



Arizona Cowboy

The romance and reality of Gail Steiger's world. Words and photos by Kathy McCraine.

Shortly after sunrise on an October morning, Arizona cowboy Gail Steiger is already maneuvering his big white gelding up the tortuous trail that rises abruptly behind the Spider Ranch headquarters near Prescott. My husband Swayze and I run cattle to the east of here, and today we are helping Gail look for some cow-and-calf escapees. He has seen their tracks on Smith Mesa and figures hunters have left the gate open.

The trail zigzags, climbing steeply through tumbled piles of granite boulders. Our rawhide tapaderos scrape through the prickly oak brush, piñons, junipers and manzanita. Gail stops to point out a lion track, a grim reminder that the calf-loving predators are ever present in this vast country.

At this hour of the morning, with bright blue skies and the hazy blue mountains

behind us, it's easy to see the romance in cowboy life, but Gail knows all about the reality of it too. Having worked here all but three years since 1981, he knows plenty about tracking and trailing and roping wild cattle. But years of working mostly alone have taught him to mix a few new ideas in with the old traditions. At 52, he's also come to a point in his life where he thinks about things like sustainability, going back to a simpler life, and making some contribution to the world.

Gail is thin as a fence stay, with slightly graying hair, blue eyes, and a trim mustache. His worn chaps have seen a lot of brush, and his black hat is streaked with sweat and dust. Gail never really planned to be a cowboy. Neither did he expect to shoot videos of cowboys around the world, or write cowboy songs like his famous grandfather, Gail Gardner, before

him. "I just kind of fell into it all," he says.

Gail and his twin brother Lew were born on the Bar Heart Ranch near Williams, Ariz., after his dad, Sam Steiger, came west from New York to go into the cow business. His mother's grandfather, J.I. Gardner, settled in Prescott in the 1870s, ran a grocery store, and then partnered with his son on a little ranch at Skull Valley.

As Gail was growing up, his parents divorced. His dad won a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives and Gail moved with him to a small farm in Virginia, where they ran about 300 cows. He quit college to help in his dad's political campaigns, where he learned a little about shooting and editing videos. Eventually he graduated from Colorado College in Colorado Springs with a degree in business.

In 1978, Gail's dad returned to Arizona and ranching on the Matli Ranch near Prescott. Gail's college advisor was lining him up to do a graduate program in computer programming at Dartmouth and Gail was helping his dad on the ranch when his path hit a bump in the road. "I got off on this hippie deal," he admits a little sheepishly.

About that time, he met Bill Murphy, a legendary Arizona cowboy who gave him a job, became his mentor, and put Gail on a new track. Bill was running the Spider and the Cross U ranches near Prescott for Gene Polk, and the two of them decided to "rescue" Gail from his "errant" ways.

"I had grown up on my dad's ranch and been around critters all my life, but I didn't have it in mind to punch cows," Gail says. "I had never worked rough country, but Bill was real patient. He taught me a lot about trailing cows, but he liked things pretty fast. Used to be you'd come up here and see some fresh sign and the dogs would start barking and everything would run off, and it was fun. I loved it when I was 20. But I didn't have to worry about how many cows we got, or if we were making any money."

Today he takes his job a lot more seriously. After trotting for maybe an hour, we reach the top of Smith Mesa and find a little bunch of crossbred cows and calves at Horseshoe Tank. This rock-covered, juniper-specked mesa is probably the flattest place on the ranch, but Weber Canyon to the south and Cottonwood Canyon to the west are gaping proof that this is one of northern Arizona's rougher ranches. With 68 sections, the outfit has a Forest Service permit for 300 head, but Gail doesn't always fill the permit to better take care of the land.

The cows and calves are easy to handle and we put them, along with some big, long yearlings, into a trap by the tank. Gail explains that he doesn't wean his calves in the fall, but just lets them run with the herd until they're two year olds, much as his grandfather did years ago. In this rough, droughty country, "it works better to sell a 700-pound, two-year-old, instead of a 350-pound calf."

Also like the old days, his program is all natural. He vaccinates the heifers, but they die of old age without ever seeing a chute. "I don't preg check, I don't worm them, and I don't knock their horns off," he says. "I figure the less I torture 'em, the easier it gets."

Gail's horses and cows rarely see a trailer either, and it's not uncommon for him to trot for miles to get where he's going, often camping overnight. Though he hires a couple of

guys to help during the spring and fall, he prefers to work alone, taking his time and gathering smaller bunches for drives.

"In a way you've got to train your cows to drive," he says. "I really try to string them out single file, because if you wad them up and push from the back, you're not going to get there on those rough trails. If you watch cows coming to water, they go single file when they're on their own."

Another of Gail's innovations that has the cowboys rolling their eyes is feeding his cows before he makes a big drive. "We used to gather a big bunch into a trap for three to four days while we worked them," he says. "By the time you got ready to drive them out, they'd have that trap mucked out and they were so hungry they would spread out all over trying to eat. Now I just work 60 to 70 head at a time. I fill them up with hay and they just line out."

Cowboy life isn't all that Gail's grandfather, Gail Gardner, passed down to him. He remembers as a child sitting around with his grandparents and their friends while they entertained each other telling stories or singing songs. Gardner, who is most famous for his poem and song, "Tying Knots in the Devil's Tail," is still considered one of the greatest cowboy poets of all time.

Gail and his brother Lew played a lot of music together growing up and recorded some cowboy songs with Gail singing and playing the guitar and Lew on the harmonica. About 1983, a friend in the video business talked them into making a music video—the new thing at the time—using a Gail Steiger song called "City Friends." Bill Murphy was the star, and the video was shot on the Cross U Ranch.

