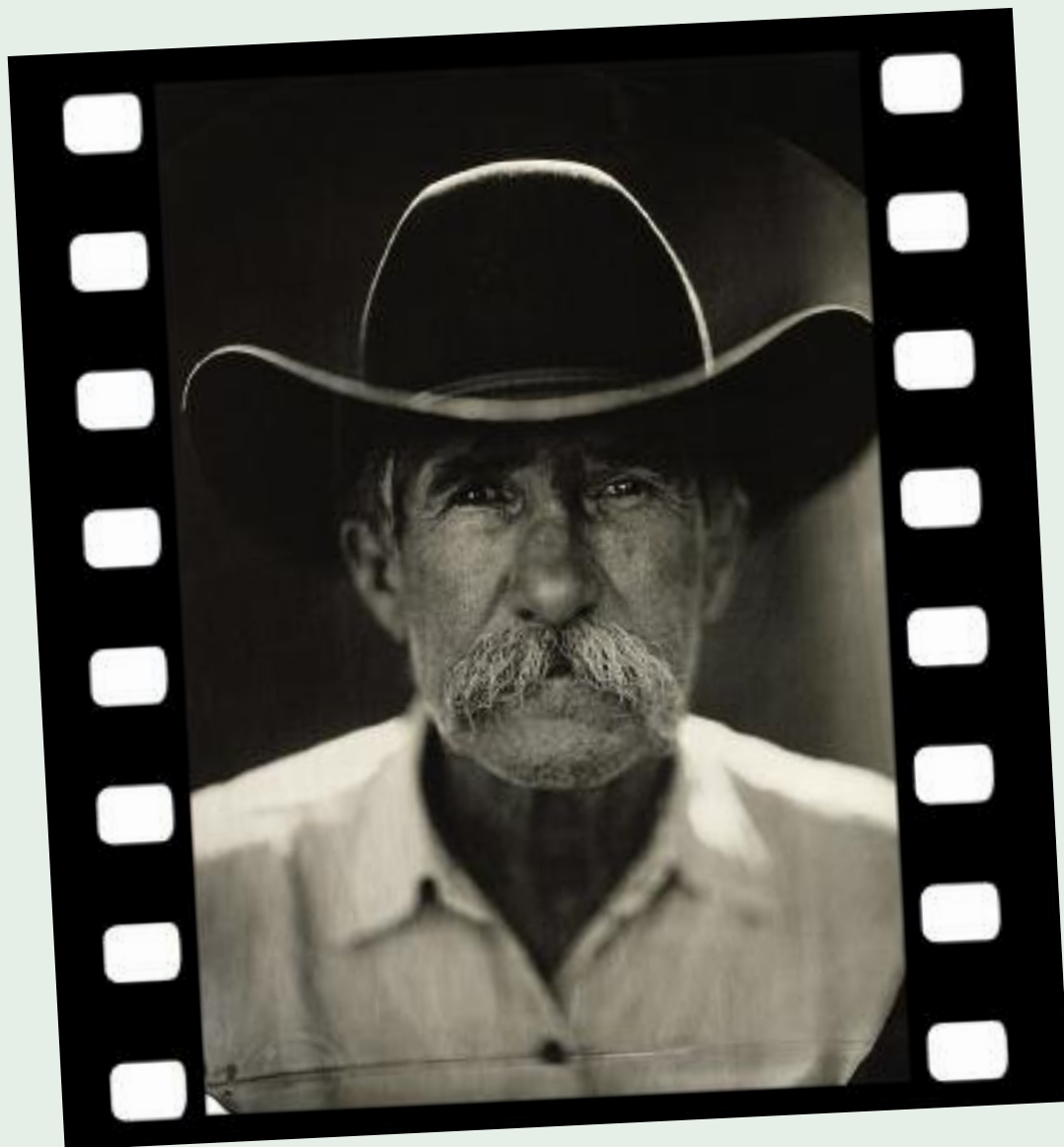


Portrait of the West



joel nelson Words and photo by robb kendrick

I had heard that Joel Nelson is a legendary horse trainer, an internationally renowned poet, and an all-around great cowboy. Sometimes when there's such a big buildup, you prepare yourself for someone with a big ego. That's not who I found.

I met Joel back in Alpine while photographing some of the big ranches in West Texas. I discovered that he has worked on the King Ranch and the o6. He's broken horses on the Parker Ranch in Hawaii. He understands equines. He knows what bovines need.

Joel began writing when he served with the 101st Airborne division in Vietnam. He is a serious reciter of traditional and free-verse poetry. His own work is among the best being written today. He is a favorite at gatherings of cowboy poets around the world and describes his own poetry as being "the distilled product of the life I have led." His poem, "Breaker in the Pen," earned a Grammy nomination in the spoken word category. He was AWA male poet of the year in 2002.

At ranching and writing, Joel Nelson is a natural. He and his wife Sylvia manage the Anchor Ranch near Alpine where they raise Corriente cattle. His daughter Carla works for USDA. His son-in-law is a cowboy. His grandchildren are accomplished redneck kids.

Even with a thousand accolades, Joel Nelson does not wear that expected big ego. He is a kind and gracious, articulate man of gentle words, with an interest in others and love for life. He is more impressive in real life than all the writeups about him could ever express. I am lucky to have spent time with Joel. ■

This photo is from a series of tintypes, many of which are included in Robb Kendrick's "Still," published by University of Texas Press. Signed copies are available at www.robbkendrick.com. Unsigned copies available at <http://www.utexas.edu/utpress/books/kensti.html> or www.AMAZON.com. To hear audio recordings and interviews go to: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=18592716>.