

## **On Hitchhiking, Horses, and Heroes**

by **Joshua H. Baker**

*“Here come cowboys, here to save us all.” –Psychedelic Furs*

My wife and I were attending the western-themed annual banquet for the local fire department when a fellow firefighter greeted me and assessed my outfit, head to toe.

“Those aren’t cowboy boots!” He said as he took a gander at my second-hand boots. I knew what he meant, even as I felt defensive. The boots have somewhat rounded toes and low heels befitting a western work boot or Wellington, rather than the steep-heeled style so unpleasant for walking many associate with the vocation of cowboys. Having grown up in a small western town, Ron had redneck credibility as I did not, and his gibe crept under my skin. My defensive reaction may have been rooted in my history.

As a young man ready to graduate high school, I had made no plans for college or career. I’d pored over college information books, but nothing fit. I did not want to be a doctor, lawyer, or biologist. My dream had been more outlandish. I wanted to be a cowboy.

In one of my mother’s yellowing photo albums, there is a photo in which I wear a cowboy outfit given to me by Grandfather Baker. In retrospect, the tan vest and hat seem more Roy Rogers western dandy than Larry Mahan rodeo badass. At age eight, however, I loved it.

My first ranch visit was a highlight of the Baker clan’s seventies version of the Oregon Trail migration, our wagon not a Conestoga but a green Chevy. Visiting the Klondike Ranch on the east slope of Wyoming’s Bighorn Mountains brought home the reality of the Rocky Mountain West in all its scrubby beauty. The genial owner of the

spread took us on a horseback ride to a pretty waterfall. In a group photo, my hair was seventies-shaggy and my grin was huge. This was definitely better than stuffy New York.

The next summer, I attended summer camp on a Montana ranch. Big sky country. Campers spent time riding horses, hiking, and rafting. We learned basic wilderness survival skills, from picking edible plants to building shelters and starting fires. I returned for the next three years. At fourteen, I spent two nights by myself in the Montana wilderness carrying only a knife and three matches. I ate glacier lilies and huckleberries and tried unsuccessfully to find frogs. I had to swat flies on my head and pick them out of my grungy, smoke-infused hair.

Under the sway of Montana folk, I started chewing tobacco. I began listening to country music like Don Williams and Eddie Rabbitt as a guilty pleasure. At home, I fell asleep reading Zane Grey and Louis L'Amour, in love with the manifest destiny dream notion of the American West, its wide open dusty landscapes and hypothetical freedoms. Saturday afternoons spent with John Wayne and Clint Eastwood contributed to the appeal.

Much had changed across the American West since the cattle drives of the 1870s brought tens of thousands of cattle to Dodge City and Abilene. Still, I wanted to be a cowboy. To hell with realism. Reality meant microwaved dinners, zit cream, cubicle work, and cul-de-sac living. No thanks.

A few days after my eighteenth birthday, I arrived in Bozeman, Montana, the end point of a 1500-mile hitchhiking epic. It was the second week of September and snow was already painting the Montana pavement white. In short order, I sported a yellow baseball cap reading, "Rodeo, America's #1 Sport" featuring the outline of a rider on a bucking bronco. Instant Montana credibility.

After a few fruitless days of halfheartedly looking for work near West Yellowstone and sleeping in a spartan bunk room for a few bucks a night, I contacted a friend and arranged to stay and work on his family's small ranch outside Darby, Montana. I fed chickens and horses at the crack of dawn, moved irrigation pipes, bucked hay bales, gathered firewood, and did other chores. I slept in a spare bedroom and almost became a part of the family. Almost.

A big chunk of the ranch income came from their outfitting business. That meant setting up hunting camps deep in the wilderness of the Bitterroot Range for deer, elk, and bighorn sheep hunters. Tom had stashed small potbellied stoves in the woods and brought a chainsaw to cut poles from downed timber to support big canvas wall tents. The saws were illegal in a designated wilderness, as were the stashed stoves, but this was his livelihood. A ranger could have written Tom an expensive citation, so I stood watch on a rockslide half a mile away with a .357, instructed to fire a warning shot if necessary. Luckily, I didn't have to fire the weapon. I enjoyed being in the camps. The canyons were well timbered and lush down low, craggy up high, with wide meadows and small lakes dotting the upper ends of drainages. Deer and elk were common sights. When we were packing out of one canyon, two bears lumbered through huckleberry bushes thirty yards off the trail. I was glad we were on horseback.

Montana turned bitter cold by November, and I grew lonely. The extent of my social life was one visit to church, one school dance where the best songs were by .38 Special and April Wine, and one movie at which I secretly held hands with a girl I barely knew. Then weeks of nothing. Maybe I was wrong about the whole cowboy thing. I loved riding horses and being in the mountains, but I didn't feel at home. I decided to leave. I hitched west with \$240 in my pocket and more than a few lessons learned about horses and humans.

