



photo courtesy Mac Hedges

MACKEY HEDGES, BUCKAROO

BY DARRELL ARNOLD



In some circles, Mackey Hedges is known as the author of two outstanding and authoritative novels on buckaroo life – *The Last Buckaroo* and *Shadow of the Wind*.

In other circles – miles-long, horseback circles in the high desert of Nevada – Mackey Hedges is better known as a capable and accomplished buckaroo that aspiring younger buckaroos would do good to emulate.

Mackey Hedges is a man of the West. He’s lived and/or worked in New Mexico, Texas, Louisiana, Nebraska, Kansas, Nevada, Utah, California, Wyoming and Montana. He’ll also confess that he once lived in Illinois, saying, “I was there just long enough to be born. My mother was staying there with relatives while my dad was serving in the Air Force in Europe.”

During his cowboy life, Mac has broken his clavicle, his pelvis, his back, both arms, both legs (one twice) and, most

recently, his shoulder. Mackey will admit that he now considers what the climate might be like on a ranch that offers him a job. “Those 40-below-zero-in-the-winter places would kill me now.” He also allows that he’s not as eager to cast his loop onto a large, wild bovine as he once was. When I’m cowboying by myself, I now give myself plenty of opportunity to consider if there might be another way to get something done.”

The looming question is, “Why does a man who will be 70-years-old next year insist on continuing to live such a strenuous and often perilous lifestyle? Why not find something easier and kick back a little?” It’s a question every lifelong cowboy eventually ponders.

Mackey says, “To answer that, we have to go back and answer the question, ‘Why does anyone do this to begin with?’ I’ve heard all the crap about how ‘I was raised on a ranch and it’s all I know.’ That’s a bunch of B.S. I don’t care

who you are or where you were born, you could have always done something else.

“Look at all the ranch kids that grow up and move to town. They didn’t do that because they were born there. Some of the best hands I’ve worked with have backgrounds that are totally unrelated to ranch work. You start out doing this kind of work because you’re hung up on the cowboy image, usually in your teens. If you stick with it long enough, you get halfway good at it, and so, then you do it because it makes you feel good to know that you can do something special and a little better than others. That’s usually when you’re in your 20s.

“Then you reach a point where you keep on doing it because it’s easier than trying to learn another trade. By then you are in your 30s and probably starting a family. After that you keep on doing it because no one else wants to hire you and retrain you. By then you’re in your 40s or older.

“Then you reach a point like where I’m at today. You keep it up because you don’t know anything else, and no one wants to hire a broken down old saddle tramp. You have to eat and feed your wife so you just keep on keeping on. But the whole time, you are doing it because you feel like you’re something special, you’re proud of what you do and you want people to know it.” And Mackey adds one more thing. “Ninety percent of cowboying is boring, but the ten-percent that is not is a real adrenaline rush.”

Mackey’s dad was a colonel in the Air Force Reserves, so the family moved around a lot. When he wasn’t on active duty, he involved himself as much as possible in horses and cattle. Says Mackey, “It’s true that my dad worked as a cowboy, and that we ran cattle when I was growing up. But he also ran slot machines, sold insurance and cars and bought, sold and traded guns. His being in the military probably saved us from starving. Every time we were about to go broke, somebody would start a war and he’d get called back up to active duty. He served in WWII in Europe, and in Korea and Vietnam. People tell me that he was one of the best bucking-horse riders that any of them had ever seen, but, by the time I came along, he was riding mostly gentle stuff. He still liked to watch good saddle-bronc riders, and we went to a rodeo almost every weekend.”

Mackey’s first horse-related job came when he was 12. He got hired to feed and saddle ponies at a shopping center pony-ride concession. “I got thirty-five cents an hour,” he remembers. Next, when he was 14, the family moved to

Nebraska. For a time, Mackey worked at a riding stable shoveling manure and taking out hourly riders. Later, he was hired to ride pens at a local feedlot and work on the doctoring crew.

The lifestyle continued evolving from there. Mackey says, “There was a racetrack near Omaha called Aksarben, and, when I could get a ride, I would go down there and hang out. One day I heard about a restaurant owner south of town that raised racehorses. He had a couple of ex-



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cowboys working for him starting the yearlings before they were turned over to the regular trainers. One of these guys asked if I’d like a job helping them with the colts and I said, ‘You bet!’

