



Remembering Jesse

Always living the dream.

By Bill Jones

What is the definition of cowboy? Is a cattle rancher a cowboy? Is a professional bull rider a cowboy? How about a guy who spends his days horseback riding pens at a feedlot? Or perhaps a dude wrangler, helping pampered and overweight guests mount sleepy-eyed geldings at a posh southern Arizona resort is the closest we come to the modern cowboy hero.

In our large cities, thousands of young and not-so-young professionals slide their new western boots across the floors in line-dancing emporiums. Nashville country singers, from their sprayed-hair heads to their \$2,000 boots, adorn themselves with every imaginable piece of western gear and clothing. It is confusing, and sometimes a guy (or gal) even has a tendency to want to gag on his Copenhagen.

Maybe “cowboy” really is just a state of mind. Certainly, the legions of cowboy “wannabes” (me included) like the philosophical twist to this particular definition. Others, the purists and historians, maintain there hasn’t been a real cowboy in this country in over 100 years. One thing is for sure. The American cowboy, in all his mythic and legendary glory, is the most recognizable figure in the world. The Marlboro Man is distinctly American. (This particular advertising

motif, used by Phillip Morris to push tobacco for decades, is the most successful campaign in history. Stetson is the second-most-recognized brand name ever. Coca Cola is first.)

Hollywood is probably the most significant factor in the romanticizing of the cowboy figure. Taking a cue from the hugely popular and successful dime novels of the previous century, early filmmakers took the cowboy theme and ran with it. They are still running.

Several years ago, while guiding some



Eastern folk horseback through the rugged and beautiful Wind River Range, I had a conversation with a fairly well-known Hollywood film producer. “The Western,” he intoned soberly, “is for all practical purposes an over-worked theme. It is dead.” This was right before “Dances With Wolves” was released.

Later “Lonesome Dove,” one of the most successful miniseries in the history of the boob tube, proved Mr. Hollywood Producer wrong again.

Then there was Clint Eastwood’s “The Unforgiven”—an Academy Award-winning Western with a different twist, but a Western nonetheless. I could go on. (Funny, I haven’t heard much lately from aforementioned Hollywood guy. Apart from one really strange and boring movie about dolphins, he kind of dropped from sight. Guess he should have taken my dude-wrangler advice and stuck with Westerns.)

Hollyweird will never quit making Westerns, if for the simple reason that there is too much good stuff there for filmmakers to exploit. Horses, stagecoaches, spurs, guns, Native Americans, epic conflicts and—you guessed it—cowboys. Even the dream makers would have difficulty creating an entertaining movie about a heroic figure with a contemporary, common occupation—say a guy who wrestles with a computer screen all day. Other than maybe a “High Noon” showdown with carpal tunnel syndrome—that wrist thing—the possibilities are somewhat limited.

A former teacher friend of mine argues the whole cowboy phenomenon is a result of



FROM LEFT: Sandy and Jesse. ▶ Jesse branding in California in 1999. ▶ Jesse and Little Jesse ride towards work. AT TOP: Jesse moves some cattle into the pen for branding.

the overactive imaginations of fantasizing “wannabes.” The West, according to him, is an overly glorified interpretation of events by later generations of folks bored and disillusioned by the technological age. In other words, it never was. At least not as we like to think.

“Cowboying was hot, nasty, low-paid work,” he says, “and historically the guys doing it would most likely rather been doing anything else. It was a day-laborer, minimum-wage type job that has been romanticized beyond belief. The whole thing makes me sick. The real cowboys are dead. All these guys now are a bunch of phonies.”

Whew...talk about fightin’ words! This guy needs a hot branding iron applied to sensitive areas of his anatomy.

But it is hard to argue with a guy who is half-right. Cowboying traditionally was, and still is hot, dirty, nasty work at times, with long hours, rank horses, bad food, and insufficient pay. Nobody is arguing that, and what few cowboy jobs are left haven’t changed much in over 100 years. But it is not about the money. And even my non-cowboy friend, obnoxious as he can be, grudgingly admits the cowboy culture is awash with an intangible thing called “values.”

What is a cowboy? Depends on your



point of view, I guess. It is, by almost anyone’s definition, a dying breed. Waddie Mitchell, a Nevada buckaroo who is now a professional entertainer, says, “I spent a lifetime learning skills with which I can no longer make a decent living.” Not much demand for “real” cowboys these days. The good jobs go to chemical engineers, geologists, computer nerds and investment bankers. Seldom in the classified ads do you read of an employer needing someone “skilled with a 50-foot reata. Farrier work required.” It is all agri-business now—like it or leave it.

