

Have Horse, Will Travel

The trials and miles of a hired man. By Marjorie Haun

“When the Lord made a cowboy, He promised him three things: one good woman, one good horse, and one good dog.”—Alan Hatch

Tall, slender limbed and barrel chested, he was built for a life on horseback. Closing in on 80 years of age, Alan Bonneau Hatch has been a hired man all his life. He’s worked on ranches from Kansas to California, with most of his cumulative—though not stationary—years with members of the Redd family in southern Utah and western Colorado. With nary an excess ounce on his lanky frame, this long-legged cowboy still puts in 10 hours a day on horseback when herding cows or gathering strays, and the word “retirement” never escapes his lips.

Alan says: “I first wanted to be a cowboy when I was about four. I would sit under my mother’s ironing board where she had a woodstove for heating the iron and she would sing ‘Little Joe the Wrangler’ to me. That story just got to me and I wanted to be a cowboy ever since.”

Roots and Uproots

Alan’s great-great-grandfather Ira Hatch was a Mormon missionary and interpreter for the southern tribes. He spoke several Native American dialects and was married to a half-Paiute/half-Navajo woman named Sarah Marahboots. His dash of Indian blood may explain the nut-brown tan that ends just above his eyebrows and borders a pale forehead.

In 1943, Alan was born in Embudo, N.M., which no longer exists but at the time was an outpost with one hospital and little else. George and Mary (Foster) Hatch lived on a small ranch in nearby Regina, which was located on the edge of the Jicarillo Apache Reservation. George also ran a general store and worked as a building contractor while Mary raised seven children. Alan was the youngest.

“At the time I was born, my mother’s brother, Bonneau Foster, was in a Japanese POW camp,” he says. “Mother didn’t know whether he was ever coming back, so she gave me his name.”

Living in a rough, remote country where diversions were few, Alan endured early scrapes with grownup hazards. He explains:



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“When I was six, I had two cousins who poured whiskey down me, whiskey they got out of the back seat of my dad’s truck. They just wanted to see what a person looks like drunk. I don’t think I got drunk, but I do remember getting awful sick.”

He also earned his traveling legs early on. After a few years in Regina, the cattle ranch was sold to Alan’s uncle Bonneau who had survived his months as a prisoner of the Japanese, and the family moved to Blue Water, N.M., to seek better schooling for the children. His father always liked having a business, so he opened a commissary and owned a truck he used to take food to Navajo laborers in the carrot fields.

When he was 10, Alan’s family pulled up roots and moved to Green River, Utah, where his dad opened a store called Hatch Merc. After a short time, they moved back to Regina and opened another store. By this time, Alan was ready to get serious about pursuing his cowboy dream, so he started chasing cows on his uncle’s ranch.

One Good Woman

“When I went back to New Mexico, I was in

my dad’s store one day when a young lady whose family I knew walked in the door,” says Alan. “She was so dad-gummed pretty I could hardly stand it.” Dianne Schultz was a few years younger than Alan, and loved his “manliness.” Their courtship was hasty. Alan says, “There wasn’t much to do out where we lived so we thought we might as well get married.”

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After a month of courting and the wedding, the couple set out for the familiar turf of Green River. In a civilian capacity, Alan worked as a security guard and propellant handler at the Green River Launch Complex, a subinstallation of White Sands Missile Base.

Around 1968 when Vess, their first child, was a year old, they moved back to New Mexico to help George Hatch with the trading post he operated on the Navajo Reservation. Throughout his multitudinous travels and profusion of stints, Alan was always looking for ranch jobs. At this juncture in his story, you can see Alan had earned his “will travel” credentials, but the “have horse” part was somewhat elusive.

After leaving New Mexico, Alan worked as a hand through the early 1970s on small

ranches in New Mexico, Utah and Colorado. Dianne was always at his side, along with two baby girls, Tava and Dennette. Alan moved to Ignacio, Colo., to work at his brother's trading post, and then took a job skinning logs at a sawmill in Bayfield, Colo. He says: "It was okay until we had a winter where it snowed eight feet. We couldn't work and I had three kids that I couldn't feed."