In Portland, I fell back in with groups of old friends. I went skiing and climbing with some and partied with others. The cowboy dream still bubbled beneath the surface of my days. I bought cowboy boots at the Portland Outdoor Store. Outside a Baskin Robbins where my sister worked, someone laughed at my boots and western shirt and made a snide reference to *Urban Cowboy*. The comment stung a little, as if I was a simple poseur. My outfit was not stylish in Southwest Portland, yet I'd ridden a horse deep into the Montana wilderness and bucked many a hay bale. I understood I wasn't a cowboy from 1881, yet still I debated becoming one, albeit in a simplistic way. Cowboys were American icons. They were tough guys who rode horseback with no patience for weakness or foolish rules. Right? So, I partied.

After Christmas, my mother gave me a polite but firm ultimatum to get a job or leave her house. Fair enough. I headed south, thumb out, more resolve in my belly. I was more prepared, yet I ran into more problems. Rides were harder to come by. I got harassed by a car full of people slowing down at the I-5 entrance ramp in Redding. When their car neared, a guy stuck his head out the window and yelled “Get a job!” Charming.

I spent a glorious open-air, sleeping-bag night in the sagebrush outside Tehachapi. The next day, a speeding stoner almost got me arrested. When a cop pulled him over for driving eighty-five, he pretended the pot and the beer bottles in his truck were mine. Luckily, the cop saw through the act. I’ve never been a good liar. When I hit Phoenix, I spent a couple nights on my cousin Kate’s couch and soon found that without a car, it was difficult to look for ranch work. After a few false starts, I landed a job as a dishwasher on Rancho de la Osa, a guest ranch on the Mexican border. The ranch’s history included visits from Jesuits priests in the eighteenth century and an attack by Pancho Villa. The older buildings had two-foot-thick adobe walls, the desert landscape was fascinating, and there were plenty of horses. It was a start to a cowboy life, a glorious start.

The ranch owners were refurbishing some of the property’s older adobe structures. A group of Mexican men crossed the border daily to do the bulk of the work. The two horse wranglers were a nomadic weather-beaten couple. The man wore a dark vest over long sleeve shirts and a silk bandana at his throat. His wife had badly bleached hair and jeans tucked in her boots. They looked the part, yet they were fired a month after my arrival when they were caught mistreating the horses. The owners promoted Tavo, one of the construction workers, to be the head wrangler. They asked me to assist him. I felt an elation almost like young love, but this was a love of life. Everything was finally matching up with the dream.

I had grown up hiking in mossy woods and scaling glaciated peaks, not riding horses in the desert. Tavo had to teach me a lot in the tack room and corral as well as on the trail. I shoveled a lot of horse manure and moved a lot of hay bales. I saddled horses and learned some Spanish. It was no Zane Grey tale. There was no huge drama, no fighting for a girl’s honor, no dealing with evil land barons, and in the kitchen,

Blue Oyster Cult was on the radio. But the rides, oh, the horseback rides through the magical desert that promised freedom in its distances!

Monday through Saturday, I woke at six a.m. to feed the horses in the corral behind our bunkhouse, then headed to the kitchen to help with breakfast. After the meal, I washed dishes, then returned to the corral to prep for morning rides. Depending on the number of guests, one or two of us would go with them. Tavo always rode. If there were enough guests, I would ride too. The rides were an hour or two long. Around noon, everybody had lunch in the *hacienda*. Afterward, there might be another ride if there was demand. Working in both the kitchen and corrals, I worked long days, six days a week. I snatched free time when I could. I was usually exhausted when I headed back to the bunkhouse at the end of the day.

Tavo didn't show up after St. Patrick's Day. Apparently, he'd gone on a bender, and not for the first time. Suddenly the wrangling was all on me. This was a big step. I received a token raise to bring my salary to a stellar \$350 a month plus room and board. I had no car, and the ranch was sixty miles from Tucson, so I had little on which to spend my hard-earned money but sodas and stamps when I walked the half mile to town. I had to catch a ride into Tucson to buy more clothes. Although it was frequently hot, I preferred long sleeve shirts as protection from sun-scorch. I bought a real cowboy hat too. I wanted to look the part. Along the way, I observed the landscape, the steep and rocky Baboquivari Peak and the slopes covered in majestic saguaro cacti. The desert looked very different than my green Oregon.

My wrangling learning curve was steep. In addition to memorizing the geography of arroyos and hills, gates and trails, I needed to learn how to care for horses. That meant feeding them, brushing them, and cooling them down properly after rides. I learned to work with the farrier. I saw a stud horse at work. That was eye opening for an eighteen-year-old virgin.

