



The Bunkhouse Chronicle

Craig Rullman
Columnist

Lashed to the mast

If you were ever lucky enough to live out on the great sagebrush sea, like I was during a certain vanishing era, you might have enjoyed a slice of old Americana in perhaps the rarest of ways: trailing cattle and working horses.

The outback was, in those days — and still is to some degree — a kind of underworld, a parallel universe, richly populated with characters and stories both real and imagined. Most folks, I think it's fair to say, travel through the desert without much pause. They might admire some dazzling vista, or stop at a favorite greasy spoon, or even camp for a night or two on a lonely butte, but mostly they pour coal to the fire and yawn at the empty miles.

But there is a real-enough daily life out there on the big oceans of desert, and it was out there, last Friday, that I was blessed to spend some time with a real American

legend, Len Babb.

I first started hearing about Len and his magnificent saddles in the long ago, when I rode the big empty with another legendary buckaroo named Bert Lambert. Bert was a Mescalero Apache, up from New Mexico, who could rope a tick off of a dog's ass at a dead run, and whose stories were so outlandish, so outrageous, and so thoroughly questionable that I actually started writing them down. I have an entire notebook I titled, way back then, "The Bert Lambert Lies."

An example from the notebook: "Bert said today that he once rode an ostrich somewhere near Christmas Valley, up in Oregon. 'Not much buck,' he said, 'But they sure do run fast.'"

Imagine my surprise then, all of these years later, when I finally met Len Babb in person, and was enjoying a fine lunch prepared by his wife, Gloria, and learned that so many of Bert's imaginative stories of mayhem were actually true.

What makes Len Babb a hall-of-famer in the buckaroo world is not just his wonderful artwork, his appreciation for fine horsemanship, or his work for storied ranches such as The Padlock out in Wyoming, or the ZX here in Oregon. It's the longevity of his career. Most buckaroo careers look more like mine did: a deep, and altogether too short, dive into the depths. With wages stuck forever in the 19th century, that's really just a

matter of economics, and very few ever accomplish what Len and Gloria did, let alone raise six children.

Sipping root beer under the wind chimes on his porch — Len told me he had real beer, but we agreed the interview might go awry — I asked him the obvious question: Why did you stick it out all these years?

"Because I love it," he said.

Simple as that. And it filled me with a certain hard-edged, inexplicable personal remorse such that I couldn't find a way to the next part of the interview. Len, mercifully, gave me an out. Bills are bills, he said, and then told a joke about his friend John Adamson, who was being interviewed by photographers out documenting the life. They were curious about the changes John had seen in his decades as a working buckaroo.

"Well," John told them, "the wages are the same."

I've long held a thought in my head, maybe too simplistic, that as soon as they start paving the roads, a mostly unexplored and unfamiliar and wide-open chunk of country is more or less finished. The mystery runs all out of it. At least for the folks that once enjoyed it for its demanding, and beautiful, remoteness. That's possibly stupid, but when you've lived mostly horseback on a country, and learned its moods that way, there is more than a bit of remorse to see how easy it suddenly is to get from here to there.



PHOTO BY CRAIG RULLMAN

Len Babb in the studio where he paints and sculpts Western art.

We commiserated, just a little bit, on how the big ranches are breaking up and disappearing with increasing

speed. We talked about how the country was filling up

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Bjarne Holm

— August 2, 1946 to October 9, 2016 —



Thanks for the kindness and support during Bjarne's battle with pancreatic cancer. It was a horrific experience for both of us, but now one of us has found peace. To those of you who called, wrote and dropped by, please know that you were greatly appreciated. His last 4 months offered some memorable experiences. I am beginning to take the reins and carry on as he would have wanted, again, not without the help of several of my new Sisters friends.

— Thank you and happy trails to you all, Robin

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