

Bill Kane A Cowboy's Cowboy

Words by Mike Laughlin. Photos © Kurt Markus.



Singer, songwriter, buckaroo Mike Beck worked for Bill Kane. He says: "Sometimes you're lucky enough to be in the right place at the right time, and you don't realize it 'til later in your life because often you're too young and dumb, but when I worked for Bill Kane at the Spanish Ranch I had a feeling that I was in a special place working for a special man. No matter how hard the snow was flyin', how hot it was, how big our circle was, or how many calves we had to brand, I never heard him complain. I was just barely licked off when I landed there and it's a miracle I survived, but I did my best to please this man and I think that's what got me through. I got a lot of songs out of that experience and I wouldn't trade those times for nothin'. In my mind's eye, I can still see him throwin' those beautiful loops catchin' horses outta the cavy. It was poetry in motion."

It was still dark outside. Inside the Spanish Ranch cookhouse, the cowboys lingered silently over their last cup of coffee and listened to the sounds of the horse wrangler and the saddle horse cavvy coming to the "ropes." The door opened and in stepped Bill Kane, cowboss. He called out, "Come on, cowboys! I'm going to rope you a horse." The cowboys followed him outside, some dry-mouthed with anticipation of their morning's mount, most with muscles aching from yesterday's work. Kane was an imposing figure in the faint dawn light as he stood inside the temporary rope corrals uncoiling his horse rope.

So began many mornings on the Spanish Ranch for 28 years while Kane was the cowboss. He has been gone from northeastern Nevada for a number of years, but his reputation lives on. Even today, if you say Kane around most working cowboys in Elko County, they know and respect the name.

Bill Kane was born in Elko, Nev., in 1942. His early childhood was spent horseback around cows and cowboys. When Bill was in the sixth grade, he "rep'd" for his dad during the summer on the Moffat Wagon in northern Elko County. Bill moved with his family and their cattle around southern Idaho, and finally to the Doheny Ranch in the North Fork area in Elko County.

Bill attended high school in Elko. During three summers while he was in school, he took in outside colts to ride and cowboied for the Marvel's 25 Ranch Wagon out of Battle Mountain. After high school, he went to cowboy for Willis Packer's ranch near Tuscarora.

In 1961, Bill hired on "riding broncos" for the historic Spanish Ranch that belonged to the Ellison Ranching Company, headquartered in Independence Valley. The horses on this ranch were halter broke after they were weaned, castrated and branded as yearlings, then turned out. Many of these ranch geldings were not started under saddle until they were five or six years old. Riding this age-class of horse for the first time was not for the faint of heart and Kane was good at it.

The Spanish Ranch, located in Elko and Lander counties, was one of the largest ranches in the Great Basin at that time, big enough to take all day to trot across. The ranch ran thousands of cattle and sheep over a huge, remote country that went from salt-sage alkali flats to alpine mountain meadows.

When Bill was 20 years old, general manager Stanley Ellison gave him the job of Spanish Ranch cowboss. He could see that there was something special about Bill Kane around men, horses, and cattle. His hunch proved correct and Kane proved to be the right choice for cowboss. Kane could get the cattle work done even though he was constantly dealing with an inexperienced, ever-changing cowboy crew and he also excelled at a number of other duties that were needed around the ranch, proving himself a valuable employee.



"I'd noticed that the tone of the stories almost always changed when the topic moved to Bill Kane," Kurt Markus writes. "A certain reserve took over. Less laughter I think. Bill Kane seemed a man somewhat apart. But whatever might be said, he and the ranch were not where you went first if you were new to the area. No, you saved up your courage before you asked Kane for a job. As much as anything, you heard about the Spanish Ranch horses. Big, snorty, tough horses. And the country. Probably the largest of the area ranches, with not much in the way of fencing. A man could get dropped off on a circle and think he'd been lost at sea."

