

# Roy Hunter

*Here comes this cow! Just head over heels!  
I don't mean rolling sideways —  
I mean going just like a ball — end-over-end!*

I MADE A LIVING practically all my life mustanging. Whatever we caught, we'd trade and sell. We just stayed at it for eight, ten years. That's all we did. Some people want colts or somebody wants a mare or somebody wants something special. We roped 90% of them, so we could be choosy. If we knew that somebody wanted a young colt to break, well, that's what we'd go try to get. We knew we had a market for it. After we traded horses a while, people came to us and more or less put in orders for what they wanted. When we got the order, we knew what to go and get. Most people wanted young mares or studs. The people didn't care as long as they were young.

The only thing to do with the old ones was to send them to the killers. That's a no-no now. But in those days there was what they called "the killer market," where we'd take a mare that was too old for somebody to break. The only place to take 'em was to the killer market. There wasn't much percentage for me in catching killer horses. I'd catch young studs and young mares

and colts — pretty young colts — because that's where the market was. Some people think that weeding out some of those horses helped the herd.

I've got to give you a little history. When I went into the service, my dad had a lot of horses, like 150 head of mares, and he was getting pretty old. They were pretty well-bred horses, good horses, but they were wild. They got wild because he couldn't handle them. He couldn't control them. He couldn't ride, and there was no one available to help him; so when I was gone, they got out of hand. The only way we could treat them was just like wild horses.

There aren't very many wild horses on Hunter Mountain now — very few. They're all gone. They've been shot, killed, and whatnot. The Park Service has eliminated a lot of them. As you get farther north into Nevada and even in Arizona, there are quite a few wild horses roaming around the country. But in each little area the horses are different.

People talk about mustang horses. These are domestic horses that have gone wild. If you start off with a good breed and get new blood in it, you get good horses. If they were scrubs to begin with, then they end up being scrubs. Sometimes to improve the herd we'd let a good stallion out there. Any kind of new blood improves them. It doesn't take very long for them to get inbred. Anytime you put new blood in there, it always improves the breed. They're always stronger and more aggressive than the inbred ones. The Park Service was shooting some of the horses. I've never known the Forest Service to ever shoot a horse, but the Park Service has. It's in their policy to eliminate those horses. One hundred percent eliminate them. They don't want to thin them out. They want to get rid of them. I know it for a fact, but I doubt if it's public record.

The Park Service got an injunction against me for grazing livestock within the Death Valley National Monument, and we were in a lengthy lawsuit over it for about eight years. The windup of it was that they took about half of the range away from me, and I got caught in the middle. We ran horses. Half of the range is what's called B.L.M., Bureau of Land Management. We didn't have a horse permit, but we had a cow permit, so we kept the horses within the Monument, which the B.L.M. didn't have any jurisdiction over. When I lost the lawsuit, they got the injunction against me, and they went in and killed the horses.

You have to know what you're doing to catch a wild horse. You have to be on horseback. You have to have good horses — horses that can run and run in tough

ground. And you've got to know the country. Catching a wild horse is something you learn how to do. There are a lot of different ways. The way that I myself did it more than any other way was to just build a loop and go out there and rope the one I wanted. But I had a market for everyone I roped. I knew what I could do with it. That's the reason that I like roping better than foot trapping; I never knew what I was going to get in the foot trap.

A mustang's the greatest general in the world. It's pretty hard to outsmart him. You really have to outdo him. Mustangs have got so many tricks that every time I'd think I knew them all, I'd get hold of one that'd teach me a new one that I'd never seen before. He never gets himself in a position where he can be cornered. He'll never go down a deep canyon. He'll always take the ridge. You can hardly make him run downhill; that is because he figures there's a trap there. He'll always contour and pretty well stay out of any big wash or deep canyon. He sees everything and he hears everything. The only way to get the jump on him is by knowing the country.

And horses follow patterns. If a horse runs in a certain circle and he gets away, the next time I jump him he's going to run in that same circle. I can cut him short because I know he's going to go in a certain direction. I get over there, and I gained a lot of ground on him. I've had a lot get away from me, but it was usually in rough ground or maybe in timbers where I couldn't see him. There's no time for tracks; I just stay with him.

I'd build a loop and be sitting there, the saddle cinched

up and my horse knew it, too. Right away he knows you're gonna go. You run behind the mustangs. You can't run alongside them or they'll turn off. You have to drop in behind them 'til you get in close enough range to rope one. You stay eight, ten feet behind him, usually. It's pretty hard to get within six feet of one. You have to throw the rope ten, twelve feet. You've got to throw it hard. You throw it right at him; you don't let it drop. You've just got to *throw* it on him. I mean you can't let it float.

