

A Hundred Years of Cowboy Stories

Willis Brunson looks back on his life, appreciating the dream he's lived.

Words by Rebecca Wells Dolph. Photos courtesy Brunson family.

Well, there wasn't no worst thing about being a rancher. I reckon I got to do just what I wanted to about all my life." In a world full of complaints, these words from Willis Brunson stand out like sunshine in a blizzard. His life's tale is over 100 years of cowboying, punctuated, of course, with a few horse stories—and told with a humble smile.

Born in 1923 in Midland, Texas, Willis is the fourth of six children of G.C. and Anna Brunson. When he was a year old, his granddad and uncle sold the family ranch and his dad bought a farm where they raised cotton until 1935. Willis learned to ride on that farm. Even as a kid he managed to get into scrapes horseback.

Willis' dad had traded a workhorse for a Shetland and a little saddle with a horn missing all its leather. His brother aggravated everyone about wanting to race a young horse, so Willis saddled an old ranch horse with that little saddle. His brother was out-running him when the saddle came untied and slipped under the horse. "I rode it to the ground and hit my hand on that horn and the leather was gone," Willis says. "I thought it had broke my arm, but it was just bruised."

In 1935, G.C. sold the farm and went to work for his half-brother on a ranch near Crosbyton, Texas. Willis began helping out on the ranch in high school. He was a young man of ambition, one in particular. He graduated in 1939 as class valedictorian. He remembers: "They told me I ought to be a lawyer and said, 'We might need some defending someday and you might even be president.' I said, 'I don't want to be president, I just want to be a cowboy.' I don't know if I ever made the grade as a good one but it's a hundred years later and I did it."

On the ranch in Crosbyton, Willis started at \$30 a month. When he got a \$10-a-month raise, he saved up until he could buy three pairs, heifers which had calved before they



*ABOVE: Willis made a hand on his own place in Corona, N.M., and for his neighbors until well into his 80s
BELOW LEFT: Willis rode the ranges of his Corona ranch until 2009. Here he is mounted on Peppy, a horse he rode to the very end. BELOW RIGHT: Six-year-old Willis Brunson pretends to be a western movie star near the family home outside Midland, Texas, circa 1929.*



were two years old. Later he bought nine more cows at the same price. By the time he left the ranch to join the Army in 1944, he had about a hundred head, which he was able to leave at Crosbyton until he returned. The Hereford herd he had when he quit ranching was from that line.

Willis and the boys on the ranch kept



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Nettie Ann and Willis Brunson with sons Ron, Allen and David about 1969. Willis says all the boys were as tall as he. ▶ The newlyweds in Camp Roberts, Calif., shortly before Willis shipped out for Europe in 1945. ▶ Willis' herd of Herefords at the ranch in Corona, N.M. This is the view from their family home. ▶ Willis and Nettie Ann with sons Ron, Allen and baby David at the ranch in Roswell, circa 1955. ▶ Willis receives a telegram that son Ron has been born. At the time, he was helping outfit troops arriving in the Austrian Alps for furlough with ski equipment in 1945. Fellow service-man John Polisky looks on.



themselves entertained with their horses. Willis tells of roping goats that came up from the creeks. One day he was riding a young horse with a hackamore while they enjoyed the sport. The goats had gone down to the water and the other boys to the house when Willis went to pick up his jacket. The pony got barn crazy and took off, jumping a five-foot corral gate that was on a slope. He came down a foot and a half deeper on the other side. Willis says: "I heard his front feet hit the top board. I never was much of one to get out of a wreck and I fell over in front of the saddle with my feet still in the stirrups. He was just running around the corral. I couldn't get my feet out of the stirrups and I couldn't get off. I finally got myself raised up and got back in the saddle."

Willis met Nettie Ann Moyers on a blind date in the spring of '44. She was a town girl but her dad was an old hillbilly who took his eight kids out to do farm work. That November Willis got his orders from the Army and one night, Nettie Ann said, "I wish we'd be



ABOVE: Three soldiers stand in a window of Hitler's home after the fall of the Nazis, Oct. 20, 1945. From left: Private Staley, Private Willis Brunson and Private Johnson. RIGHT: Willis and Nettie Ann dance at their grandson's wedding in 2000. They were married for 66 years, seven months, six days, and eight hours, but Nettie Ann never could teach Willis to jitterbug. BELOW: The Brunsons enjoyed entering the Corona Days Ranch Rodeo as a family in the early 2000s. One year they won an event and earned bridles as prizes. From left: grandson JW Brunson, son Ron, grandson John holding his daughter, Sage, son David, Willis, and son Allen.



married before you leave." She wasn't 18 yet, so her dad had to accompany them to the courthouse the following day. Four days later Willis left for the Army.

Nettie Ann used to wryly tell how, when they married, Willis told her, "You will not interfere with my roping." And, she said, "I never did." (Willis says he mainly calf roped, but he also got into wild cow milking.) He laughs as he explains that when they married, Nettie Ann hardly knew which end the bridle went on. He says: "I made her into a barrel racer. She ran barrels and she won enough to get my roping entry fees paid."

Oldest son, Ron, was born while Willis was overseas. When he got out of the service

he returned to the ranch at Crosbyton and became a camp man. The night his son Allen was born in 1948, there was a sandstorm. They left at one a.m. for the doctor, driving a '45 Chevrolet with a spotlight. Willis says: "That spotlight on the pavement, I couldn't see. [The sand blowing] was just like snow, you know." It took three days to clean the sand out of the house so Nettie Ann could come home. The youngest, David, came along in 1954 after they had moved to Roswell, N.M.