In 1966, Bill married Marie Ellison, the boss's daughter, and they raised four children. Bill says about his early years:

"I have cowboied as long as I can remember and was lucky enough to be around some great cowboys when I was growing up. My dad was my first teacher and a good cowboy, as was my grandfather. I learned the ways of cattle, horses and ropes on the big wagon outfits from men such as Tom and John Marvel, Charlie Chapin, Tom and Jim Dorrance, Ray Hunt, Charley Van Norman, Stanley Ellison and many others. I had a great desire to succeed in the cowboy world, so I tried to watch and learn as I rode with these great stockman and horse hands."

Bill continues: "In my 28 years of being cowboss on this ranch and working on other ranches, the best all-around cowboy I ever

saw was Tom Marvel. He taught me a lot."

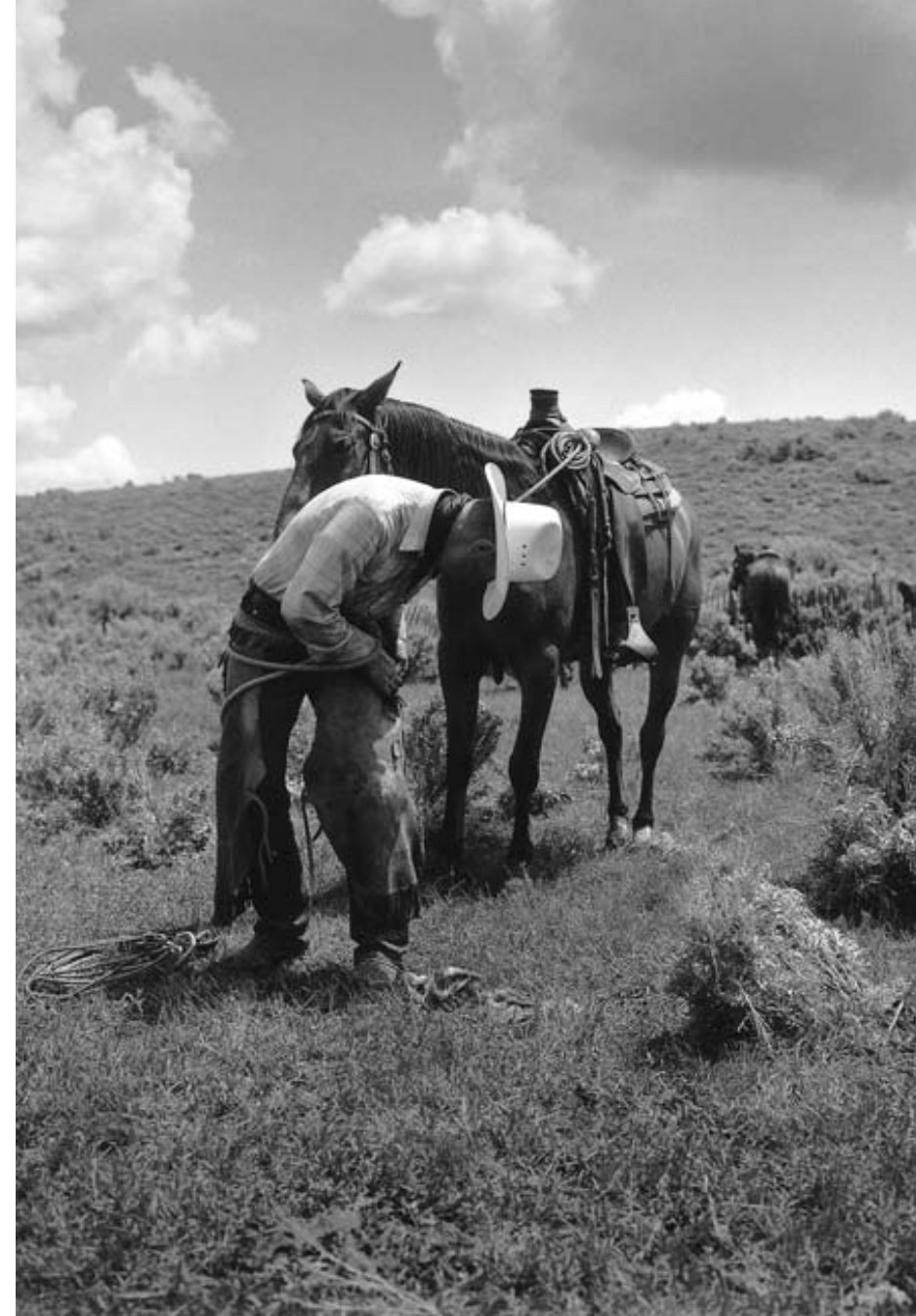
When asked about Kane, Tom Marvel says: "Bill Kane came to cowboy for us on the 25 Wagon out of Battle Mountain when he was 16 years old. He had already developed many cowboy skills with horses and ropes before he came to work. He was wild in his younger days, but was wild in a good way. He wanted to learn the cowboy game and he did."