Even in the livestock trade papers, semi-cowboy jobs are described with qualifiers, things like “must have knowledge of pivot irrigation systems.” And, more common, “must have no objection to riding a four-



PHOTOS COURTESY SMITH FAMILY

This photo was taken on Jesse’s 80th birthday on Aug. 20, 2021. Top row: Jesse and his stepson Kevin Small. Middle row: Raymond Castaneda (who was like Jesse and Sandy’s son) and daughter Laura Smith. Front row: Little Jesse and daughter Teresa Marichech.

wheeler.” It is enough to make a real cowboy—whatever definition you use—want to hang up his Garcia spurs and start selling life insurance with a multilevel marketing scam. The few cowboys who are left, anyway. Will James, God rest his cowboy soul, mercifully died early enough to be spared such obscene indignities.

The American cowboy is the most recognizable figure in the world. Some say this somewhat mythical figure is a dying breed. The good news is, there are a few left scattered across Wyoming, Nevada, Oregon, Washington, California, Hawaii (Yes, *Hawaii*—this is not a misprint!), and a host of unlikely places across the United States and Canada. They don’t get to town too much and you can’t see ’em from the road. Most work for outfits so far back in the sticks the magpies fly in their mail. But they are still there. And they are doing the same things cowboys have been doing for 150 years—taking care of cattle horseback that belong to someone else.

Jesse Smith of Porterville, Calif., is one of them. Age 56, he is a day work cowboy. With the exception of a couple of years in the Army and a few months fishing in Alaska, it is all he has ever done. Jesse never knew his father. One morning six months before Jesse was born, his dad’s horse came trotting back to the ranch riderless. Jesse’s mother immediately went looking for her missing husband. She found him lifeless on a pile of rocks and they never found out what really happened.

Jesse’s mother moved to town, Glennville, and Jesse grew up there, but he always wanted to be a cowboy. Summers and every other chance he got he worked for local ranches but it wasn’t enough to satisfy his dream. At the wise old age of 15, Jesse left school and got hired by an outfitter. They packed dudes and hunters deep into California’s Sierra Nevada mountains. To a kid with a head full of cowboy myth and legend, it was a wonderful life. If dreams die hard, this particular one was not only alive, but in full gallop.

Like a lot of ranch-raised kids, Jesse discovered early that he had an easy way with horses and a natural ability with all livestock. Later he went to work for some of the historic old California ranches and honed his cowboy skills. Much of his youth was spent in isolated cow camps, listening to stories of old-time cowboys. He was fascinated. In fact, he transformed some of the stories into poetry, writing his first poem when he was 16. It was the beginning of a lifelong interest that years later moved him down some unusual trails. Jesse, for most of his 56 years, has done nothing but cowboy. And since the days when he pulled a pack string into the High Sierra, he has always written poems.

At age 18, Jesse joined the Army and volunteered for the paratroopers. “It seemed like a good idea at the time,” Jesse says, “and I got to travel around a little. In Okinawa, I was the only American soldier to actually have credit at a local bar. I got to know a Japanese family



SIERRA NEVADA PHOTO © LARRY ANGLIER

High Sierra

By Jesse Smith

*Have you ever been up in the high country?
Drunk from crystal-clear springs?
Woke up in the mornin'
To hear a songbird as he sings?*

*Have you ever seen native trout
Jump out of lakes so crystal clear,
Or seen a flock of geese fly overhead,
And the liquid flight of deer?*

*Seen the mighty hawk and eagle
As over their domain they fly?
Caught the smell of good camp coffee
And bacon as it fries?*

*Caught the scent of pine and cedar,
Manzanita and redwood trees,
The velvet touch of meadow clover,
The gentle whisper of the breeze?*

*Or caught the power of a summer storm
When lightnin' streaks across the sky?
It'll bring your heart up to your throat,
Up in those mountains high.*

*Or seen the mirror-smooth mountain lakes
Where you can look to depths untold?
In the fall, the quakin' aspens
Will shed their leaves of red and gold.*

*Now if you have not seen all these things
I've just described to you,
Then I pray some day you'll get your chance,
Before your life on earth is through.*

*But if you have seen all these things,
And across the mountain paths you've trod,
Then, pardner, you've been truly blessed
To have stood right at the throne of God.*

and they owned a little place...we kind of liked one another."

In 1962, Jesse took his discharge and headed back to California where, he says, "Men are men—and so are about half the women!" He talked his way onto a freighter as a crewman going to Alaska, actually steering the big ship much of the time, although, he admits, "I didn't have any idea in hell what I was doing." Once he got to Alaska, he hired out on a commercial fishing boat and spent several months puking into the Pacific. Although Jesse says Alaska is one of the most beautiful places he has ever seen, there aren't many cowboys there. With a few regrets, he headed back to California.