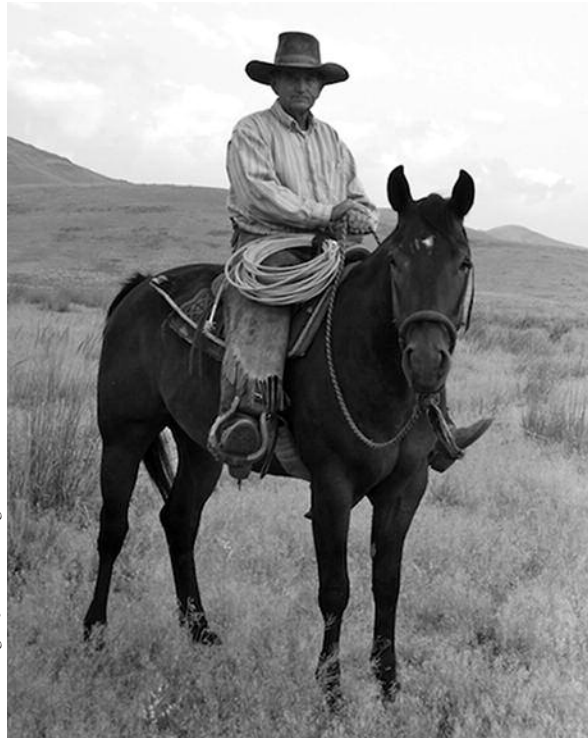
“I was pretty small for my age so they’d sack the yearlings out and get them gentle enough to put a saddle on and throw me up on their backs. They’d pony me around for the first few rides and then turn me loose. Got pretty Western a couple of times. I remember one colt that took off at a dead run, jumped a five-foot fence and half a dozen ditches before he ran back to the corral. Scared the hell out of me, but it shook them other old boys up pretty good, too. Not much they could do but just sit back and watch me making a circle of the county.”

As soon as he was old enough to do it, at age 17, Mackey joined the Marine Corps. He says, “I spent the next four years ‘protecting hearth and home from eminent danger.’” It was just before Vietnam really got heated up, and Mackey was part of what was called “the floating battalion.” His outfit trained for 13 months in Korea, Japan and the Philippines before they were shipped to Thailand and then Vietnam for a month before his overseas tour ended.

Finally discharged at Camp Pendleton in California, Mackey headed straight back to the horses. “The first job I landed,” he says, “was working for a pack station up on Echo Summit in the Sierras. In the winters, I’d work for ranches down in the valley. Then I went to college.

“I went to college because I was staying in a cow camp and this friend of mine, who had worked with me before, showed up and had this really good-lookin’ gal with him. I saw her and said, ‘Man, I’ve got to get me one of those things. Where did you find her?’ He said, ‘Not out here in the brush. You’ve got to go to college.’”

Mackey eventually attended Pierce College at Woodland Hills, California and ended up with an



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out rope me, but I never got fired and was always able to go back, so I guess I wasn’t too bad either.”

A partial list of the outfits Mackey has unrolled a bed on includes: the YP, Soldier Meadows, Geyser Ranch, the IL, Elko Stake Ranch, Coyote Creek, Nevada Nile Feedlots, K Ranch all in Nevada, Bud Wilson’s White Rock Ranch, Ed Pilliken’s Slough House Ranch, Murrell Cattle Company, Irvine Ranch all in California, ZX is in Oregon, Horse Prairie Ranch in Montana, Deseret and Flying D in Utah, Shamrock in Wyoming.

About leaving those outfits Mackey says, “All of them were just me changing ranges. I grew up at a time when the bigger ranches didn’t think anything about cowboys or buckaroos changing. They knew he wasn’t going to stay, and he knew he wasn’t going to stay. You stayed until you knew the country and you rode your horses, and then you went someplace else where you could see more country and ride different horses and do things a little bit different. Next thing you know, changing ranches gets to be a habit.

“Today, things have changed. Outfits want men who are going to stay. You have a different class of people working out on these ranches. They are a little bit more stable than they used to be. We used to have, when I was at the YP, a 300 percent turnover a year in the buckaroo crew. The same thing at the Spanish Ranch, IL, Maggie Creek, the 25, the older ranches. The guys came; they were there six, seven, eight months. I got to be the Jigger Boss on the YP because I stayed longer than anybody else. There were a hell of a lot of guys better than me, but I just happened to be there longer.”

