



The Bunkhouse Chronicle

Craig Rullman
Columnist

Wheel of Fortune

Way back a thousand years ago, when I came off the desert to try once again — reluctantly — to reconcile myself to the vagaries of human civilization, I committed a cardinal sin: I sold my saddle.

In the world of buckaroos this is a subject so taboo — like sitting in a baseball dug-out and suddenly starting a conversation about The Yips — it is better off left alone. But this is, after all, rodeo week, and some stories still have happy endings.

I sold my saddle for the simple reason that I was flat broke. I also needed to eat, and put gas in my truck to get from here to there, and that saddle — and some bits, a decent collection of romals and hand-twisted mecates, a

special pair of spurs with silver-dollar rowels, and even a quirt I built over a long winter in a one-room shack — represented my only treasure on earth.

So I sold them off for a grubsteak and a kickstart, and mostly refused to talk about it whenever the subject came up in the subsequent years.

I first acquired that saddle at a branding on the Bare Ranch in Surprise Valley, California. With so many buckaroos in one place the branding turned into an open-air bazaar, as they usually do, with Garcia bits, spurs, 12-plait romals, and saddles changing hands faster than buffalo robes at Bent's Fort. I traded out three saddles in three days until I finally got the one I wanted, an HH out of Elko, Nevada. It was a work of art: 16.5 inches on a Wade Tree with a Cheyenne roll, a stout post horn and lace-in stirrups. It also had some silver pretties on it and came with the original elk-hide bucking rolls. It fit like a glove and looked, to a working cowboy, better than the Hope Diamond.

We branded 5,000 calves that spring and summer, every last one of them dragged to a sagebrush fire in one of five different desert camps, and to say that I built some memories into the leather would be

an understatement. I bucked out sloppy rough-string colts in Duck Flat, chased wild horses and burros through High Rock Canyon, herded angry bison through the Madeline Plains, fought wild bulls up Slumgullion Creek, and once rode through the Black Rock Range from Soldier Meadows to Battle Creek in a solid blizzard to gather stray cattle. I was so cold I couldn't feel my fingers or toes, and the ice in my beard was so heavy my face drooped. Next morning, we drove those cows back through the canyon under a flawless blue sky in wind that cut like razorblades.

But the Wheel of Fortune — Rota Fortunae — has its ups and downs. The concept of fortune being tied to the wheel was first introduced to us by the ancient Greeks, and shows up from time to time in Western literature, most notably during the middle ages when talented scribes started drawing it on vellum by candlelight. Belonging to the goddess Fortuna, she spins away at the wheel on a whim, and those of us tied to its spokes will sometimes end up on top, and sometimes hang upside down with our pockets turned inside out.

When my first crack at living upright in town inevitably failed, I went back to

the desert. By then I had another saddle, another collection of good using gear started, but I never quite got over the shame of selling off the old HH. Over the years I made several attempts to get it back, but the good man I sold it to had built his own memories into the tree, riding his own big circles on the desert.

And the truth is, selling that saddle, and rolling my bed for town when I did was probably a good idea, even if I didn't think so at the time. It likely kept me from straying too far from the end of the road for too long and ending up like Claude Dallas. I never met Claude, but I know people who rode with him, and I know some of the places he stayed when he was on the run. And I'm a firm believer that the temptations of the true desert can overwhelm our capacity for reason if we aren't very, very careful.

But I promised you a happy ending. Two weeks ago I got that old saddle back from my old friend. And my silver-dollar spurs. And some mane-hair mecates so fine

they could make me cry. I drove three hundred miles to get it, and it cost me a rifle in trade, plus a promise that I would bequeath the saddle back to his son when I die, but that is a small price to pay to end up, all these years later, back on top of the wheel.

And I realize now that if I had never sold it, I never could have nurtured the dream of getting it back, felt the long pull of summer sunshine in the desert when other careers took me into places of darkness, or felt the sublime frisson of swinging into it again like I did last week, on a new colt, in new country, with new dreams, but the same wary eye on the hand that spins the wheel.



PHOTO BY CRAIG RULLMAN

Find your pioneering spirit in Sisters Country.

While you are here enjoying the Sisters Rodeo, we invite you to re-discover the hospitality of the Old West. Take a stroll through Sisters and explore the one-of-a-kind boutiques, galleries, antiques stores, book shops and restaurants. Kick off your boots and relax in a rustic cabin or world-class resort; experience hiking, biking, fishing, golfing and more in our backyard.

The **SISTERS** Country

SISTERS AREA
CHAMBER OF COMMERCE
866.549.0252 541.549.0251
www.SistersCountry.com