

Sunday, August 19, 2007
A Bell Ranch Cowboy

by Lee Pitts

I was once asked what was my favorite of the stories I've written. My answer surprised even me. It was an essay I wrote a long time ago in an attempt to prove I could write to an editor who couldn't. I think all of three people read the story. "A Branding On The Bell" is memorable to me, not because of the words I wrote, but because of the time I spent heel-squattin' around a fire, sleeping on the ground branding calves with the cowboys on the Bell Ranch. Those two days and nights were about the best I've ever spent on this spinning orb of ours.

If you care at all about cows and cowboys then you've heard of the Bell Ranch. Once over a million acres, and still sizable, the Bell is named after a ding-dong-shaped mesa on the ranch. William Noble Lane was a Chicago industrialist who built a Fortune 1000 company and bought the Bell in 1969 because he thought that land represented wealth. When he died in an automobile accident on the ranch he left the Bell in a trust insuring, he thought, that a Lane would own the ranch for at least 120 years.

My invite to the ranch came from a lanky, mustached cowboy who one would surmise, at first glance, was making day wages. In reality he was the immensely likable son of Bill Lane. Jeffrey could have had a high roller's life back in Chicago but he chose instead to earn his spurs amongst the most critical crowd there is on earth: cowboys.

There's never been any room for crybabies or sissies on the Bell, where it takes 42 acres to support a cow and a few beans andatoes twice a day to support a cowboy. I had the opportunity to ride with 18 men, aged 13 to 72, on the Spring roundup, a tradition that has gone on uninterrupted on the Bell since the 1870's.

Jeff picked out a gentle horse for me from the 120 head remuda and, although I've never felt comfortable riding another man's saddle, riding with Jeff was pure joy. I'm sure we didn't gather our share pairs but when we said "adios" I knew I had a new friend for life. That's why the news of Jeffrey's death hit me like a ton of bricks.

Next to raising great kids with his wonderful wife Janet, Jeff liked best being a cowboy and flying his airplane. But the plane wasn't just a toy. On a big spread like the Bell it can be the difference

between life, or in Jeffrey's case, death.

The thing I'll always remember about Jeff is that he loved to wear a wild rag around his neck, a big hat on top of his head and tall ts with his pant legs stuck in them. I asked him once why the cowboys these parts wore their boots like that and he told me it was to keep red ants out, or, so your legs wouldn't chap after long hours in the saddle. But I think it's also so the world will know you're a cial kind of creature: a New Mexico cowboy. And not just any cowboy but one who belonged to the Bell. For 130 years that's been as good a resume as any hand could have.

Some high-priced lawyers broke the trust that Bill Lane set up and the Bell is up for sale. I guess you can't blame the other members the family but I felt bad for Jeffrey. At first he fought it and n he tried to keep a little piece of the ranch he loved, but when he realized it would be a deal-breaker he gave in for the good of the family.

I can't picture Jeff living in a Chicago high-rise like some caged cat or leashed Border Collie. Jeff's death is tragic and I feel for his family but I like to think Jeff was doing what he loved and had everything he ever wanted. Living a life most Americans think has vanished. Today I'm very sad but some tiny part of me is grateful that Jeff will never have to see someone else riding herd on the Bell. He'll never have to leave the ranch he loved, looking back h a tear in his eye and a lump in his throat beneath his wild rag.

Jeffrey was a man who could've taken the easy way out in life but instead wanted to prove that he was a man worthy of the west. And prove it he did, for Jeffrey Lane belonged to that very special species known as a Bell Ranch cowboy.

The above article will appear in the September issue of The New Mexico Stockman.