

# Martin Price — modern day Mountain Man

By [Dutch Salmon](#)

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While a correspondent for the **Albuquerque Journal**, I spent an afternoon in the **Grant County Jail** interviewing a modern day mountain man. This isn't writing; it was just a matter of getting the man to talk and then arranging the notes so it all made some sense. After the piece came out there was some comment by law enforcement that I'd made the guy out to be better than he was. For example, I found out later that the man had kept a diary in which there were allusions to kidnapping some young and unsuspecting nubile and keeping her there in the wilderness so he could "*raise her up right.*" Also, the man did not, to put it mildly, keep a clean camp. But I never thought he was a hero. To a journalist, such a character is neither good nor bad, only interesting. And what was primarily interesting about this man was the fact that in 1983 he had gone off into what remains a pretty awesome wilderness, and he had stayed for a year.

The **Gila National Forest** of Southwest New Mexico encompasses more than three million acres in a contiguous block of largely untrammled terrain, an area larger than some Eastern states. Near the center of this last great wilderness in the Southwest, in a cave a few miles downstream from where **Sapillo Creek** meets the main branch of the **Gila River** in northern Grant County, Martin Price made his new home in June of 1983. He brought with him a subsistence lifestyle and the myth of the mountain man.

*"The Gila is the Yellowstone of the Southwest,"* Price said. *"I loved it. It was my home, but it brought me to this cage."*

This day, Martin Price, 31, was a resident of the Grant County Jail. Nearly a year after he moved into that cave at **Panther Canyon**, he was arrested by officers on horseback and charged with twenty-three counts of cattle rustling, burglary, littering and poaching of wild game.

In November 1984, he pleaded guilty to one count of each charge and received a two year deferred sentence, a condition which included a nine-month jail term. He served most of that nine-month term while awaiting sentencing and was eligible for release on probation in January 1985.

*"I've got a ranch job lined up in Arizona,"* Price said. *"It'll be legit' and I can still live in the hills. I hope to live a lot like I always did, only I won't be killing cows anymore."*

Long before his stay in the **Gila Wilderness**, Price chose to live in the woods, always picking mountainous terrain in the West.

*"I lived for seven years, mostly, in the wilds. I lived for months at a time in the Chiricahua Mountains, in the Santa Catalina Mountains and the Mazatzal Wilderness, all in Arizona. Also, in central Nevada and in the Sawtooth Mountains in Idaho. In the Sawtooth Mountains I had a dog, a German shepherd pup, for company . . . until he was killed by a bear.*

*"It didn't matter where I was, I was always out in the desert or in the hills. That's what I liked. And when I got some schooling, I began to read Indian stories and all about mountain men. When I was four or five, my dad was at the silver mine in Puerto Libertad in Sonora. It was there that I first became friends with lizards. People laugh, but I can communicate with lizards; they're my friends. That's how I got the name 'Gila Monster'."*

Price was born with an affinity for the outdoors, but had no more of the skills needed to live there than any other middle-class person. He acquired some of those skills in the military - three years as a paratrooper in the 82nd Airborne.

*"I had a very difficult time in the military. I liked the soldiering, I liked guns and learned about weapons. I didn't like the discipline."*

What Price learned about guns in the military he would put to use in later years in the wilderness.

*"When I first went to the woods I survived mostly by hunting. In the Gila I hunted squirrels - tassel-eared squirrels, rock squirrels and Arizona grays. Turkey and deer - I'm learning how to work hides. Not many rabbits in that part of the Gila, but plenty of fish. I caught suckers, catfish and trout. I speared them and I made fish traps. I caught bullfrogs."*

Price said he was learning how to use homemade traps and a bow, but he did most of his hunting with guns. At his Gila camp he had a .22 rifle, a .270 rifle and .41 Magnum revolver, all with open sights.

*"I didn't want a scope," Price said. "I wanted to get close."*

One of the creatures Price got close to in the wilderness and levelled on with his iron gunsight was a domestic animal.

*"Yes," he admitted, "I also hunted cows."*

And, in that, Price's life in the wilderness came up against the law. Price did not equivocate.

*"I couldn't live out there without breaking the law. For one thing, it's against the law nowadays to live in the wilderness. You can only stay so long and you're supposed to get out."*

And hunting today, as Price found out, is not what it was when the mountain men roamed the Gila. The game is there, but it's protected by a bureaucracy and rules to match any found in urban life. You can kill a deer, but only at a certain time and in a certain way and you're

supposed to have a license. The squirrel season is a month long. The bullfrog season is shorter than that. And it is not legal to spear gamefish.

*"It's against the law to live off the land anymore,"* Price lamented.

One would expect a tirade here, a protest of the U.S. Forest Service, the New Mexico Game & Fish Department, et al. But it doesn't come.

*"Basically, I think those guys are doing a damn good job,"* Price said. *"The Gila Wilderness is special. I'm glad they could save some of it. Those guys like the wilderness, too."*

In **Silver City**, after Price was arrested, many people belittled his living off the land, because he had poached game and rustled cattle. Price said, *"I went six months at one point without seeing another person. That's something. I am a student of son-hak, the art of being a hermit. I worked in the wilderness to develop my mental powers to be a hermit. In time, it felt natural to live alone. Of course, I wasn't alone, really. I can communicate with animals. I was not alone at all. And I didn't kill animals in the area where I lived. I only killed what I actually needed. I suffered remorse at times after wounding and having to kill with my bare hands. I was an animal, too. But then, we are all animals."*

Price did not think he has any more natural ability for living outdoors than any other person, merely more of a liking for it. He did believe he developed outdoor skills during seven years in the wilds.