"I was going to send it around and get rich in the music business!" Gail laughs. That never happened, but he showed it to Gene Polk, who liked it so well he encouraged Gail and Lew to make a longer documentary about cowboy life in the area. He even offered help with financing. With input from the video friend, and many hours in the library reading about how to make films, the brothers finally finished "Ranch Album" in 1987. It was eventually released by PBS, and the exposure launched the Steiger brothers into a successful video business.

In 1988 the fledgling Western Folklife

Center decided to dedicate its National Cowboy Poetry Gathering in Elko, Nev., to Gail's grandfather. Gardner was 95 at the time and unable to make the trip, so they asked Gail to make a video of him singing his famous song.

"It was a real revelation to me," Gail says, "because at that time there weren't too many people writing stuff about ranching and there were a lot of ranch people who came to that gathering. I had written some songs about ranch life, too, and it was good to hang out with those people."

For the Gathering, the Folklife Center had also been bringing in people from other cultures involved in the livestock business to perform songs or poetry from their respective countries. They invited Gail to bring his camera and travel to Mongolia, France, Brazil and Argentina to film videos of their cowboy cultures.

Today Gail serves as a trustee on the Western Folklife Center's board and he is working on several travelogues about their adventures abroad. He hopes to eventually expand this



Gail Steiger is a fourth-generation rancher, whose great-grandfather came to Prescott, Ariz., in the 1870s. Today Gail runs the Spider Ranch, shoots videos of cowboys around the world, and occasionally writes and performs cowboy songs. ABOVE: Returning to the home ranch in Skull Valley. OPPOSITE: Rock outcroppings, steep canyons and brush-covered terrain are typical of this northern Arizona ranch, making it tough country for cowboys and cows alike.

eye-opening experience into a documentary to be called "Cowboys Around the World."

"I'm trying to support the Folklife Center in reaching out across international borders," he says. "I may not be able to influence U.S. policy, but there's a lot we can do one on one to understand other cultures and represent America in whatever interaction we have with them. Between all these countries there is a common thread, and that is a movement away from an agrarian existence to an urban

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existence.”

Gail thinks a lot more these days about global problems. “We need to think regionally,” he says. “To be sustainable you’ve got to grow enough food in a particular area to support the people in it. And in this rough country, what else is there but a cow deal?”

His dream is to eventually market beef right off the ranch, “to harvest what’s right here, with as few additives and as little stress



Gail, with favorite horse Rosco and three old dogs he inherited from his former boss and mentor, Bill Murphy. The dogs—Sophie, Ellie and Jake—enjoy tagging along on days that are not too tough.

as possible. I think it’s a pretty good product.”

Dropping off Smith Mesa on the way home, we spot a black bull at the Dumbell corrals on the wrong side of the fence. We haze him back through the gate. It’s not hard to figure out how he got there. A few yards down the fence is a narrow opening with a short little cattle guard that the Forest Service has put in, easy enough for any bovine to hop over. Gail explains that it was put there so that dirt bike and four-wheeler riders don’t have to open any gates. The rumor is they will soon be putting a major dirt bike trail through the Spider. Just one more headache.

It’s like the words from Gail’s song, “The Romance of Western Life”:

*And the romance ain’t completely gone
To this cowboy life we chose,*

*But the bliss that I was countin’ on,
Well, it comes and it goes.
I could have been a lawyer (or somethin’)
But it’s too late for that now,
’Cause the only thing I know anything about
Is a damned old Hereford cow. ■*

Kathy McCraine is a rancher, writer and photographer from Prescott, Ariz. Copies of “Ranch Album” and “The Romance of Western Life” can be ordered from Big Bend Saddlery, the Western Folklife Center, Amazon.com or GObaby.com.

The Homecoming

Portrait of a friend. By H.D. Boyer

As horses go, he wouldn’t have rated a second glance in a sales ring at any of the big livestock centers. He had good withers that would hold a saddle in place but his flank was not cut high enough and his back was a little too long.

What he did have was an unbelievably big heart. And he knew and loved his last home.

After years of roundup and corral work, he had become “stove up” in front, as the locals called a gradual stiffening in the shoulders and knees. Age combined with a shortened gait adversely affected his value as a cow horse. When my father came across him running with a small bunch of mares and colts, he arranged a trade with his owner and brought him home for use as a wrangle horse.

This old pony knew a good thing when he saw it and settled easily into the new life that he must have felt he had earned. He was smooth mouthed which, in short-grass country, meant that he was past nine years old. Several of the range riders who knew him figured he was well into his 20s.

After a few years of light-duty wrangling, father decided to retire Old Chub, as we called him. The next spring, as soon as the grass was good on the range, we led him to our line gate, slipped his halter off and hazed him toward some horses that were grazing in a draw a short distance away. We figured him to be about 27 years old and he had certainly

earned a rest.

We didn’t see Old Chub all summer long and just presumed that he had drifted down to the Powder River for better feed and water plus the shade of the big cottonwood trees.

Fall in Powder River County arrives in a hurry with brisk breezes and scattered flakes of snow. Long Vs of northern ducks are seen every day heading south. The wild game in the area begins to move down to the river bottom to be close to food and shelter.

That year, about the third day of these winter warning signs, we noticed a speck in the distance moving toward us. The speck grew, and soon we recognized Old Chub on the trail, heading home. He seemed to be in a hurry as it appeared that he was trying to trot but, stove up as he was, it was more hobbling than trotting.

With his ears cocked forward and his tail raised, he hustled right up to the line gate and looked around, as if to make sure he was home. Then he lay down. In a few minutes,

he stretched out flat on his side, groaned a couple of times and died.

Old Chub had come home. He knew who his friends were, and he had spent his last ounce of strength to be with them. ■

H.D. Boyer was 18 when this photo was taken in 1930. See “Confessions of Red Meat Survivors,” page 76, for a story about him today.

