

A Cowboy Who Did His Damnedest

(Eighty Years Aboard the Hurricane Deck of a Few Good Cowponies)

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In 80 years of riding, breaking, training and working with countless horses, Lee Karr says he has “finished” only two horses. One was Panhandle Slim.

“He was a big skinny thoroughbred that had run registered as Mr. Casis in Detroit and Chicago and won money. When he quit winning, he was sold as a three year old in Santa Fe and then somehow came to the feed yard in Amarillo, Texas, where I was working.”

Lee remembers and tells this story as we sit in his horse barn in Kerrville, peeling pecans open with his pocket knife.

“That horse didn’t know anything, but running. He’d never had on a stock saddle, he didn’t know how to rein and stop or how to open gates. Well, there was a hothead kid at the feed yard that year. He picked him out of the remuda ‘cause he was tall, saddled him, and went to trying to make him open a gate. The horse had no idea what he wanted. That hothead kid beat him for hours. I never saw a horse take such abuse. He raked him open with his spurs, he ripped his mouth, he whaled on him with his lariat till one eye was swollen shut. I was mad as hell, but I knew that kid was the kind who’d just as soon kill you as look at you when he was hot like that, so I didn’t say anything to him. When he was through with the horse, he stuck him way at the back so no one would see him.

“The boss came up and saw that bleeding horse and said, ‘What happened here?’. All I said was, ‘You’re a horseman—you can see what happened.’”

“A few days later that kid was gone, fired. I started petting that horse. I called him Panhandle Slim, cause he was skinny as a rail. He didn’t trust anybody then. I petted him for a month. I took my time with him. He was a challenge, but he had an intelligent eye. You can tell everything about a horse by his eye, just like a man. And he responded to kindness... Like that old saying, “That old pony’ll stand good treatment.” I ended up buying him for \$200. and training him. What a roping horse! He was *fast*. He could get on a steer like that,” he snaps his fingers. “My god, it was fun to rope on him.”

“He became a great riding horse, one of the outstanding horses I ever rode. And after all he’d been through,

he was gentle. He followed me around all the time. A horse will respond to good treatment.”

“That’s the main quality I like about horses—their gentleness. Just like with people. Show me a kind man, and he’ll be successful.”

Judging by his gentle contributions to people and animals, Lee Karr himself is a successful man. In 1975 he published a book of his extensive collection of black and white photographs of cowboys and ropers, called *ROPE BURNS*, now a collector’s item that sells for \$300. a copy at out of print book stores. The title page says *Rope Burns* is “a fair likeness of a few good cowboys who know the meaning of the words.”

In the introduction to his book, Lee writes, “The year was 1926.” (He was ten). “The place was the North side Coliseum at the Fort Worth Fat Stock Show and Rodeo. Allan Holder had just won the Calf Roping Championship for the third consecutive year. My father, Joe Karr, who ranched in Coleman County, Texas, was a roping enthusiast and this was my third time to go with him to the Fat Stock show. Little did I realize as I watched Allan win the title, that 50 years later I would be doing a camera portrait of him at his home in Rankin, Texas.”

From this early exposure as a small boy, he became a lifelong observer and student of “the roping art.”

“I do not use the term “roping art” lightly,” Lee says. “No other sport in the world takes such coordination, timing, patience and professional skill to become a champion.”

His first serious interest in roping began in 1946 when he owned and operated a studio in Georgetown. Some of his first practice subjects were Clyde and “Fat” Kimbro, Son and Buddy Glass, Gene Pearson, Lonnie Krause, Will Young, Neal and Albert Landry, J.H. Montgomery, Henry Glass and Tommy Kimbro. Some of his more treasured photographs are of Ross Martin on his horse “Sleepy,” Tony Salinas on “Stormy”, and Royce Sewalt on “Copper.”

Lee has photographed a number of notable ropers ranging from RCA World Champions to just everyday good brush ropers such as Roy Gunn, who actually

claimed he “could not throw a rope well.” But when it came to catching a “wormie” in the flintrocks and honey-combed brushy country that he owned and ranched, he was another kind of champion.

Lee Karr was born on his family’s ranch, The Lakewood Ranch, in Coleman County in 1916, which his father had settled in 1900. Lee vividly remembers the big two-story old ranch house he grew up in; it had seven bedrooms just on the ground floor. The cowboys lived in the house and Lee’s mother cooked for them. As a small boy Lee would sit on the long, front porch and watch the cowboys drive cattle down a dirt road to the intersection of the Frisco and Santa Fe rail lines. “sometimes they’d stay up at night and I’d sit up listening to stories of bucking horses ridden, of cattle driven. I’d stay there till my mother made me go to bed.” Later, he would join them riding, roping and wrangling cattle on the ranch.

Just before his twelfth birthday, Joe Karr, Lee’s father, died of a stroke at the age of 49. “I had learned to ride and go with him horseback. I felt important with him. He always wore his shirt buttoned up and a string tie, even out working, and I can remember that tie flying behind him when he rode, hell bent for leather. He loved good horses and good cattle and good ranch hands,” Lee reminisces.

His father’s untimely death left the family bereft, and with the crash of ‘29, they lost every acre of the ranch. It was a blow.

Lee was sent to the ranch of a friend of his father’s, Earl Gill. “Pa and Ma Gill took me in.” Lee recalls. “Seven boys called it home. Other than my parents, they were the greatest influence in my life. Four of us Karr kids, the depression, we were all going hungry—what would have happened to me if they hadn’t taken me in? They were kind and generous folk.”