A lot of people fence off the water and just leave one corral open. I've done that myself, too. When the mustangs came to this certain corral, we would just drop a curtain behind them on a slipknot. We just pulled a trip rope, and the curtain would fall behind them like a piece of canvas. Later, nearly everybody started using what's called an automatic gate. It's a spring-loaded deal. A mustang can squeeze through and open it up, but when he tries to come out, it tightens up on him. That way nobody has to be there. It's a lot better. When we're water trapping wild horses, if we build a fire or smoke a cigarette or do anything, the mustangs smell it. They can smell it a long way off, and they won't come in. They just go ten miles away to get a drink. So the automatic gate works a lot better.

Sometimes I'd make a foot trap and bury it in the ground. The principle is that it's just like a box and the horse steps through it. I'd tie a piece of truck inner tube and stretch it really tight, and I'd have a rope around that box. When the horse steps through it, it triggers the inner tube to snap the rope across the foot. The rope

is tied to a limb or something that the horse can move a little. It isn't so solid; he can drag it off a little way. Then it doesn't hurt him. If it was tied to something solid, he could break a leg.

Those are the main ways we trapped them. It sure was exciting. It's just like fishing or anything else. I enjoyed it. It was a bigger thrill for me to catch a big stud than it was to go hunting deer or kill anything. To be able to sit and rope a mustang and tie it down and get it in the corral was, to me, a lot more thrilling than other kinds of sports.

Very seldom does one ever get away. I've lost a saddle before. Once I went to move some cattle and I'd forgotten my bridle, so I was riding with just a halter; I was just going to move the cattle. I saw a young colt. A man here in Lone Pine wanted to buy just such a horse about two years old, and I saw him. I thought, whoa, if I catch this horse, I'll sell him to that guy. So I roped the young stud. My horse had only this halter on, and I was a little bit concerned. We were running along downhill, and I gave him a pull and I hollered, "Whoa!" Well, it startled him, because I'd never done that to him. And when I did that, he just buried his tail right in the ground! Man, he just stopped like he'd hit a brick wall. He stopped so hard and the other one was running so fast that it just jerked this saddle right off over his head. And it was a brand new saddle. Down through the wash we went and I still had my [rope] turns on. I stayed with the saddle, but my saddle didn't stay with my horse! I had a brand new rope. I didn't want to lose that. I could have let the colt go, but the

saddle finally dragged against some brush. I got him stopped and tied down. That was one time.

Oh, we've had a lot of wrecks, but I was only hurt once. I broke a bunch of ribs. Where I got in trouble was when I got a bad horse that fell with me.

Joy and I stayed with mustanging for about eight years after we were married. Of course, I'd mustang'd a lot before. But she and I used to go together all the time. We lived on Hunter Mountain and ran a few cattle. We didn't have anything to keep us in the valley: none of our kids were old enough to go to school. We just lived up there and would go wherever the wild horses were. She's pretty handy. A lot of times when I'd take her with me, we'd have two good horses. I'd go rope something. And instead of taking time to tie it down, I'd take my turns and let Joy get in my saddle. And I'd jump on the other horse. Then I'd run and rope another one without losing time. If we got into a bunch of horses that were running pretty good, she'd rope one with me. Then I'd tie mine down and go over and help her to tie hers down. She roped quite a few.

My grandfather came here in 1868 or '69. He'd been a Confederate officer. At one time the Confederacy was getting its silver bullion from Virginia City, Nevada. So as a young man, he'd made a trip to Virginia City. He was always interested in mining and livestock anyway. After the Civil War when he got home, there was nothing there for him to do. So he just saddled up a horse and came to Virginia City, Nevada, and he met my grandmother. He had a lot of pack mules in and was interested in mining. After that he was always a

rancher. He had a ranch in Lone Pine and then one right here. I don't think he ever worked for anybody that I know of.

At Cerro Gordo he ran smelters, but he was also mining his own property at the same time and packing water to the town of Cerro Gordo. That's really how he came to the town. He had 100 or 150 head of mules. And the town didn't have any water. So he packed water, and that's the reason that he went to Hunter Mountain. He had mules that needed rest and time off, so he went to Hunter Mountain. He was raising mules and running other mules over there. It was known as Hunter Ranch, but they call it Hunter Mountain now.

My dad was born in Lone Pine. He had three brothers and one sister, but they all died fairly young. He told me he owned his first bunch of cattle when he was just a little kid. I don't know how he got in the cow business. But he bought a ranch and he homesteaded, plus he had Hunter Mountain. I don't know if he got that from my grandfather or what happened there. He ran cattle in the High Sierra in the early days. They kicked him out of there because of a little argument; he got on the wrong side of a political fence. Then he just concentrated on running cattle on Hunter Mountain and over in Death Valley and in the Koweechee Mountains of Nevada, south of Silver Peak. He sold all of Hunter Mountain and the part of Death Valley where Scotty's Castle is to the Johnson who financed Death Valley Scotty. That had been the center of the cow operation.

