



The Bunkhouse Chronicle

Craig Rullman
Columnist

You can't see 'em from the road

Saturday, July 23, marked the National Day of the Cowboy. I was unaware there was such a thing. Most cowboys (we call them buckaroos where I come from) probably don't want their own national day — it's a touch immodest — but there it is anyway, and like a bad meal, sometimes you just have to eat it and say thank you.

That word, buckaroo, is of course a derivation from the Spanish vaquero, and it has mostly to do with preserving some of the Californio traditions, a quieter way of working cattle, which is essential on the big deserts where there are no corrals or fences, and 4,000 calves still need to be gathered and sorted and branded. It has to do with

horsemanship, and tack, and of course a much-better-looking hat.

For me it came naturally. I was born into it. My grandfather was a working cowboy until the day he died. That's something like 75 years in the saddle, even after subtracting his time in the Marine Corps during World War II. When I was born he told my mother, "Well, he'll make a cowboy for sure, he's all shoulders and no butt." That might be apocryphal, but it still makes one smile.

Naturally, as I came up, he tried to warn me off of buckarooing. He promised I would end up broke, and broken, with nothing to show for the effort but a collection of old tack and memories nobody cares much about.

He was right and wrong. The pay is terrible. The hours endless. The work largely thankless, and hazing cattle out of the rocks can be quite dangerous. But there are some jobs you don't do for money or praise. There were days horseback out on the desert so good, so perfect, I wouldn't sell the memories for Bill Gates' money.

My own circle started on the 10X Ranch in Arizona, east of Flagstaff, a grand swath of land stretching from the Mogollon Rim to the edge of Meteor Crater. We

ran a Hereford-Brahma cross for a rugged cow that could survive tough conditions and still pack on weight.

We rode every day. The cowboss on that outfit was from Newcastle, Wyoming, a cranky, wiry, wind-wrecked puncher assembled from juniper and rawhide who could C-section a struggling cow in a blizzard blowing sideways. He was absolutely humorless, unless it involved a joke about his mother-in-law, whom he regarded without fondness.

From Arizona I circled north into northeastern California and Nevada, my home country, and on those ranches we had a lot of ground to cover. Some days we would trot out 10 miles just to get to the cows and start working. I tell people that and they roll their eyes, assuming I'm exaggerating. I'm not. It was true horseback work, and we took a lot of pride in our inheritance, some measure of the lore handed down by guys like Teddy Blue Abbott, and Will James, who wrote so well about the life. In many ways, working on those big outfits was like living in a time machine.

Somewhere out there, in the heat and the dust and the biting flies, or riding in the deep snow and the cold

at night, when your mustache turns into ice and your mecate is frozen stiff, you have a chance to learn something about your own character, that place where your ambitions run straight into your limitations. That's what I loved about the work. Those kinds of lessons can only be won in hard places, and moving 300 cows through the desert, alone in a thunderstorm, can be a hard place.

I don't know if it will last. True riding outfits are harder to find each year, and by that I mean a traditional horseback ranch, where cowboys still hold fast to the notion that if it can't be done from horseback it isn't worth doing. An awful lot of people are mad at ranchers and what they call "welfare ranching," and would like nothing more than to see ranchers and their crew of buckaroos thrown off the desert for good. In the end, I suppose they will probably win out. That's the way of the world.

But folks like that will never see the country the way I've seen it, and if they win out they will have killed a dream that fueled a good, productive culture that cannot be recreated. It's a modest way of life, for certain, and it's not for everyone, but the romance of riding for a brand in unsettled country

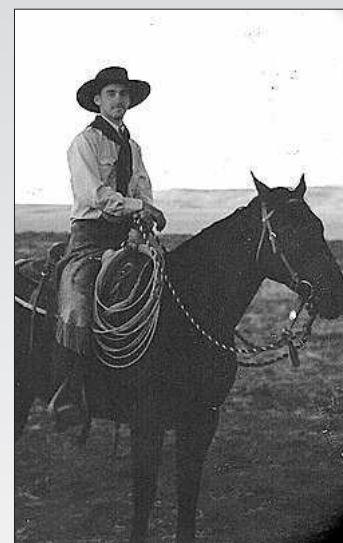


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still stokes the passions of young men and women in the rural West, who want to carry forward that inheritance with honor.

For now, they're still out there, those hardy buckaroos, and now they have their own national day. I sincerely doubt they know it, because they're out riding this very minute, on places like the ZX down in Paisley, or the Spanish Ranch out of Tuscarora, or the Winecup, or the mighty IL. They're still out there, doing it the old way — no four-wheelers or helicopters, just wiry kids with a lot of heart and heads full of desert dreams. They're still out there, those real cowboys, but as Chris LeDoux sang to us, "You just can't see 'em from the road."

"I was just going in for 10 minutes."

But then the check-out line was so long.

Even with the windows partly down, the heat can rise from 80° outside to 102° inside the car in a short time.*

Parked cars are deathtraps for dogs: On a 78-degree day, the temperature inside a parked car can soar to between 100 and 120 degrees in just minutes, and on a 90-degree day, the interior temperature can reach as high as 160 degrees in less than 10 minutes. Animals can sustain brain damage or even die from heatstroke in just 15 minutes.*



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