Lee began to show his entrepreneurial drive early. When he decided at the age of 12 he wanted his own saddle, he figured out a way to buy it. He went to the Santa Fe railroad yard where they would unload the cattle for rest and water. Those that were weak, crippled or hurt couldn’t be reloaded. Lee paid \$1.50 each for them, took them home and nursed them back to health. He’d get them back on their feet so they could load up, then sell the lot of them for \$12. each. It took three years, but he saved \$90. and bought himself the handmade saddle he still proudly displays today.

The Gill ranch raised polled Herefords, and Lee says, “The Gill family were not just cowboys, they were cattlemen.” He learned all about cattle raising until, at 17, packing his saddle, a bedroll and two changes of clothing, he struck out to work on his own on the ranches in

South Texas. “I was big and stout and knew horses and cattle. I never got turned down for a job when I asked for one,” he recalls. During the ‘30’s he cowboied Sonora County’s rough country of rimrocks, canyons and sotols for \$30. a month, working seven days a week for the ranches of Howard Espy, Roy Hudspeth and Clayton Puckett. Education had been a strong message in his family (both Lee’s sister and his mother were teachers) so when he’d saved enough, he went up to Georgetown, near Austin, and entered Southwestern University. He graduated with a degree in business four years later.

When World War II came, he fought in the Pacific in the Merchant Marines, then came back to start a cattle feed yard in Georgetown. His forte was feeding the cattle on a “cost-plus” basis, something he’d learned in his college business classes. Starting with 18 heifers, “black baldies,” he remembers, he built the feed lot up to where he could feed 3,500 at a time.

And he never stopped playing around with two things: horses and photography. He had an old 4 x 5 Speedgraphic, developed for news photography, the kind with big flat plates and film you had to hand develop. He had a special enlarger with a condensing lens and a 38 pound strobe light for fill. Lee’s photographs caught the reality of ranching and cowboying with a poetic eye. In his frame barn’s wide hallway hang Lee’s large photographs of the men he knew in 70 years of riding. There are photos of Jack Myers, Cotton Jarnigan, Jose Zeretuche, Bob Crosby and others. Their weathered faces, full of character, look down upon Lee as he fixes a bridle.

When he spent some time at the Moss Ranch in Llano County, a breeder of fine quarter horses, he took some of his most magnificent photographs. From the round ups of hundreds of horses to the mountain top portrait of the famous roping horse Cotton Top.

It was at the Moss Ranch that he bought the son of Cotton Top, a 3 year old named Jack Frost—who would be, after Panhandle Slim, his second best horse.

“He was a sorrel with flaxen mane and tail, and as handsome as they come. But Mark Moss, always honest to a fault about his animals, said he’d thrown his best bronc rider. Well, I bought him, anyway, me being such a darn good rider, you know, and when I got on him he walked a few feet, calm as can be, then he exploded like TNT. Threw me higher ‘n a barn and came down right on his side that big roping stirrup. It must have bruised him or knocked the wind out of him, ‘cause he lay there groaning like he was going to die. Finally I walked over there and nudged his butt with the toe of my boot, and he jumped up. Best aversion therapy I ever saw. He never bucked again. I taught him how to fox trot, and

boy, he was smooth as silk. A fine saddle horse, that Jack Frost.”

After telling that story, Lee revealed he is writing his autobiography and it is called *My Eighty Years Aboard the Hurricane Deck of a Few Good Cowponies*.

He also says he is the only photographer to have photographed two presidents (Truman and Johnson) and the World's Runner up Champion Goat Roper (John Burris).

“I was never a bronc rider,” Lee says. “I tried to break them gentle and kind. Most horses are gentle natured. Bad acting horses are that way usually because people treated them badly.”

“I have a kindred spirit with horses, and I have a lot of respect for horses. They're a lot like people: if you give them fair and kind treatment, they'll return it.”

“They know loyalty, just like the old-time cowboys. An old-time cowboy would always help a man out. When I was day-working around those South Texas ranches I could tell a lot about a ranch by the hands they kept and how long they'd been there—if they'd been treated right, they stayed around a long time. Loyalty, same with horses as with men. It took Panhandle Slim a long time to trust me, he'd been hopped up so much and treated so badly, but once he did, he was completely loyal.”

“I've lived here in Kerrville seven years—big cowboy country—but I've met only one cowboy. Real old-time cowboy. Some of these guys you see, they ride good horses, and they're athletes, but they wear a baseball cap...” He paused, shaking his head. “I've never adjusted to that.”

“I've met a lot of people in my 82 years, mostly good people—some bad,” he stops here and grins, “but I've

forgotten those sumbitches' names. The good ones I remember.”

For several years Lee volunteered as a docent at Kerrville's Cowboy Artists of America Museum. But these days he works as a volunteer with Head Start teaching underprivileged children how to ride. “Here at the largest ranch within the city limits of Kerrville,” he grins (he has an eight-acre place in town), “I work with these kids, teaching them to ride. It's probably the best thing I've ever done,” he muses.

“I hope it's helped point a few in the right direction.”

He remembers one little boy who came to learn to ride: “Six years old, scared like a little coyote pup. He'd been passed around a lot. He took up with me, hanging on my shirttail, learning to work with the horses. He kind of bonded with these ponies I have. Then the teachers told me he'd completely turned around in school, started doing much better.”

“I think back to the Gills who helped out a little kid. Ma Gill put that saddle of mine away when I went to war and saved it for me. People kept saying, “Whyn't you get rid of that saddle? He ain't coming back for that.” They told me she just said, “That's the only thing that boy has,” and went on keeping it for me till I came back for it.”

“Sometimes you need to understand about what people have, and what they don't have.”

Lee looks up a moment from the bridle he is fixing.

“You know what I want on my tombstone?” he asks earnestly. “Here lies an old-time cowboy who did his damndest.”

About the Author

Lin Sutherland teaches horsemanship and riding at Onion Creek Ranch in Austin, Texas. She rides and writes where the west wind takes her.