

A buckaroo's tale Cowboy focuses fiction novel on ranching history



ELKO — Winnemucca resident Mackey Hedges published his second work of fiction in January called “Shadow of the Wind,” a story that is largely centered on a fictional ranch in the northern part of Elko County.

In his latest novel, Hedges used many of the same characters from his first novel, “The Last Buckaroo,” however, he completely changed the point of view.

“The Last Buckaroo” is told through the persona of narrator Tap McCoy, a renegade and seasoned cowboy. McCoy is an older man who meets Dean McCuen, a young “drugstore cowboy” from the East.

The story is about their adventures in the West, the sharing in cowboy experiences and the camaraderie that results.

“Shadow of the Wind” tells the story from McCuen’s point of view.

“He saw things totally different than the old man because he was younger. He tells his story about why he did certain things,” Hedges said in a phone interview with the Elko Daily Free Press.

Publisher Robert Sigman, a huge believer in preserving western culture, said anyone who has lived the life of a buckaroo can identify with the stories Hedges tells. He said the books give firsthand knowledge of what western life was like, especially as Hedges, “a buckaroo through and through,” describes it.

Both novels are deeply seated in history and based on a large ranch in Elko County. They include details of ranch life that Hedges experienced and stories he heard growing up.

Hedges grew up listening to tales, many from his father, of breaking mustangs before they were sold to local ranchers and farmers.

In 1964, Hedges, in his early 20s, was discharged from the Marine Corps. and went to work on a ranch between Owyhee and Jarbidge to fulfill his lifelong dream of working as a buckaroo.

Except for his four years in the Marines, Hedges worked as a buckaroo his entire life and never made a dime doing anything but working with horses, Sigman said in a phone interview. At the age of 69, he continues being employed as a buckaroo on a large ranch in Nevada, but also remembers a much simpler time for the cattle industry.

As a way to help his children remember the lifestyle of a buckaroo when he was younger, he decided to write “The Last Buckaroo.”

“I didn’t figure my kids would read history, but I thought if I could make it into a story that had all the facts in it, the kids would read it and remember it,” Hedges said.

When Hedges was bucked from a horse and broke his back in 1990, he had time and really set to work on “The Last Buckaroo.”

“I wanted to tell my kids about what it was like when I was younger working on the big ranches in Elko County. I wanted them to know what it was like in the days when we had big crews with eight, 10 or 12 buckaroos on a crew and you camped in tipi tents as a horse wrangler,” Hedges said.

“Buckaroos are the guys who make 100 percent of their living working on the horse.”

In the 1970s, Hedges said the government and environmentalists were beginning to intervene on the range. Although he said a lot of the changes were positive, the way of life he and fellow buckaroos loved was fading.

“We made a lot of mistakes and we were running ranches the way they were 100 years before,” Hedges said. He added the smaller outfits were really progressive, but the large ranches he primarily worked on weren’t.

Although there are still buckaroos, the way of life Hedges said he wrote about no longer exists and he wanted to preserve it in the pages of his books.

Hedges said his books are largely steeped in history. Some parts explain the conflicts between sheepmen and cattlemen; others describe the fear during an influenza outbreak in the 1920s in Nevada.

“I didn’t know how to tell my kids about it,” Hedges said.

He said his stories also show how ranchers were forced to be willing sellers and how smaller ranches began to fade away because they could no longer make ends meet with new government restrictions and environmental lawsuits.

When the “The Last Buckaroo” was first printed in 1995, it immediately developed a following. However, there weren’t very many copies. By 1998, copies were going for upwards of \$50 or more on Amazon.

Sigman, who is the former President and CEO of Republic Pictures, known for producing some of the great western movies, managed the heritage of the studio for almost 10 years and “developed a deep interest in keeping alive the heritage and culture of our American West period,” he said.

As his interest in western culture flourished, he managed to get his hands on a copy of “The Last Buckaroo” and tracked down Hedges who at the time was working on Soldier Meadows Ranch north of Gerlach.

Sigman took it upon himself to start his own publishing company and republish Hedges book.

“It just shocked me how popular it got,” Hedges said.

Hedges still had more stories to tell that weren’t included in “The Last Buckaroo.”

Last year, he was kicked by a young horse and was taken off the ranch to heal from a broken leg.

That’s when he sat down to finish writing “Shadow of the Wind.”

Sigman is again the publisher behind the new book.

“With all of these different industries in America, young people in America don’t pursue these heritage industries,” Sigman said. “Mack (Hedges) works on 100,000 acres, but he’s worked on two million acres and for me it’s a very important part of preserving our western heritage.”

For more information on the book and Hedges, visit www.CowboyBooksandMusic.com. Copies of “Shadow of the Wind” are also available at www.amazon.com, the Western Folklife Center and www.LastBuckaroo.com.