



# Bill Carrasco

*A young cowboy could be a whip-and-spur artist,  
but if he won't listen, he won't make a cowman.*

MY GRANDFATHER STARTED ME in cowboyin' when I was a little boy in Templeton in the Sierras. Yes, he started me by jerkin' my ears and twistin' my nose and kickin' my fanny. "Wrangle the horses, boy, and do this and do that." And that's how I started. My grandfather started in the 1860s and was considered one of the top cowmen in the Owens Valley. He cowboied all his life. He had men who worked for him like Henry Olivas, who was a teenager when I was a little boy. He'd twist my ear too. And my uncles, Harold Gill and Wendall Gill, they taught me. But these guys would all take you in hand, and they had permission in them days to thump on you. So you did your job, and you behaved

*Left: One more log and one more yarn. Cowboys, unlike the popular belief, can say a great deal more than "Yep"; they can talk all night. Almost all are versed in cowboy folklore, poetry, and unprintables. They enjoy stories on the art of cowboyin'. They speak of many things, of saddles and fences and the Civil War, of cattle and Kings Ranch, never tiring of a well-told tale.*

and took the position and carried it. And if you didn't, there was somebody there to correct ya.

I was brought up to believe in a cowboy legend that the only way you could get to be a cowboy was to get through the Tunnel. This tunnel had all manner of animals in it; grizzly bears, mountain lions, wolves, coyotes, fox, and badgers. And to be a cowboy you had to go in that tunnel and get by all them animals. Each one, the way the story goes, is a friend or relative. The grizzly bears were your grandparents; the mountain lion, your parents; the wolves were your uncles; the coyotes, the cowboys; the fox was the boss; and the badgers were your friends. If your grandparents could teach you and get you passed, your folks could take over and pass you down to the uncles always snappin' at you, growlin' at you, and worryin' with you, right on down to your last job, and you could see the light at the end of the Tunnel. When you got out, your reward was being able to pick off the wall the equipment you needed for

the job you excelled in. So you'd wind up being a spade-bit man, or what they call a hackamore man, or a good riata man or bronc rider, calf roper, etc. Usually a man would excel in one of these things with the help of the grizzly bears like my grandfather and old John and Albert Lubkin, Charley Domini, Russ Spainhower. They were all coyotes and fox. Friends like Bev Hunter and Roy Hunter, Mark Lacey; oh, I could name them all night. They were all badgers, keepin' you in line. You talk about snappers and biters, they were it. This is the way you have to learn to be a cowboy. You can't buy a big hat and a pair of boots and think you're a cowboy. And so the old sayin' that goes "he's been through the Tunnel" means you're talkin' about a "top hand." Now this is a secret I shouldn't be passin' on, but real cowboys know what I'm talkin' about.

There's what you call a cowman, a cowboy, and a rodeo hand. A young cowboy could be a whip-and-spur artist, but if he won't listen he won't make a cowman. The name of the game is weight an' beef an' money. You're in the business to make a living, so you handle your cattle as conservatively as you can and try to make what you can out of them and pay your bills. A lot of these boys we call whip-and-spur boys, they knock more beef off your cattle than you can put on them in a whole summer. I mean on a cow drive they won't stop and rest and make sure your cows and calves nurse and mother-up properly. So we have a problem. We have to hire them because there is a shortage of help. You have to work this kind of guy, and you have to keep one eye on him and one eye on the horse he's ridin' so

he don't spoil him. Pretty soon some of them get a reputation, and they can't work anywhere. They just bounce from job to job. I've done a little of that myself when I was tryin' to learn, but you should do it as a boy, when you're still learning and will respect the other man's suggestion. Today if something is suggested to them, they get mad, blow up, and quit. A young boy won't do that a lot of times, because he's been told, "Now you listen."

A cowboy is a conservative man, and he can probably do it all. He's been through the Tunnel. He's been raised on the ranch or brought up around old professional cowmen, and he's been told, "Not too much of this, not too much of that, be conservative, don't run all the fat off the cattle, save your horse, be sure that the calves are paired up with their mothers." This sort of thing. This is what makes a cowman.

A rodeo hand is an athlete, and he's damn good at what he does. Ridin' and ropin' are just the beginnin' of runnin' cattle. So a guy that goes out here for sport, why he never makes it. Now we've got what we call a "one-county tramp." That's no disgrace. He's a one-iron man. He's a boy that was raised here in Walker Basin or Owens Valley, never worked anywhere else. He never got to go over the hill and learn another ranch. My folks told me, "You go somewhere else for a while and learn another system." When you accumulate them all in one bunch, all your different experiences, you

could usually filter out what's going to work and what ain't goin' to work. As a predicament arises you've got a better chance of makin' it work than a guy who knows just one spot.

What I'm gettin' at is this: today you get a lot of boys right off the sidewalk who buy a big hat and a pair of boots and go to the rodeo and start ropin'. The next thing you know they're tryin' to cowboy, and they'll tell you they can cowboy, and when they get out here, they foul up the whole show. They're not dependable, and they tell you they can do this and that and when they get out there, they can't. They're apt to rope a critter

and break his leg or break his neck. No matter how good he is in the arena, a rodeo man might not know to pair up cattle or read brands, or he doesn't know the strays. He doesn't know ages of cattle or a pregnant cow from a dry cow. These are things that we have to be taught.

Now, Jesus, I'm not sayin' rodeo hands don't know how to cowboy! I'm sayin' *some* don't! I don't want them comin' after me sayin' I'm knockin' rodeo hands. Some of 'em are top hands. But, by God, if you want to make a livin' at runnin' cattle, you've got to come through the Tunnel!