For the next several years Jesse was a day work cowboy at ranches around Porterville. He got married, had some kids, and tried to accumulate a few cows of his own. He rodeoed some, but never made anything but some great friends and bittersweet memories. Eventually he started announcing rodeos and was able to buy a small place of his own. He was still doing day work. And he was still writing poems.

In 1985, a folklorist by the name of Hal Cannon organized the first National Cowboy Poetry Gathering in Elko, Nev. He contacted Jesse Smith and invited him to come recite. Jesse says he has "no idea how Hal Cannon found me. I never recited my poetry to anybody but family and friends. I have some tapes of that first gathering. I was plumb scared to death. I sounded like Mickey Mouse impersonating an auctioneer."

Soon Jesse was reciting his poetry, sprinkled with a liberal dose of outrageous cowboy humor, to audiences all over the United States. He was the featured cowboy poet on a 28-day U.S. tour sponsored by the National Council for the Arts. Several of his poems have been published in major cowboy poetry anthologies. Recently he appeared at the Red Lion Casino in Elko, Nev. "It's unbelievable, really," Jesse remarks. "I sometimes make more in one night than a whole month of cowboyin'. This poetry thing has come farther than my wildest dreams. I have been to Philadelphia, Boston, New York. I enjoy it and try to have fun. If I ain't havin' fun, I start lookin' for the exit."

Most all major wrecks, cowboys will tell you, happen when you least expect it. In 1991, Jesse and his wife, Sandy, lost a 20-year-old

daughter in an automobile accident. "It was tough," Jesse reflects, "the worst thing we have been through yet." A couple of years later, Jesse and Sandy, still struggling with the death of their daughter, decided to adopt a new baby. Jesse says, "We were lucky enough to get a little feller who was just a few hours old."

Jesse Smith Jr., now almost three years old, has changed the lives of Jesse and Sandy—and provided a pot load of joy along the way. "It's been a long time since there has been a baby around the house," Jesse says, "and I forgot how much fun they can be." (One of Jesse's young grandsons, noting the baby's brown skin and dark eyes, asked Jesse, "Will he speak English when he gets grown up?")



FROM LEFT: Real buckaroos and poets Ross Knox and Waddie Mitchell joke backstage with the group calling themselves *The Cardiac Cowboys*. The ones with the almost-matching outfits are Sunny Hancock, Jesse Smith and the survivor Chris Isaacs. Their shows were hilarious!

"I hope so," Jesse replied, "'cause I can't speak a word of Filipino.")

Jesse is still doing day work. His cowherd has grown to about 85 momma cows and he and Sandy are looking to buy a bigger place near the Oregon border. Jesse Junior is doing great and talking like a Philadelphia lawyer—in English. Life, thanks mainly to Jesse Smith Jr., is once again full of promise and hope.

Two years ago, Jesse did a little show in Farmington, N.M.

"After the show," Jesse says, "a couple who ran a local motel invited us out to their place for pizza and beer. A few of us went out, sat around, did some poems. It was very laid-back but the couple, Ken and Marie, were awful nice. Marie especially liked a poem from Northern California. It's about the Sierra Nevada, where I spent a lot of time as a kid."

Several months later, Ken called him because Marie was dying of cancer and he wanted those cowboys to come back and perform some poems for Marie. "Ken said he didn't care what it cost, but to please come. Well, we weren't going to charge him nothin', but after the arrangements to go a big snowstorm prevented us from making the trip." Marie died before they could get there.

"Marie was cremated and Ken scattered her ashes along a ridge in the Sierra Nevada. That, I guess, is the biggest honor I have ever had. And the strange part about it is...well, Marie had never ever seen the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Never been there in her life."

Marie had never been to the Sierra Neva-

da, but that doesn't mean she had never seen them. She saw them all right, clear and bright as a summer's day, through Jesse Smith's poem. ■

Bill Jones wrote the above article almost 30 years ago for a Wyoming newspaper. Jesse Smith, age 80, crossed the Great Divide in 2021 from COVID complications. Jesse Junior, now 29, is an oil-field mechanic. A daughter, Teresa, is a respiratory therapist. Another son, Kevin, owns an oil-field construction company. Sandy, Jesse's wife of over 40 years, relates that during the last week of his life Jesse expressed how proud he was that all his kids had grown into honest, hardworking and successful adults. "What more," he asked, "could any father want?" Jesse Smith will always be a part of the cowboy legacy and, like him, there are still a few left. And for the most part, you still can't see 'em from the road.

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