He finally put an ad in the *Western Livestock Journal* and immediately got 50 inquiries. "I took a job in Ulysses, Kansas, where I worked for a farmer-feeder." In a twist of fate, Alan discovered that Hardy and Preston "Pep" Redd—of the Utah Redds—were building a feedlot in Hugoton, Kan., and he wound up working there, first as a pen rider and then as cattle superintendent, for eight years. During that time, twin boys Lance and Rusty arrived, giving Alan and Dianne a total of three sons and two daughters.

In 1975, the family settled into a single-wide trailer that burned to the ground just six weeks later. Fortunately, the three older children were in school at the time. "A little shed in back of the trailer caught, and it just spread like wildfire," says Alan. "Dianne had on cutoff shorts and a tank top and the twins had diapers and T-shirts, and that's all we had left." Sustained by the kindness of locals and friends, Alan stayed on in Kansas until 1980, then moved to La Sal, Utah, where he worked as a ranch hand for Hardy Redd.

From there Alan hired on with Paul Redd, Hardy's younger brother, 20 miles to the east in Paradox, Colo., where he took care of their registered cattle herd.

"We raised the kids on the ranch," Alan says. The Hatch sons and daughters were equals while working on the ranch. "They could all ride horses, and rope calves, and ride heat and anything that was required. Then they would help me get the cows to the mountain." Dianne was full-time mom and full-time cowboy wife. She also rode horseback while working cows, helped with inseminations and kept the books.

For 16 years, Alan and his family summured with the cattle in a cabin along Two-Mile Creek in the mountains north of La Sal. When the kids returned to school and Dianne

went back to their permanent home, Alan stayed at the cabin until bringing the cows down in the fall.

"They were all good hands and they enjoyed life on the ranch," says Alan. Vess, Tava, Denette, Lance and Dusty never came



FROM ABOVE: Alan faces down an uncooperative heifer. ▶ Less than a week following a heart attack and surgical procedure, Alan rejoins fellow ranch hand, Gayla Hart, to work at the corrals in La Sal. ▶ Alan works cows in the chutes for Redd Ranches. OPPOSITE: Kevin Costner's production company hired Alan to keep cows from invading the set of the four-part western series "Horizon."



back to the ranch after they got a taste of other things, but they treasured life lessons learned at the hand of their cowboy dad.

One Good Horse and One Good Dog

The horse gospel according to Alan states: "A horse needs to be agile with a good brain and really good conformation. I personally like a pretty good-sized horse."

One reason Alan will never retire is

because local ranchers won't let him. He's on call year-round. "I get sent to find the strays and a lot of times I have to track them. Sometimes I have to trail them a long way to get them off the mountain. I spend a lot of time in the saddle." At age 79, Alan often helps much younger cowboys find cows in craggy, steep mountain country. "They don't want to get off the road because it's too rough or they fear they might get lost."

Cowboying requires a skill set that is not easily mastered, but Alan has done it all including managing sizable horse herds and raising and breaking quarter horses for himself and his employers. As for training cow dogs, he says, "I'm like that old cattle buyer, Dick Davis, who says, 'Some dogs are just natural.'" Nevertheless, Alan has one good dog with him on the trail at all times and prefers border collies and Australian shepherds. His experiences on the trail have substantiated the importance of one good horse and one good dog.

In 1990, Alan and Tom Garcia, who was older than Alan and in poor health, trailered their horses to Disappointment Valley—a place Tom knew but was new to Alan—to get some cattle that had wandered.

"We drove our horses down into Sylvie's Pocket where we found a bunch of our cows," Alan says. "We saddled up our horses and pushed the cows through five miles of winding canyons. As we were going back to the truck, we found another 15 head and so we gathered those and took them out.

"Though Tom claimed to know the area, it was getting dark and we seemed to be going a very long way. We turned to go back and couldn't find the trail. It was rough. We jumped canyons and everything else. By this time Tom was really feeling bad. We came on a nice little pocket in

the canyon, a place that I call a 'Louis L'Amour camp.' I unsaddled the horses and told Tom to lay down and rest. I spent the night keeping a fire going. I told Tom, 'We're awful close to that truck but I just don't know where it is.' It was so dark—the darkest night I can ever remember. Everyone thought we were lost, so they had a plane out looking for us." He got up in the morning and saddled the horses, and after a lot more riding they



COURTESY DIANNE HATCH

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FROM TOP: Alan monitors cows with his favorite sorrel, Duke. ▶ Close to 80, Alan often spends 10 hours a day on the back of a horse. ▶ Alan and Dianne's wedding day. It's the only photo that survived the fire in Kansas. ▶ The couple, 50 years later.

