

Cowboy Uncles

I was a practice offspring for two bachelors.

By Vess Quinlan

My grandfather and all four of my mother's brothers were cowboys, not ranchers, but cowboys who spent their lives taking care of someone else's cows for wages. Every spring from the time I was old enough to walk, either Dell (my mother's oldest brother) or Wayne (the one just older than she) would take me for the summer on whatever ranch they were working on. Usually they would split my summer more or less equally between them. Both were married, but childless. I suppose I served as practice offspring just in case they should eventually have children of their own. Neither ever did, but both adopted children later in their marriages.

I was 10 years old, and the summer of 1951 was special because both uncles were working for a Goodland, Kansas, businessman named John Cogswell who owned several ranches. Dell was taking care of the steer deal just out of Sharon Springs, and Wayne was running the cow and calf deal north and east of the Sharon Springs outfit.

There was no electricity at the Sharon Springs place. A windmill pumped water into a tank on a tower high enough to get water in the house. There was a wind charger that kept open-topped batteries under the water tank charged so we had limited electricity when the wind blew enough to keep the batteries charged. There was no telephone, and no television to consume electricity. We did have a static-prone Philco radio so we could listen after dark to XERF Ciudad Acuna, Coahuila, Mexico.

One of my chores as a child was to get water out of the stock tank and walk across the planks over the batteries and keep them full of water. There was a propane refrigerator, a wood cook stove, and a big coal stove for heat. My aunt Helen had a Maytag Model 92 wringer washing machine powered by a little gas motor that was almost wore out and hard to start. A mechanic from Mr. Cogswell's farm was at the ranch one day when I was trying to get the cranky little motor started. He said the motor lacked compression and showed me how to take the spark plug out and squirt a little oil on top of the piston to seal the piston

rings and the little motor started right up. I never did tell Helen the secret, received much praise for my mechanical ability, and became indispensable on wash day.

Dell started colts by teaching them to lead by snubbing them to a big black horse called Tony. Since I was available, Dell must have figured it was a good idea to teach me and the

“Everyone knows that you can make a cowboy out of pretty near anything, but you can't make hardly anything out of a cowboy.”



FROM LEFT: My uncle Wayne Aldred, Grandpa Walter Aldred, and Wayne's cousin Merle Petry. All good cowboys.

colt at the same time. He would put a heavy halter and a work bridle on the colt with a snaffle bit. Then saddle him with my aunt's saddle he had fitted with wooden stirrups blocked so I could only get my foot part of the way in the stirrup. He would snub the colt up close and drag him around the corral until the horse found out it was easier to follow than fight. Then have me crawl across Tony behind Dell and set down in the saddle on the colt.

My job was to use the rein hooked into the snaffle bit and looped over the horse's neck so I could not panic and drop a rein to cue the colt. When Dell tipped his head left, I was to cue the colt left. If he did not

respond, Dell would jerk him left. When Dell tipped his head right, I was to cue the colt right, and if he didn't respond Dell would crowd him right. When Dell tipped his head back, I was to cue the colt to stop. If the colt ignored my cue and tried to walk past Tony, Dell would slap him in the face with a pair of leather gloves.

The worst would come when sooner or later Dell would see a steer that needed to be roped and doctored. He would hand me the snub rope and say: "Here, hold this. I'll be right back." I learned not to say, "But what if he starts bucking?" Because Dell would say, "Well, I'd ride him till he quits. The ground looks pretty hard here." If I said, "But what if he runs off?" Dell would say, "Hell, he can't outrun old Tony here. I will catch you before you get to town."

I do not know if the colt was as scared and traumatized by this whole operation as I was, but I do know that when Dell ran one of the big colts in to buddy up with Tony, that in a few days I would be setting, stiff with fear on the back of another bronco colt.

I hated helping Helen pull weeds in the garden but began hoping against hope that she would draft me for garden duty on colt snubbing day, but it never happened.

The fall of 1951 found me in a polio quarantine ward with hundreds of other kids. My uncles brought me Will James and Andy Adams books, red and white striped J.R. Williams cowboy cartoon books. My grandmother brought me her box of cowboy poems cut out of many years of livestock journals.

When my grandfather saw the collection of cowboy stories, cowboy cartoons, and cowboy poems, he said, "You have ruined this boy putting all that cowboy stuff in his head. You will never get it out and everyone knows that you can make a cowboy out of pretty near anything, but you can't make hardly anything out of a cowboy."

My grandfather may have had a point, but it was really the huge shot of self esteem that came from coming in at sundown on a colt stepping in Tony's tracks and responding to my every cue that caused me to whisper, "Well, old kid, you may have started the day scared silly, but you did not cry or run away."

That and maybe making a hand for my aunt learning how to start the cranky little Maytag motor on wash day was what really ruined this boy. ■

Vess Quinlan, former rancher, farmer, trucker and cowboy poet, lives in Florence, Colo.