So, what makes a good outfit to work for? Mackey says, “The best outfits depended on who the bosses were. The YP had Jerry Chapin, one of the best buckaroos I ever worked around. He was an exceptionally good hand, that was true enough, but the thing that made Jerry Chapin really good was that he knew how to handle men and he knew how to handle cattle. It made everything a lot better. When I was there, he hired most of the men from Owyhee, if he had a choice. That fit me just perfect. Most of them were already my friends.”

Then what makes a bad outfit? Mackey explains that, too. “Some of the worst outfits I worked for were more ‘cowboy’ outfits. By that I mean short ropes and tie hard and fast. They went out of their way to make my life miserable because I didn’t look like what they thought a cowboy should look like. I looked like a Nevada buckaroo. Now don’t get me wrong, I worked on the Irvine with some tie-hard-and-fast guys and they were as good out in the brush as anybody I ever rode with. There was a kid named Wayne Jewell, who I worked with for three years, and I believe I never saw him miss ten loops outside in all that time. He was just that good. He’d grown up in Texas roping cattle on those wheat pastures.

Associate’s Degree. He also met and married his wife Candace while there, in 1967. Subsequently, and over a period of several years between buckarooing jobs, he attended the University of Nevada at Reno, Northern Nevada Community College in Elko and then Utah State University, from which he received a degree in Animal Husbandry. “By then,” says Mackey, “I was 35-years-old.”

“After we were married,” says Mackey, “I continued to drift around the country working on ranches from Montana to California. If you count the ones that I worked on more than once as separate jobs, it comes to 38. But that isn’t totally accurate, either, because I worked on some of them three and four times. I never was the best man on any of the places that I worked. It seemed that there was always someone there that could out ride me or

"We ran 5,000 head of yearlings and 2,000 head of mother cows at that time and we did a lot of doctoring, especially when the wild oats were growing, cleaning out eyes. Wayne was the buckaroo boss, and he was a fantastic cowboy. I've seen him rope hard and fast while riding colts and they'd go to bucking and it was really pretty to watch.

"I've worked around other guys. Bob Elder on the Irvine was another one. He was the manager of the livestock. They called him the livestock superintendent. He was a Texas man and he was good. I worked with a kid by the name of Joe Gardenhier who came out of New Mexico. One day he'd dally and the next day he'd tie hard and fast. He'd ride anybody's bucking horse. He was a good hand."

Mackey says that it is the people who make a job good or bad. "Horses are horses. You got good ones and you got bad ones. You got good cooks and you got bad cooks. The cooks come and go faster than the buckaroos or cowboys. You can't sit and say 'I like that ranch because of the food, because if you stayed long enough the cook would be gone, too.'"

There has been a lot of discussion in buckarooing circles through the years as to the merits of a ranch having horses that are hard to ride, and there seems to be two schools of thought on the subject. Mackey explains, "One outfit I left not too long ago had some really trashy horses. Two of them went to the National Finals. We were riding them the week before they took them down there.

"There are two things you've got to look at. The guy who owned that ranch told me one time, 'You know when you've got horses like we've got, you get good cowboys, because the others won't stay.' And, to some extent, he's right. About the time some of these green kids get bucked off three or four times in a morning, they're usually gone in a day or so. But the bad part about it, from a business standpoint, is you've got insurance problems.

"At one time, on that outfit, there were four of us – myself, my son, another guy from Alturas, California and a Mexican kid out of California – and all of us were busted up at the same time and surviving on Workman's Compensation. That's hard on the bottom line of an outfit because it causes their insurance to go up higher and higher.

"Believe it or not, the right kind of men will get the job done no matter where they are and no matter what kind of horses they're riding. If you've got the wrong kind of men, you can have the best horses in the world and they still aren't going to get the job done.

"Having said all of that, it's a whole lot more enjoyable, from the working man's standpoint, if you've got nice horses. I'd rather sort cattle on a broke horse than I would go out there on one that, every time you jump him out, he buries his head between his front legs. Granted, it's fun to watch, and a little of it is fun to



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participate in when you are younger, but it sure does not lend itself to a smooth, efficient operation."

