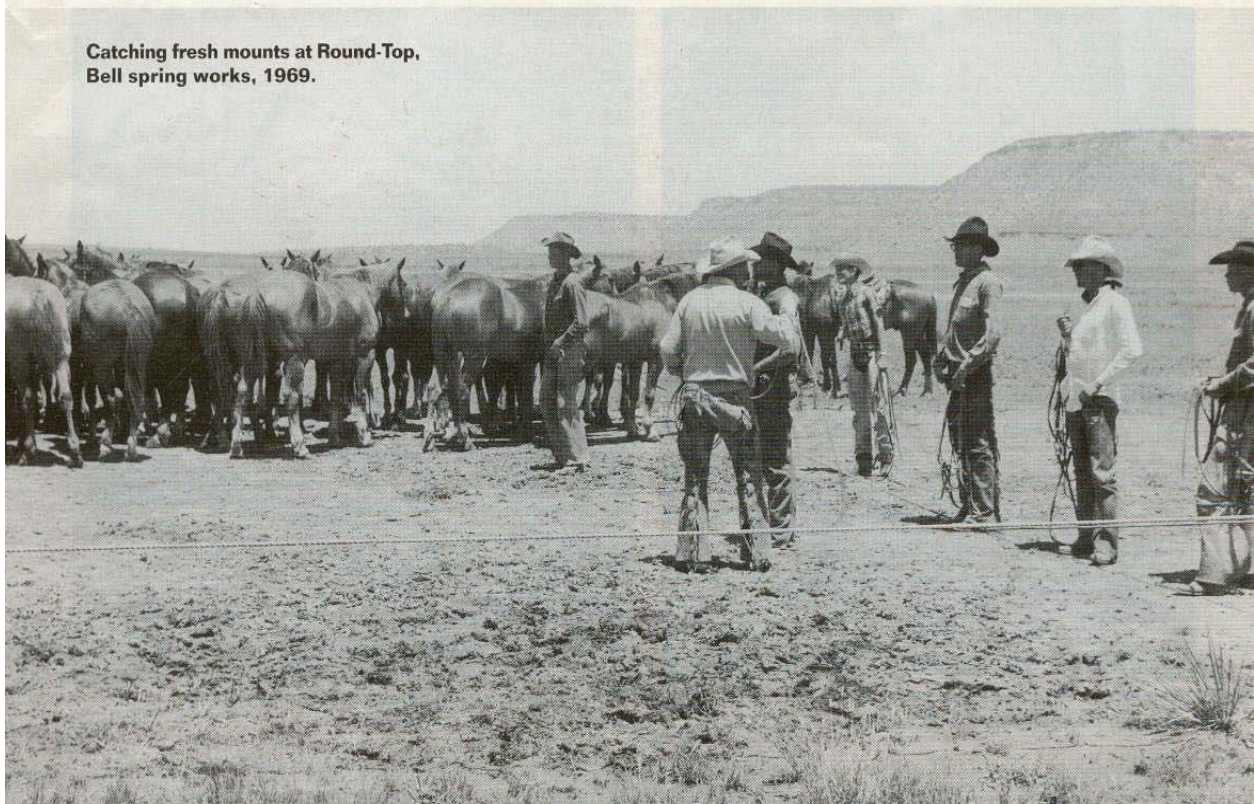


Catching fresh mounts at Round-Top, Bell spring works, 1969.



Bell Ranch Horses

A cowboy recalls the horses he rode on New Mexico's historic Bell Ranch during the 1960s.

Article by Curtis Fort as told to Stephen Zimmer

Photographs by Mattie Ellis

Illustrations by Curtis Fort

IN THE spring of 1967 I wrote a letter to George Ellis, the manager of the Bell Ranch in New Mexico, and asked him for a job. He wrote back a nice note and told me to come to the ranch with my bed and saddle, that the wagon would pull out June 1.

I was excited to be going to work for the Bells (Bell Ranch) that was known all over the Southwest for its good horses, good cowboys, and big country. I had spent the previous summer out of high school on the Pitchforks in the Texas Panhandle

and got my first experience on a big cowboy outfit, but had missed going out with their spring wagon.

