

Cowboy Jim a Montana Range Cowboy in Perris

By Karen Bradford

Who would have guessed that learning “to cowboy” would eventually be written in a book where it could be studied, underlined, highlighted and savored at night before going to sleep in a nice, comfy bed—perchance to dream of dusty days spent wrangling a herd of cattle to round-up?

Those who remember Billy Crystal and his friends in *City Slickers* know that little boys may grow up, but they do not forget their dreams of having a trusty horse for a pal, a bandana 'round their necks and a lariat at the ready on their saddles.

Jim Brooks was one such little buckaroo, born in Georgia and brought up in Pennsylvania: states that are about as different in setting, philosophy and culture as it gets from his beloved cowboy movies featuring John Wayne and Gene Autry. Oh, and one other thing: There were no role models of black cowboys to be found anywhere in the movies.

So where does a boy go to dream? For Jim, his vision of cattle drives on the open range under the big sky was cemented when reading the classic novel *Smoky the Cow Horse* by Will James. By the lovely power of imagination, Jim's quick mind easily filled in his face as one of the wranglers.

Those early dreams later turned into more than his imagination could have foretold: in addition to mastering the cowboy life, Jim Brooks has become a Renaissance Man, Western-style, as himself an author of cowboy advice books, illustrator, lyricist, songwriter, teacher of the cowboy way, publisher, actor, rhythm guitarist and lead singer of Jim Brooks and His Ranch Hands!

“I admit, I never knew why, but ever since I was a little kid, I wanted to be a cowboy,” Brooks said.

“Fortunately, my folks never tried to dissuade me.”

Once his goal of being a cowboy was set, Jim Brooks spent summers cowboying in the West until graduating from high school and college as he promised his parents. “Eventually, I’m going to get my skull cracked and need an education to fall back on,” so he earned a degree from Penn State. “That was it, end of story,” he said about graduation, “and I went out



It's all in a day's work for a cowboy, from Jim Brooks showing excellent form in "pegging out" a perfect ride to ropin', tyin', stayin' on a bronc, saddle breakin' a horse by first covering its eyes and showing the tools of his trade: leather chaps (pronounced "shaps") to protect his legs, lariat and a plastic steer head to show how lassoin' is done!



A man and his rope



Partners in marriage for 41 years now, Jim Brooks met and fell in love with Connie when he was cowboying on her father's ranch in Montana.

there": there being Montana, Wyoming, Nebraska and the Dakotas.

He described how he felt as he traveled through the rolling plains of the American Mid West that seemed to abruptly change in the town of Chamberlain, South Dakota, on the Missouri River. "The alfalfa and soy beans changed to Western-looking hills, bluffs and draws. As soon as I saw that, I felt like I was home, a place I'd been before. I knew that from the beginning."

Jim was smart enough not to call himself a cowboy just yet, though that was always in his head: "cowboy" needs to be earned. He spent the years of 1960 and '61 as a ranch hand: putting up hay, fixing fences and the many other inglorious jobs that keep a ranch running and a man employed, even milking cows.

"Oh yes, I be a cow-milking fool!"

"It took about five years before anybody called me a cowboy," Jim revealed. "Then I became a drifting cowboy: up north in summer, and after fall round-up, I headed my truck south to Texas, New Mexico and California to get out of the cold. I'd drift on — one month, two months, three

people might imagine based upon that character.

As his drifting life ceased and the now-married couple got into ranching with a small "cow-calf operation" of 200 head, Jim's cowboying just paid the bills.

"... but I began to think I'm pretty lucky, now how am I going to provide for this girl?"

When winter temperatures stayed at 35 degrees below zero and the wind blew down out of Canada, Jim continued thinking and found work as a "sugar-beet man" in the local mill: "Inside the plant was a nice 70 degrees, and I made \$600 a month. I was comfortable, everybody was treatin' me real well. I thought, 'You're doin' really good, Jim!' but about three weeks into it, I got driftin' fever. There was the first pay day, then the second pay day, and I thought, 'I can't work here anymore.' I went 30 miles south of town and got a job feedin' cattle in 40-below. I was a lot happier than in a nice, comfy factory!"

Since graduating from college, except for that very short career as a sugar-beet man, Jim Brooks has never done anything else but cowboying and ranching.

One benefit of stormy weather that Cowboy Jim soon learned, however, was how to make long winter nights pass: just like his author mentor Will James, he started to write down his own cowboy experiences of snorty broncs, bawling cattle, self-reliance and the satisfaction of living a man's life by a job well done.

"It was cold and snowin' in cow camp," Jim said, recalling the bitter cold and flinching just a bit as remembered snowflakes started to fall in his memory. "Snowin' like a son of a gun." He said that the story took a while to formulate as he started to write in longhand, so he regularly checked the herd to make sure the stock was alright.

Cowboy Jim had the good sense to do something with his writing, too: He soon became a published storyteller after mailing his work about a bucking horse to the famed *Western Horseman* magazine. "They sent me a check! The next thing you know, it's in the magazine! After I

— until wild-horse round-ups when we'd catch 'em and sell 'em until we'd go rodeoing before the fall cattle round-up. Then the cold wind would start to blow, and I'd go south again."

He didn't take his own advice one year when he "was fixin' to head out" and said yes when asked to winter-over, tending a cow camp with about 900 head of cattle in Montana. "The only problem was that I met Connie," he said: the beautiful blonde daughter of a Norwegian rancher.

"That was the end of my lone driftin'."

In 1969, Montana was noted as the most prejudiced American state regarding race. "We had to get special permission to get married," said Jim, recalling the cynical judge who stroked his chin as he considered their request.