Mackey and Candace Hedges have three sons, all of whom had ample time to learn the buckarooing business from their dad as they grew up, and they all plied that trade for a time. Today, their oldest son Buck has an alfalfa farm in southern Idaho and his wife raises horses. Jed, the middle son, day works around Winnemucca, but brings home his real paycheck by working in the gold mines. Their youngest son Sam tried the mines, but didn't like it and went back to making a more enjoyable, if less lucrative, living buckarooing on the Treetop Ranch, a big outfit in Oregon.

So how did a life-long man of the saddle end up authoring one of the best buckarooing novels ever written? Mackey says, "The reason I wrote *The Last Buckaroo* was that I got bucked off in 1990 and broke my back. I was laying there in the bed, and the doctors had told me I might never ride again, and I was feeling pretty discouraged. I was being a real pain in the rear to everybody who had to deal with me so my wife said, 'Why don't you write some of your stories for the kids?' There's a lot of wisdom in a wife.

"I based the book on my adventures and the adventures of other cowboys. All cowboys have basically the same stories to tell. People come up to me and say 'Hey, that episode in your book reminded me of the same thing that happened to me.'"

Both of Mackey's books can be found in bookstores around the West. They're also available online at Cowboybooksandmusic.com. The website includes a video profile of Mackey Hedges.



Sigman Rides to the Rescue

Mackey Hedges first book, *The Last Buckaroo*, was popular enough that all copies eventually sold out. Publisher Gibbs Smith elected not to reprint the novel and turned the publishing rights over to Mackey Hedges.

One day, Mackey got an e-mail from Robert Sigman, President and CEO of Republic Studios. Like so many of his generation, though, he didn't have real-life experience as a cowboy, Sigman had a fascination for the man on horseback. A friend of his told him that the best book on buckarooing was *The Last Buckaroo*, so he tried to buy one and couldn't find any. Thus, the e-mail to Hedges.



Hedges recalls, "I was out at Soldier Meadows when I got this e-mail. I didn't know Bob Sigman from anybody. I'd never heard of him. He wanted a book, but I didn't have any copies. They were selling on the internet for \$600 or \$800 for a good one and a used one for \$150 or \$200. He asked why it wasn't in print anymore. I told him I got the publishing rights back and didn't know

what to do with them. One thing led to another and Bob decided to reprint *The Last Buckaroo*, and then offered to print the sequel *Shadow of the Wind*. He and I don't even have a contract. Four times a year he sends me a check. It's the cowboy way."

Sigman says, "As President and CEO of Republic, I was re-introduced to my childhood heroes, and now, I go to meet them. I grew up in Ohio, no cowboys there that I can remember. There is no ranching or cowboying in my family history. I may have ridden a horse at a fair when I was little.

"Through my position and Republic's heritage of Western films, I started getting calls about the library, Western film festivals and, of course, the Golden Boot Awards [presented to actors, stuntmen and others who worked in the Western film industry]. It eventually led to my being asked to join the Board of the Motion Picture Home and the Golden Boot Committee. A vacation led me to Lone Pine (California), where many

Western movies were made. I also managed *Cowboys and Indians* magazine for about a year."

Sigman was really hooked. He even became a member of the Single Action Shooting Society. He says, "I became entrenched in the heritage of the West, and the values of the people – their courtesy and kindness. It was like joining a family."



Bob and Susanne Sigman

He continues, "While even cowboy life shares the many social and political problems of our times, (out there on those ranches) the moral fabric, family values and respect for individuals remains intact, all bound by a deep appreciation for what being an American means."

Sigman and Hedges hit it off, a friendship developed and then Sigman decided to publish Mackey's books. He says, "The Western lifestyle and culture just got under my skin. Mac's books provide a real slice of cowboying, and I wanted to contribute to raising awareness of that culture. My involvement, time and money are my way of honoring those people and that lifestyle."



Today, Sigman maintains an entertainment consulting business, assisting producers, rights holders and individuals in developing distribution and marketing for their projects. He recently helped golfer Tom Watson introduce his "Lessons of a Lifetime" instructional series and is currently working on a project to interview legendary baseball players. In addition, he is working on a documentary on the life of Dale Evans while trying to get *The Last Buckaroo* made into a movie.