While living at the camp, Willis broke young horses. He tells about one of the most exciting: "Dad had a friend who had a horse he wanted me to ride. He was five years old

and hadn't been broke and he had been a stud.... He said he'd give me \$25 if I'd ride him for two weeks. I said, "Well, \$25 wouldn't buy me the magazines for while I was in the hospital." Willis finally agreed to ride the horse for his dad's sake. Seeing that the horse had been fooled with before, he called another ranch hand who was a saddle bronc rider and they harnessed the young one with an old ranch horse and loaded 1,200 pounds of hay into the wagon. After running the wagon around a six-section pasture, they saddled up. The horse still wanted to run a little and buck, but they got him ridden. Willis rode him every day for two weeks and when the owner came, he told him: "He lacks a whole lot of being a good gentle saddle horse." Telling the



story he adds: "He was kind of flat-footed and I trimmed his feet. They had wheat fields they'd just plowed up and I'd take him over there and lope him on the rocks. He appreciated the chance to get to stand still."

As the story goes, the owner had him shod and fed him oats and the hired hand was thrown multiple times. The horse was finally put in a bareback string. Willis saw him throw a guy six feet off the ground at a rodeo. He adds, "They said they called that old horse Caprock, but that isn't what I called him."

Reflecting on the best parts of his cowboy life, Willis says: "That ranch at Crosbyton was about my heaven on earth. It had running water and springs. A lot of the pastures didn't even have no well. It was 100 sections. We ran sheep, too. I liked the cows, but the sheep made money, you know. I enjoyed all my years cowboying except that last year when I got moved to headquarters and had to boss."

In 1950, Willis and family moved to a

ranch north of Roswell, a partnership with his dad. Describing the ranch, he says: "Some of it was state land; they had it permitted for 16 head to a section. I don't think we ever got it to support more than 10. The best year we had it rained about six inches, but it fell just right. They think it's dry here now but it was drier then. We sold in 1959. That's when I bought the ranch in Corona [N.M.]"

Before leaving the place north of Roswell, Willis was working for a neighbor doctoring screwworms. It gave him a chance to ride his young horses. One of the pastures was about 67 sections. He remembers how late one afternoon he was eight or 10 miles from home on a three-year-old horse and saw a calf needing doctoring. He tells the story: "I was running the calf down a draw. I missed and I was building another loop when I saw that hole. That horse had his head kind of pulled up and his front feet went in and over we went. I could have reached the rope but I didn't want the horse to get in that loop I was building. He got up and ran off. There was a windmill a mile and a half down there. He never did get scared and was grazing at that windmill. If I couldn't catch him it would be farther to walk home but I was already too far to walk, so I hung my leggings and went down there. And I caught him."

Willis took his heifers and a couple of horses from a stallion off the ranch at Crosbyton with him to his ranch near Corona, as well as a few sheep. That first winter in Corona was almost more than he bargained for, starting with frost on September 4. On December 11, it snowed about three feet. Willis only had a few bales of hay he had bought for the milk cow, and no four-wheel drive, so he loaded up one horse with cotton-

seed cake and rode another to lead him out to the old railroad dump. He fed the cake on top of the dump where the wind had blown the snow off. To care for the sheep, he and the boys saddled up and rode back and forth, throwing out snow as it fell into the trail they made. An old ewe who had raised dogies followed a cake sack through that trail to the

worked on windmills, and helped his neighbors work cattle into his 80s. He competed in Old Timer's Association ropings, winning a saddle at age 64. Willis and Nettie Ann moved to Artesia, N.M., in 2009 and Nettie Ann passed in 2010. The ranch now belongs to the boys, who have leased it out.

Willis kept two horses when he left the ranch. Granddaughter Judy's husband took them to their ranch near Duncan, N.M., so Willis could help brand or move calves until, he says, "I got to where they were going to have me carry the nut bucket." Still, living next door to son David's leather and boot shop keeps Willis up and about. Friends keep him supplied with reading material and RFD TV keeps him in the rodeo loop. His other two sons live in Texas and he has a couple of grandsons who can't shake the cowboy gene.

Asked about his good health, Willis says that he drank a lot of milk. Far from complaining, he just laughs when he says, "I got a few problems now, but a guy that makes 100 years has got to have problems of some sort."

Willis' memory is clear. One friend comments, "We know his stories are true because they are always the same." A good listener realizes he hasn't forgotten the hard times, but as he says, "I thought there was some hard times but I didn't know how much fun I was having." Here in the boot shop, there is always truth, always a bright side—and always one more horse to remember. ■

Rebecca Wells Dolph is a typical ranch wife and mother who lives in Claunch, N.M. She also homeschools two little daughters and "cowboys" every chance she gets.



ABOVE: Willis and great-grandkids at his 100th birthday party. BELOW, LEFT TO RIGHT: Willis enjoyed competing in old-timer's rodeos. This calf roping photo was taken sometime after 1970. Note that Willis is flipping the rope over his horse's head; this was in the days before they got off on the wrong side. ► Willis holds the saddle he won calf roping in Spur, Texas, in 1951. He won another in 1987. ► Willis in David's boot shop, where he can be found on most days.



safety of the barn. That snow lasted two weeks and the roads stayed muddy long enough that Willis had a load of hay unloaded at the highway and drove down the dirt on frozen mornings to get it to his house. Ninety-six inches of snow fell that year.

Hereford cows and horses stayed with the Brunson family on the Corona ranch, though Willis sold off the sheep because the coyotes were bad. Willis rode outside horses for years,