"There were no black people and especially no black cowboys," Jim said about the times and civil rights that were slow in coming to the northern states. "Older people there only remembered Stepin Fetchit," (the stage name of a black American comedian and early film actor whose roles became associated with negative stereotypes of African Americans). Jim said he earnestly worked to set a dignified example of a black man rather than the tap-dancing minstrel that

wrote the first one, everything was easy after that."

To his surprise, the magazine's publisher, Dick Spencer, recognized Brooks' name during a bucking-horse sale in Miles City, Montana, and approached him to continue writing. Their relationship of publishing Jim Brooks' authentic stories lasted for eight years.

Next for the couple came: "This ole boy who had a brother who had a 'teepee ranch,' a spread on a reservation where you could rent a ranch. I started running wild horses and sellin' 'em. That kept us in grub. We'd raise oats and buck out the horses" (start to break the horses to saddle for riding)."

Not all days were "good days at the office" for cowboys as Jim recalled one wild horse who wanted to stay wild:

"He was a big ole bay stud who bucked me off. He jumped the fence, took off with my saddle, and we had to go catch him!"

But the good days outnumbered the rest for a while as Jim and Connie rented another place and received a government loan to buy heifers to breed and build up their herd. The location was above the historic area of Custer's Battlefield in Montana, or "the Battle of Greasy Grass" as Jim was told by a Cheyenne elder who was an eyewitness to that day in 1875. "The Army's later revenge was the end of their horse culture (the Indians), quite a deal. I appreciate it more now." Jim said it wistfully, having seen the end of a people who loved and respected horses and the free life on the plains as much as he does.

At the same time as ranching, Jim continued to rodeo, sometimes three times a week on their own ranch. Time went by until the fall of 1978 when a depression in beef prices started to record plummeting sales and little profit as long-time ranchers began to sell out. The couple foresaw the inevitable outcome and preemptively sold their cattle, equipment and trucks while they could still pay off their government loan.

The long-ago habit of drifting south for the winter caused Jim and Connie to end up in California, first tending 125,000 head of cattle near Coalinga.



Jim & Connie setting up for a roping class demonstration.

In their work, Jim and Connie started meeting people who already were a legendary part of the American Western: Chuck Connors, Jimmy Stewart, Roy Rogers, Jane Russell (remember her famous role in the Western movie *The Outlaw*, financed by Howard Hughes?) and Gene Autry's faithful horse Cham-

pion with his show bridle that featured a bit whose shanks were stylized pistols at the cheeks of the bit.

Drifting a little farther south took them to Julian in the backcountry of San Diego on the Spoke Ranch and ultimately to

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Jim Brooks and His Ranch Hands



As a role model to the next generation, Brooks teaches the time-honored cowboy skill of roping. With the reduced size of the lariats and sawhorse to be roped, even the littlest wranglers could achieve a feeling of success!

Norco, which became their home for 16 years.

The people and feel of Norco's "Hometown USA" lifestyle and Southern California's pleasant weather suited Jim and Connie as they settled into a happy life of creating a horse camp—horse training, teaching the cowboy skills of ropin' and rodeoin' — traveling to state and county fairs to perform, acting in movies as card-carrying members of the Screen Actors Guild and instructing fellow actors Bruce Boxleitner, Ben Kingsley, Melissa Gilbert and singer Chris LeDoux in the Western lifestyle.

Cowboy Jim continued to write his memoirs and cowboy advice in book format, as well as compose songs and perform with his band. He even composed and recorded *Starlight and Roses*, an entire CD of original love songs to Connie! Instead of singing to a horse as Gene Autry did, how's that for keeping his wife in love with him?

What does the future hold?

He says he looks to spend more time with his writing and illustrating, showing folders and envelopes that bulge with manuscripts, photos and his drawings

that await transcription and organization for publishing.

Jim also says he writes songs all the time. "I've got hundreds of them ... It just comes to me, and I'm thankful to the Lord. I keep a pencil and I write them down." His band, Jim Brooks and His Ranch Hands, featuring traditional and steel guitars, fiddle, bass and drums, are showcased performers at public and private-hire events. A recent fan letter from a member of the legendary Sons of the San Joaquin band gave Brooks an exhilarating endorsement of his music.

A Lesson in Life

But as the consummate performers and role models that they are, Jim and Connie continue their roping demonstrations at fairs and other country life events to the delight of families and parents happy to show their children a part of the vanishing American West.

Part of what impressed Jim in the tale of *Smoky the Cow Horse* was the lesson that when horses are gentled and handled with respect and kindness, they grow into reliable, steady and willing partners; but "breaking" a horse into submission can break a horse's spirit. Author Will James make the comparison that "breaking a horse the way he's broke on the range is about the same on the animal as schooling is to the human youngster." Those treated roughly or abused turn out poorly. Just like the thoughtful gentling of a wild horse to learn the new lessons of saddle and bridle, Jim and Connie patiently and lovingly show the human young 'uns how to coil a lariat, circle it and throw a loop over the horns of a plastic steer head mounted in a sawhorse.

The "teachable moment" is always in mind for Jim, and he continues his personal standard — begun as his response to the ignorant stereotype of Stepin Fetchit's black man as buffoon—to be that honorable person who is worthy of being called a cowboy, no matter the color of one's skin.

Will James would be proud of Jim Brooks, cowboy.

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"When you give a lesson in meanness to a critter or a person, don't be surprised if they learn their lesson"

Will Rogers

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- Always wait your turn, whether roping or filling your plate from the chuck wagon.
- Never cut in front of another rider's horse.
- Always remember to roll up your bedding and stand it on end to keep snakes and rodents from crawling up in it.
- Pay attention to your boss and ride a little behind him.
- If your horse blows up and bucks, try and talk the old pony out of his notions, and if that doesn't work, you'd better take a deep seat and a short rein and just hang on and rattle.

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