



The Bunkhouse Chronicle

Craig Rullman
Columnist

Lights. Camera. Cowboys.

It was late June, but there was frost on my bedroll when I woke up in the dark at the Murphy Ranch cow camp on South Flat, about 25 miles up the Chewaucan River from Paisley, Oregon. I was there — along with cinematographer Samuel Pyke — to begin filming *The Len Babb Movie Project*, which was an idea that flashed into my head two months earlier while riding my colt.

I had just finished watching a couple of documentary films about cowboys and the life — “Fishtail,” and “The Highly Exalted” — and couldn’t shake the thought: I can do one better than that.

Which was an especially arrogant idea, given I had zero experience making movies. I could barely make my iPhone camera work. But I have learned to listen to that little creative voice — in this case it was simply screaming in my ears—and also I am prone to creative manias that smash any fear of failure like an ugly bug.

The challenges of making a world-class movie — with world-class production

values — are immense, but sometimes we arrive at a confluence of vision, preparation, and opportunity that’s better left unexamined. Sometimes we just have to embrace the confidence to go where the waters are taking us.

In this case I was drawn to make a film about the Paisley, Oregon, artist and cowboy Len Babb. I wanted to make a film about his 80 years making a living in the saddle — a feat almost unheard of anymore — and about his accomplished artwork... but also about something else.

In an era where it seems we have gone internal, and are intent on devouring ourselves, I wanted to make a film about values — about faith, family, friends, and community, set against a backdrop of some of Oregon’s most intensely beautiful country — and in a town where working cowboys remain the pillars of a threatened culture.

But there was something else. I wanted to get as many local people involved as I could. I wanted original music from Sisters local musicians — Jim Cornelius, Mike Biggers, Lilli Worona, and a talented ZX Ranch cowboy named Jody Cooper — and to have Keith Banning at Grange Records lay it all down in his Sisters studio. I wanted adult supervision and a local producer, and got one when Cris Converse came on board the project.

I wanted Samuel Pyke, a Sisters native, to film it because he has travelled the world with his cameras — and he has a lot of them — filming sequences

that are second to nobody. I wanted to build a movie around local collaborations — on the production end in Sisters, and on the narrative end by Len’s family and friends around Paisley — and as far out east as Juntura.

All of these big ideas cost money, of course.

So one day I sat in my barn while the horses ate and the rain came down and put together a call to action, a request for help, and tossed it out into a world seething in the grip of a pandemic, lousy politics, and apparently endless strife.

And in the midst of all that ugliness the world has answered with a tremendous outpouring of enthusiasm and assistance, and with an often-expressed desire to see something built around cycles of life, natural beauty, and creativity, rather than cycles of despair, dis temper, and destruction.

That first morning on South Flat, where Len Babb and half dozen other cowboys from neighboring ranches had gathered to help the Murphy’s gather and brand some 800 calves — I felt that odd frisson, that elevating lightness of mind, that can only come when a creative project has real legs.

Five minutes into filming, when the light was perfect and there was a lace-curtain of steam rising out of Morgan Creek, young Paisley buckaroo Tyler Mecham got in a bronc ride on a cold-backed palomino — just as they were trotting out to get around the cows. It was dicey for a minute, but in the end Tyler forked that bronc, and Sam got the shot.



PHOTO COURTESY SAM PYKE, HILL SHADOW PICTURES

Branding at Murphy Ranch, South Flat. The Len Babb Movie Project is an artisan project — with every aspect of the production rooted in Sisters and Central Oregon.

And that’s when I knew beyond a doubt — come hell or high water — we were going to see this all the way to the end.

We can never know what will become of our projects in the long run. We build them on a vision, and like children they grow up with their own ideas. This movie project has grown exponentially, and in surprising fashion, from where it started. It has led to other opportunities. It has helped a spectrum of people understand

how valued they are, and how valued their work is. Which, I think, is ultimately why we create such things: to show care for each other, and to find value in each other.

Which is what my cowboy movie is really about.

Editor’s note: To view a trailer from The Len Babb Movie Project, visit <https://www.gofundme.com/fl-len-babb-movie-project> or find The Len Babb Movie Project on Facebook.



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