My dad and I have worked together ever since I can remember. The first incident I can really remember

was a time when we left Independence. We were riding Hunter Mountain, and we had left in the afternoon and got out, way out in the desert. I fell asleep and I fell off the horse. I was laying on the ground. I guess I wanted to cry and everything else. But it felt so good to lie on the ground, I just went to sleep. Later he woke me up. I don't know how long I slept, but he let me stay there and sleep. I probably was five, six years old.

We used to go out there and stay all summer. We'd take a pack outfit and go and stay and take care of the cattle. Usually he'd have somebody else working for him, too. Quite a few of the Indians would work for him. We had several line cabins, but the main one was a log cabin right on top of Hunter Mountain. It was the best place to camp because it was cool. We had a pretty good meadow there for horse feed. There was no road. You had to do everything on horseback. It's high desert country; it's nearly 8000 feet high. There was a lot of pinyon timber, heavy timber, and there's small meadows that were anywhere from two up to forty acres. The only things we ever had out there were mountain sheep and, of course, mountain lions, coyotes, things like that.

My dad never stopped because it got late or he was tired. To him there was no such thing as an 8 or 10 hour day. He only stopped when the job was done. If we were 40 miles from camp and couldn't make it back, we just stayed there all night and started work again the next morning. He was a very fair man, with a lot of patience for both men and animals. He had a lot of patience with kids, too. He would try to teach me all he could, but he never really forced anything on me or made me do

something that I wasn't willing to do. In fact, he made me want to be willing. I don't know if I'm a cowboy, but he did his best to teach me all he could.

I don't mind being called a cowboy. I might put my occupation down as "rancher" and let it go at that, because I don't work for wages for cow outfits. I think if you're going to be a cowboy, you're working for somebody else. But when you're running your own outfit, there's a lot of things besides cowboying. In fact, one of my dad's sayings was, "There aren't no more cowboys. The only way you can get along now is to be a mechanic and a baloney artist along with it." It's not just riding a horse anymore. It used to be that that was everything. We didn't have a truck to haul our saddle horses in. We didn't have to worry about a truck. We went with pack outfits and saddle horses, and we didn't have anything mechanical. But we couldn't do that anymore and survive. It's gotten to the point now where we have to run a truck and we've got equipment and we've got things to take care of. It's just not being a cowboy.

One year Byron Burkhart and I were standing guard on cattle. We got them up to a place called "The Chute." It was just as steep as it could be; it wasn't a cliff, but it's the next thing to it. It got late, and we knew that if the cattle came down we'd never get them back up again, so

*Right: Roy Hunter and his son-in-law Dan Anderson share the hard work on the Hunter Ranch, which Roy's granddad started in 1869. He had originally come out West to pick up a silver shipment from Virginia City for the Confederate Army, to help finance the Civil War.*





we decided to build a fire. Byron got behind a big tree and built a fire.

I said, "You know, if they roll a rock off up there, dark as it is, we won't see it, and it's going to wipe us out down here!" About midnight, I imagine, I heard a thunk, thunk, thunk. We hollered back and forth to each other, "Here comes a rock! Watch out!" I had a big fire going and he had a big fire, and right between us, here comes this cow! Just head over heels! I don't mean rolling sideways. I mean going just like a ball, end-over-end. And she came by us just like you'd turn a tire loose going down there. Well, we stayed behind the tree all night. At daylight I walked down about a quarter of a mile and I found her. All to pieces. She'd rolled off about a half mile and I don't mean rolled sideways. I mean end-over-end. That's how steep it was!

The first or second time we ever came down, there had been a big washout. The willows had been smashed down with the snow. The cattle got going down there trying to walk over those willows. We had 60, 70 head. They just walked out on those willows and the trunks just all caved in. It took us about a half a day to get the cattle on their feet and get them out of there. That was probably the worst thing that ever happened. This country is all right if you understand it, but it can get pretty cruel to you, too. This is pretty tough country for raising cattle. I never had money enough to leave.

Our brand is Bar 26. It came from Shenandoah Valley. My grandfather came out here to Virginia City. He was an officer, so he had the horse that was his own private mount, and he rode that horse from Virginia

to Virginia City, Nevada. The horse had a 26 brand on it, so that was it. My dad started branding with it, and he went ahead and recorded it with the state. When I bought him out, I bought the brand. A straight bar across the top with a 26. Originally it didn't have a bar on it. Just the 26. But when I bought him out, he'd let it lapse for a year sometime back in 1895 or 1900, so they wouldn't register it. They wouldn't re-register it in my name unless I put a bar over the top of it. That brand's over 100 years old now.

*Right: A pickup man at Cotton's Flying A Rodeo hazes a steer into the corral. The lariat is not just any piece of rope. It is made of carefully braided nylon and must be stiff enough so that when a cowboy pays out a broad loop and then sends it flying toward its target, the loop stays flat and open. The original Spanish lariat was made of braid-rawhide and was 60 feet long, but it was expensive and delicate. Most early American cowboys turned to grass that was twisted rather than braided, and used it until nylon was invented.*