When Kane took over the cowboss job on the Spanish Ranch, they ran two wagons during branding in the early summer months. One wagon started out of Squaw Valley on the west end and Kane ran a wagon out of the Spanish Ranch headquarters over 60 miles to the east. These wagons would be out for several months, but they seldom mixed cowboys and cattle. There were cowboys working on one wagon who never saw the crew working

on the other wagon.

The ranch kept around 500 head of horses and started around 30 colts each year for replacements. For the most part, these pitchfork-branded horses were not registered. They were a thoroughbred-type grade horse with some draft blood. They were a Spanish Ranch-bred big-circle horse that could make the miles in this vast country and still have enough left to get you back to camp at night. The ranch had several outside stud bands from which they selected replacement saddle and draft horses. In those days, they were feeding livestock with teams in the winter months, so they also had a number of draft horses, starting several new feed teams each winter.

"The wagons would pull out in mid-May and we would stay out until around July 4th," Bill says. "Then we would come in to the



headquarters and cowboy out of there. One year I ran the entire Spanish Ranch with one wagon because the cowboss at Squaw Valley quit in the middle of branding season. I would usually keep eight to 10 cowboys and a cook on the wagon. All the cowboys slept in tepee tents. Fresh horses for the day were roped at the 'ropes' each morning after the horse wrangler brought the cavvy in. I assigned each cowboy eight to 12 horses for his string. There were about 125 horses in the wagon cavvy to make up the cowboys' saddle horse strings."

In those days, the ranch hired a number of Indian cowboys from the Paiute/Shoshone Reservation near Owyhee, Nev. Bill says, "These Indian boys could sure rope. We would work a country, brand up, and then move the wagon to a new camp location that had water for our horse cavvy and plenty of

sagebrush for a branding fire. We usually worked a country branding calves for four or five days and then moved on."

There were very few branding traps (corals) to use on the Spanish Ranch. "We branded most calves in an 'open rodeo' where the herd was held by the cowboys, horseback, and the calves were roped by the back legs and drug to the fire," Bill says. "We used a couple of men on the ground to flank, vaccinate, earmark, castrate, and brand. We did not head and heel our smaller calves. Wasting two men roping the same calf was too slow. We were there to get the branding job completed in the shortest length of time and we stayed with it until we were finished."

The Spanish Ranch scattered out around 400 head of bulls with their cows and calves. They would trail the bulls out from the bull

(Continued on next page)

Remembering the Spanish Ranch Wagon

By Kurt Markus, Photographer

When I started going to Elko and the ranches surrounding that once-buckaroo town in the early '80s, someone ought to have warned me the land and its people were deeply addictive. Elko felt like someplace else, a place bypassed sometime early in the 20th century.