The Family That Loves Best Loses Hardest
Brushes with mortality are part of a cowboy's job description, but some close calls are closer than others. "A year and a half ago I was riding my big sorrel. You can't hardly control him and my shoulders were hurting, but I just thought it was from working that horse." That evening, Alan took some painkillers but otherwise dismissed the pain. He tracked strays in Dry Valley the next day, and that night the pain turned into agony. Dianne drove him to the hospital in Moab where it became clear he was suffering a heart attack. He was life-flighted to the University of Utah Hospital where a stent was inserted to open up an artery and he was released. Less than a week later he was back in the corrals with cows.

With five children and 16 grandchildren, all successful in their own pursuits and families, there is bound to be loss. Oldest son, Vess, contracted COVID and then pneumonia. A big man surrounded by his loving family, he fought for his life but succumbed at the age of 55. Alan and Dianne's suffering is etched in their faces. Alan says, "We'll never get over it."

Riding for the Brand

The cowboy gospel according to Alan says if you set out to be a cowboy you better be serious and you better do it right. "I've never worked for anybody anywhere that I didn't ride for the brand. You don't worry about what your neighbors think; you ride for that guy. Everything you do is with their interests in mind. They own the ranch. Don't mess around; just do a good job for the man you're working for."

Alan and Dianne always dreamed of having their own ranch, but were never able to cobble together the financing. Alan says: "Dianne did a beautiful job of making ends meet when we were raising the kids and I was working for terrible wages on the ranch. One thing that saved us was that our kids got paid for the work they did and they paid for their own clothes and had money to get them through winter." Upon reflection, he says, "I kind of feel sorry for the fact that we couldn't give them everything, but as far as the lifestyle and teaching the meaning of work and the meaning of life, I don't think you could have a better place in the world for raising kids than on a ranch."

Despite his rugged exterior and tough-going career, Alan Hatch is a shy, unassuming man. His personal integrity, faith, love and loyalty were forged by his pursuit of a dream. He will be a hired man to the end. ■

found the truck.

"But looking back, although I was riding a colt, every time we passed a certain spot that colt would try to turn and my dog would try to turn, and I told Tom, 'This might be the trail.' And Tom said, 'You're riding a colt; that horse don't know nothin'.' I said, 'My horse and my dog want to go that way.' As it turned out, that little spot led to the trail. If I would have listened to my horse and my dog, we would have been back to the truck in an hour."

Still traveling for work, in 1995 Alan took a job as a hand on a California ranch in the mountains between Los Angeles and the Mojave Desert. He managed a cowherd and 1,000 head of steers that summered in the leased pastures. When he arrived there were 400 steers that needed to be brought down.

"The folks who owned the ranch said, 'We'll give you the names of 15 or 20 people who will help get those steers down to the bottom end.' I said, 'Oh, I don't think I need the help.' And they insisted, 'No, you can't get them down by yourself.' And I said, 'I betcha I can get them down with my horse and my dog.' And I did, without a hitch."

The California ranch was in a beautiful setting, but Alan and Dianne missed their

family. "When we got the last steers on the truck, our pickup was already loaded with our stuff and we put our horses in the trailer and came home." Still, home is where he hangs his hat, and Alan subsequently hired on with ranches in Ruby Valley, Nev., and Mack and Delta, Colo.

Singing Cowboy

There are authentic singing cowboys in the world and Alan is one of them. His instruments are the guitar and a sonorant tenor voice, embellished by a slight Utah twang.

"I've been playing the guitar since I was 12 years old. My dad played the fiddle and taught me some chords, and we played at all the dances wherever we happened to be."

From the time he was a teenager he has played in country music combos. He took lead vocals and played acoustic or electric guitar, depending on the audience. Once he reached legal age, he played in honky-tonks from Green River, Utah, to Cortez, Colo.

"We never got paid money for playing, but we got free beer."

No longer haunting the honky-tonks, Alan joins his sons and a handful of grandkids, all of whom play guitars, for living-room jam sessions.