*"Your senses develop in the wilderness. I concentrated on a different sense each day - hearing, sight, smell. I'd trail an animal and smell his track. Every human being has that ability to develop these senses . . . we have been dulled by modern society."*

Price talked at length about his campsite. *"I have always been a backpacker, never used horses or burros. I packed in four loads on my back. My cave was about a mile up Panther Canyon from the (Gila) river, up above the canyon, where I could see all around. But I was totally concealed from the river. I had a couple of sleeping bags and Army blankets. I packed in tea and sugar and salt . . . some food. But, soon, I had nothing but what I could get myself. My camp was in the zone of pine and piñon and oak and manzanita. I learned to make use of six kinds of plants. I had started a garden when they caught me. That garden was a rock garden . . . I had to clear it. I had three bald eagles near camp. They stayed up by where the Sapillo comes in. But one would fly up and down the river every day, right by camp. And in the cave I slept by the fire and I could lay on my back and see the fire and the stars."*

*"It was cold that winter, though it was really a mild winter for the Gila. But it was very cold. At first, I was all bundled up. But there I was on a January morning standing at the mouth of my cave in a T-shirt and bare feet."*

*"I'd cross the river in winter and I'd just take my clothes off and cross in my bare feet. When they came to arrest me, all the officers had jackets on, and I was barefoot already that spring. Their mouths dropped open when they saw how I was dressed in the cold.*

*"There was a good snow one night, but I just brushed it out of the cave in the morning. That snow was less than the one in Idaho, in the Sawtooth Mountains in June. I was snowed in for two days there. I ran out of wood, and had no fire. I ate elk meat raw, and that warmed me up.*

*"I felt healthy in the wilderness. I was healthy. I was never sick in the Gila. I've been sick several times in here."*

What about Ben Lilly, last of the mountain men, who lived for long periods of time in the Gila, alone with his hounds as a government hunter, killing bear and lion for bounty?

*"I've heard about him. I'd like to read his book, The Ben Lilly Legend. But Ben Lilly wouldn't be allowed to live like that today, any more than me."*

And what of society, that cut short your life in the Gila and put you in a cage?

*"True individuals are a rare species today. There's no room for an individual anymore. Not just in the wilderness, but anywhere. Our society won't allow it."*

Price said he was a religious man. As he described his beliefs, I was reminded of the 19th century New England transcendentalists whom, with the exception of Henry David Thoreau, Price had not read.

*"I've read Thoreau, but I'm not that educated. I don't read or write that good. But I believe in the Great Spirit, what most people call God. I see God in the trees, plants, rocks. It's all connected. Trees, rocks, water - it's all connected and perfect the way it is, the way it operates. I learned all that in the wilderness.*

*"But I've learned some things in here, too. When I was brought to the cage, people were talking like I was dangerous and didn't like people. I like being alone, but I don't dislike people. And in here, I'm starting to re-establish human relationships. I've made some good friends in here. And I'm getting to know my parents again. When I first came to this cage I had culture shock. Getting used to people was the hard part. But I don't think I'd want to go back to being so alone anymore."*

Price seemed to have a particular fondness for the television set.

*"I'm missing my afternoon's TV with this interview. After a year without any TV, I've spent a lot of time with it in here. I've learned from TV, too. I watch the performers and the people in the news and the politicians and I see who has succeeded. It's the people who are positive about life. It's the doers. I learned that was true in the wilderness, and now I see it here, on television.*

*"I think we are destined by fate. But I believe you can alter your destiny. You go to the wilderness and you don't know if you can do it. You face a crisis everyday and you get scared. You find out that you can do it, and you become more positive about life. You learn to stay calm. I learned to be self-reliant - I like to be self-reliant - and that makes me believe in myself. I believe in myself."*

Martin Price did not talk only about his time in the Gila and in the Grant County Jail. Some questions took him back to other places where he'd lived in the woods, when he wasn't always by himself.

*"I had that dog in the Sawtooth Mountains. That was company, for a while. And for a while in the woods, this guy camped with me. He didn't last."*

*"I lived with a girl, too, and she didn't last. I burned up three times the wood when she was there. She married fire. She was afraid to leave the fire. Some women like the idea of living in the wilderness, but they change when they get there. They don't like the reality."*

*"And then, I lived with Susan and her four kids. Those were the best days, with Susan and those kids. Then she left the wilderness. When she was gone I didn't want to be with nobody anymore. I felt hurt and hostility. That's when I came to the Gila to live alone. I've gotten over most of the hurt and hostility now, living in the Gila and being in here, too."*

*"And since she left, I've been celibate. I've been celibate for two and a-half years. I will end that soon, as soon as I get out of here. But that was the best - when I lived in the wilderness with Susan and those kids. You come into camp at night and a woman and kids are there, and they have the fire ready and you've got a deer slung over your shoulder. That was it."*

*"And a lot of people have told me that they would like to live like I did, if they could. They can't. I can't. Not anymore. I've learned my lesson. I was born one hundred years too late."*

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After his release from the Grant County jail, Martin Price went back to Arizona but he didn't take that ranch job. He kept disappearing into the wilderness, then, following another capture, he would spend time in jail. About ten years after his time spent in the Gila, he disappeared into the mountains for the last time near Prescott, Arizona. Soon, area ranchers began losing cattle, and there was evidence of deer poaching in the region. Sheriff's deputies went into the mountains to get him. This time the mountain man had no intention of giving up. Martin Price died in those mountains in a shoot-out with the law.