The nuts and bolts of being a wrangler meant learning the different types of bridles and saddles. Each horse responded differently, and one might require a curb bit while another needed a hackamore. I broke a few reins along the way when I forgot to use a lead rope to tie up a horse, and they easily broke the leather if they jerked their heads away from the hitching post. Saddles had variations too, and I learned how snug each

horse needed to be cinched. Some would try to fool you by puffing up their chest. I spent time adjusting stirrup heights for different riders, and keeping inexperienced riders away from tough horses like Velvet, Casino, and Princess.

A few months of working with horses went to my head. I thought I was a real cowboy. Real cowboys wore spurs, or at least the tough guys did in movies when they entered a saloon knowing a showdown was in their future. One day I borrowed spurs from the owner's ten-year-old son. I thought I looked and sounded cool. After I got the small group of guests on their horses, I mounted the gray and white dappled mare, Princess. As soon as I was seated, she began to buck. After a few jumps, she managed to throw me like a rag into the dirt, right in front of customers. Earlier, listening to jangling spurs, I'd thought I was a badass. Now I felt a fool.

After my humiliation, I worked harder at becoming a good rider, soliciting tips from more experienced riders. Soon, I was tackling the horses even the owners wouldn't ride, like Casino. I rode on my own time in the sandy wash south of the corrals, challenging the horses as they challenged me. Stop, start, fast, slow, turn, turn, turn. I learned to ride bucking horses and control them when they didn't want to mind me. It was hard work, and it was rewarding. My confidence level climbed.

Much of my job was being a tour guide, leading the way on the trail, but also pointing out key features of the landscape to guests. My favorite trail dropped into a grove of holly trees, its smattering of dark green and bright red glorious in that otherwise brown world. A great contrast was a difficult trail that headed up a steep rocky ridge to a peak with a view far into the purple-brown immensity of Mexico.

I thought I'd arrived when a customer gave me a six pack of beer as a tip. He was a nice guy with a fifteen-year-old daughter I'd chatted with more than most customers. I was the closest thing she had to a peer while they visited the ranch for a week. Everyone else was under twelve or over thirty. Just when I was getting comfortable, however, I saw someone who was obviously wrangler material headed to the corrals on one of my days off. I was confused. Then I heard that the boss wanted to talk to me.

I met Bill in his office behind the hacienda kitchen. He was blunt but kind at first, calling me smart. He told me I seemed cut out for college, not ranch work. He probably meant it to be a compliment. I didn't take it that way. The litany of my mistakes followed,

most of which had occurred more than a month earlier: the spurs incident, the broken reins, not cooling a horse down enough. I pointed out how much I'd learned, but I also got too defensive. At one point, I said "I bust my ass for you for twelve hours a day" or words to that effect. Good move, Sherlock. Bill disagreed. I was crushed. I was also fired.

The next day, I stepped onto a bus in Tucson wearing my boots, western cut jeans, western shirt, and cowboy hat. I was so tan, some people thought I was Mexican. My wispy dark mustache may have contributed to the illusion. A stoner girl made out with me on the way to L.A. She liked the cowboy look. The dream was deferred, but I could milk the benefits of pursuing that dream for a while. When I got home, suburban friends wanted to hear stories of hitchhiking and horses. It seemed more interesting than their academic pursuits even as it led nowhere. To them, I was a cowboy. Image is everything.

Over time, I became a soldier, firefighter, and teacher. I no longer wanted to be a cowboy, yet the cultural perception of a cowboy remained fascinating. Presidents Reagan and George W. Bush were both labeled cowboys at times, and they played up to that tag, wearing cowboy hats at home while talking tough in Washington, as if they were actually going into the street to shoot it out with an enemy rather than sending working class men and women as their proxies. The cowboy lone wolf archetype is still widely disseminated through pop culture. Consider traits that run from ancient characters like Sir Gawain through Rooster Cogburn to Tony Stark. When we expect people to be as tough, witty, strong, and independent as such characters, failed expectations follow.

I will never become a cowboy, but I still appreciate the romantic myth of the hero riding across the miles, defending the little people. It's nice to believe.

I like the feel of the leather snugging around my heel as I pull on my black boots. I won't pretend my boots are the coolest, and I don't wear them ironically in hipster Portland. The boots are comfortable, they are easy to don, and they are good for working outside if the streets are not icy. The scrollwork on the uppers is lovely, but the

leather encasing the foot itself, the insole, the sole, those parts have a simplicity calling to mind sage, dust, sun, and wind. The distance of dreams.

I never told Ron about my work on ranches. It probably wouldn't have mattered.

He probably would not have understood if I had. The cowboy references with which we are most familiar often distort, misunderstand, or trivialize the historical reality of the job. No matter. If trends continue, the curious cultural influence of the cowboy will last for centuries, long after all our beef comes from a test tube and robots do the herding.



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