My dream had always been to make the wagon works on a big outfit, and now I was going to have the chance. Besides, after a year in college I was ready for another summer on a ranch and especially to ride the wild mesa country of the famous ranch I'd heard so much about. As usual, the wagon would be out for a month, and the crew would brand about 4,000 calves before the Fourth of July.



Branding in Seco pasture.

Leo Turner was the wagon boss. He was about 55 years old at the time and had worked for a lot of big outfits before coming to the Bells: the Diamond As, the Grey Ranch, and the Big and Little Boquillas outfits in southern Arizona.

I'd heard that he knew how to work a range and treat his men right while keeping the condition of the company's cows and horses first on his mind. After working for him for three summers I found that to be exactly the way he was.

All the cowboys appreciated the way he asked them in the old way to do things. He never would say, "Joe, you and Curly go do this or that." Instead, he'd say, "Joe, if you and Curly don't mind, why don't y'all trot over to the Sabinoso and prowl through the heifers, and, if you have time, on your way back, come round through the West Bronc pasture and see if that windmill is keeping up on water."

My Saddle String

The morning after I got to the ranch in late May, Leo roped out a string of horses from the remuda for my mount, 11 head if I remember correctly. He did the same for the other men who'd also hired on to go out with the wagon.

The saddle horse remuda was in one big corral at headquarters. As Leo roped out each of my horses, he led them by me and told me their names. My dad had told me before

I left that a man should always remember the color, size, markings, and names of his horses the first time he saw his string and never have to ask which ones were his.

My mind was sure racing as he brought out the horses, trying to remember everything about them. The heck of it was that just about everything in the remuda was a sorrel with white stockings and streaks on their faces, the color and markings that the Bells had long been famous for. And, of course, they were all packing the Bell iron on their left shoulders, the only difference being that they had different number brands on their left hips that corresponded to their sire. Out of the 120 or so horses, there were only a few bays, blacks, and duns.

Fortunately, I did pretty well in remembering my string and never had to ask much about them. Their names, the best I remember, were

Fooler, Jeff, Rocket, Scorpion, Brown Jug, Rio, Porticito, Denver, Lightning, Eagle Eye, and Tom Cat.

We all spent the next few days putting shoes on our horses, and then rode out of headquarters for the next week, cleaning up some chores that needed to be tended to before the wagon pulled out.

Rocket

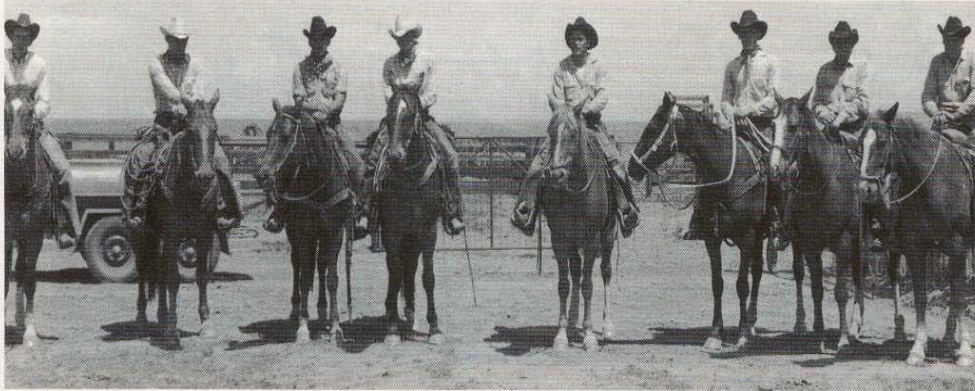
The first morning we caught horses to work a pasture, I called for a horse in my string named Rocket, who was a 12-year-old line-backed grulla. He was gentle enough and didn't snort or try to jerk back, but I did notice while I was saddling that the steady punchers seemed to be watching me pretty close. I took that as a tip.

When I went to step on him, I pulled his head around like he was a 3-year-old on the second saddle,



"Rocket didn't waste any time showing me his true colors. He fell in two and showed me quick that he was no amateur."

Curtis Fort



Salimosa corrals, June 1964. Author Curtis Fort and Fooler are fourth from left.

twisted the left stirrup, and eased into the saddle. He stood like an old campaigner. I nudged him into a trot around the corral, and he acted like an old dog.

Well, I thought, maybe they were checking me out and not the horse.

