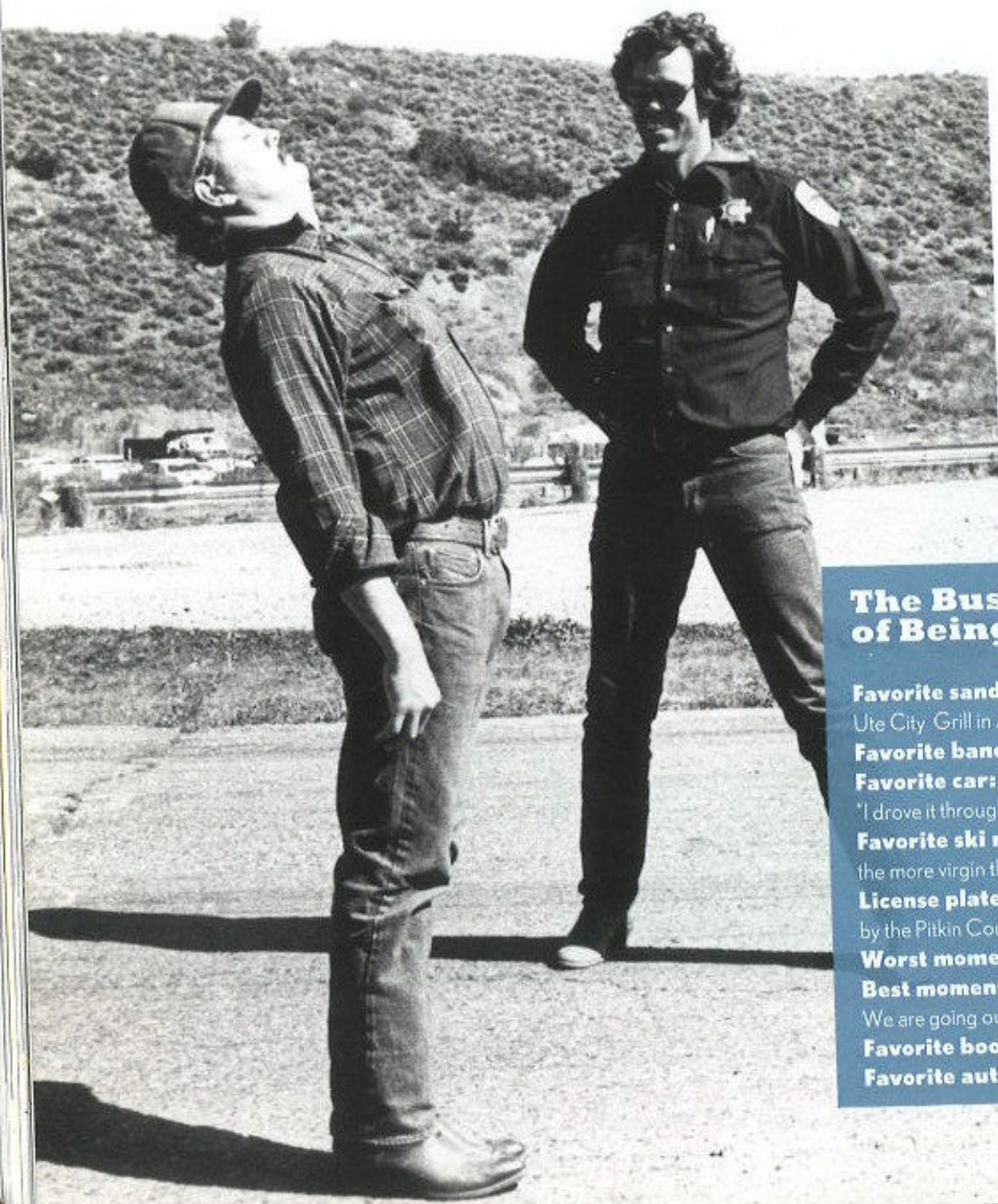
License plate: ZG 27—given to him in 1977 by the Pitkin County Clerk.

Worst moment: Thompson's suicide.

Best moment: "Nearly every day has been glorious. We are going out on a long fine run."

Favorite book: *The Brothers Karamazov*.

Favorite author: Joseph Conrad.



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*Shot on the patio
of Ajax Tavern,
at the base of
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