It was no trick at all to connect with the ranch community and get a feel for who the players were. The YP, the IL, the T Lazy S, the Winecup, the Spanish Ranch. Of course there were others—many fine, smaller family-run outfits—but if you were a buckaroo with a bedroll and not afraid to roll it, these were the ones you knew.

I had the privilege of spending a few days with the Spanish Ranch's remarkable Bill Kane in the spring of 1983 while their wagon was out, and for a day or two in the winter when the sun was shining but the world and everything in it was frozen solid. I knew a few Bill Kane stories—stories you hear about anyone who has spent enough time in that cruel but beautiful country. Serious stories of enduring great pain. Funny stories, sometimes with injury involved, sometimes with a cook in the mix. Factual stories, even.

I'd noticed that the tone of the stories almost always changed when the topic moved to Bill Kane. A certain reserve took over. Less laughter I think. Bill Kane seemed a man somewhat apart. But whatever might be said, he and the ranch were not where you went first if you were new to the area. No, you saved up your courage before you asked Kane for a job. As much as anything, you heard about the Spanish Ranch horses. Big, snorty, tough horses. And the country. Probably the largest of the area ranches, with not much in the way of fencing. A man could get dropped off on a circle and think he'd been lost at sea.

I got the chance to see Bill Kane the legend and Bill Kane the man. He worked 24/7, could ride anything and make it look easy. He could take a crew of relatively green hands and get a day's work done in conditions that would stupefy almost anyone else.

I'm not even tempted to explain my view of Bill Kane the man. I'm not sure I could. Or that I know enough to do any justice to what is certainly a story worth telling. May I offer that Bill Kane is someone who was charitable enough to treat me with kindness, offer me good, gentle horses to ride, feed me, tolerate my cameras, and answer my persistent and generally knuckle-headed questions. I suspect that Bill Kane offered much the same, in other ways, to anyone who put their trust in him. He was, and no doubt is, a man of trust.

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pasture near headquarters and place them with groups of cows and calves after they had branded.

At that time, there were no gooseneck horse trailers on the ranch. Bill laughs: "Just as well, because these big-circle horses probably wouldn't have liked loading in a horse trailer." Kane and his crew rode their horses wherever they went. The country was open with very few fences.

"We rode our horses on cows. That was the way it had always been done on the Spanish Ranch—the old way. Some of these young cowboys who stayed with me through branding season never set their feet in anything but a saddle stirrup during the time the wagon was out. The advantages for the use of the wagon were that you camped near your cattle and were ready to go in early morning when it was cool and cattle worked better. There was no driving miles in a pickup with a horse trailer to get to cattle. Cowboys living on the wagon were around cattle and horses 24 hours a day and you made good cowboys and good horses that way. There were few outside distractions cowboying on the wagon. These men began to look and see what needed to be done."

In the fall, Bill and his cowboys would gather, work cows and ship calves, cut out replacement heifers, gather bulls and ride for remnant cattle. When winter approached, Bill and his cowboys would get the feed teams trimmed up and fit with their collars and harness getting ready for winter feeding. There was never much slack time on this big outfit.

Bill Kane, no doubt, handled more cows, horses and cowboys than most people could ever imagine as cowboss on this historic Nevada big wagon outfit. He is a true Nevada cowboy legend.

Bill and his wife Marie left the Spanish Ranch after being the cowboss for 28 years and moved to Eagle Point, Ore., where they bought their own ranch. Today Bill enjoys his family, rides outside horses, helps his neighbors work their cattle, twists McCarty ropes out of horse mane hair, and raises and sells registered quarter horses.

Bill smiles and says: "I wanted to live where it never snows. I found that place." ■

Mike Laughlin has cowboied, trapped and traveled the West from Canada to Mexico. He "Rep'd" for Western Horseman for 18 years. He spends summers on the west slope of the Ruby Mountains in northeastern Nevada near Lamoille, where he writes, day works, and takes care of pastured cattle. He winters in Congress, Ariz. <www.cowboyshowcase.com>.