Leo led us out of the big corral and into a trot along the lane that went in front of the big house. About a mile later he looked back at us and said, "Let's graze 'em, boys."

We hit a lope, and as we did, ol' Rocket started to swell up like a toad, which kind of surprised me. We rode on for a little bit more, and something came into my mind to where I thought I'd better make sure that these punchers knew that they weren't dealing with no pumpkin-roller. To prove it, I stuck my horse in both shoulders.

Rocket didn't waste any time showing me his true colors. He fell in two and showed me quick that he was no amateur. On the third jump I went over his head to the end of my 8-foot reins and landed flat on my back. He bucked over the top of me, but quit when I held onto the reins.

Boy, was I embarrassed. I started thinking serious about rolling my bed. I shook my head a little and stood up to get back on him. Rocket had put his head down, grazing like nothing was different to him. I pulled his head up and stepped on him, and we loped to the far end of the pasture. But, this time, I kept my feet where they belonged.

Right when we were at the end of the pasture, Dan Crowley, one of the steady punchers, rode up beside me and said, "Don't let it bother you, Curtis. Ol' Rocket has bucked off every one of us one time or another. Besides, he hasn't felt a saddle since last fall."

Then I knew why they'd all been watching me.

Jeff

Dan Crowley was, and still is, all cowpuncher. From the Bells he went on to punch cows on several big outfits including a stint as horse breaker for the Parker Ranch in Hawaii. We became good friends and still are from that first summer wagon works.

The next summer Dan, who had left the ranch, came by the Seco Camp to visit. We had just branded a bunch of calves and were eating dinner when he arrived. Some of us had to go back to the Round Top Camp, where we had branded the day before, and pick up the day herd that consisted of the culls and dry cows cut from all of the previous gathers and drive them to camp.

Leo started roping horses out of the rope corral for everybody as the rest of the crew was going back to prowl the country we had gathered that day. Dan was sitting on a bedroll watching.

Seeing that he was, I called for

Jeff, a big, leggy sorrel, who was named from the "Mutt and Jeff" comic strip. He was a good pony, but like any cow horse, demanded to be treated right. I led him out to my saddle that was by the rope corral, hobbled him, and threw my wood on him. I thought I'd give Dan a little show, and so after I unhobbled, I didn't untrack my horse on purpose, mounted, and spurred him in the shoulders. Any cowpuncher knows what happened next.

Ol' Jeff broke in two and on the fourth jump sent me to the end of my reins. I hit on my back and the fall nearly knocked me senseless. I remember seeing stars. When I pulled myself together, I got back on, patted him on the neck, and rode out to help move the cuts. I don't remember much about the rest of that afternoon, but they told me later that I jabbered like a crazy man through most of it.

I do remember that Dan was lying on the ground laughing at me so much that I thought he was going to swallow his tongue.



Porticito

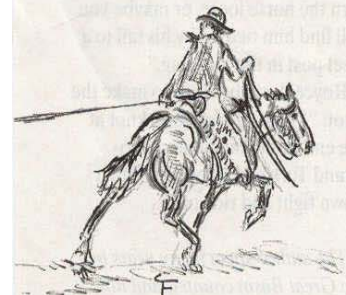
During the three summers I was on the Bells, I became pretty good partners with the horses in my string. All around, they showed themselves to be tough with plenty of guts. As with any string, they each had their quirks, but they were all honest and had a lot of heart. They could pack you a long way in that rough country and were still willing to do a job at the end of the day.

One of my favorites was Porticito, who was my top horse for doing work when it really counted. I never used him on big circles, but always caught him when we had heavy stock to rope. He was big and stout, but could sure move out. Whoever broke him put a good handle on him. He had a lot of heart and never quit on me.

Like a lot of ranch horses, he wasn't flashy looking, and he'd never been to town and ridden in a parade so people could see him. He just did honest work every day that he was saddled. In my opinion he deserves the world's admiration far more than any mount those Rose Bowl Parade punchers ride.

The summers I spent on the Bells were some of the best of my life. I've punched cows on a lot of outfits since and have ridden many good horses, but I'll never forget my Bell Ranch string.

Stephen Zimmer, a previous contributor to the magazine, is director of the Philmont Museum in Cimarron, New Mexico.



"Porticito was my top horse for doing work when it really counted."