

Chapter 20

BREAKING THE BRONCS

Man and horse have been a vital and remarkable combination for centuries. We have been told for ages that man's best friends are dogs. There are a lot of people who enjoy the companionship of horses just as much as dogs. Dogs make great friends, but horses make great workers. There has in all probability been more written about horses than any other mammal on earth primarily because they are the favorite of many.

It is generally believed that humans first began domesticating horses about 4,000 B.C., and these horses were widely spread by 3,000 B.C. The made-to-order anatomy of horses gives them the ability to make use of their speed to escape predators. Their well-developed sense of balance gives them a strong sense of willing to stop and fight or run when necessary. They have many inherited attributes that have served them and man well over the centuries.¹

Once mankind realized what wild horses could do for them if and when they were trained to serve them, it was off to the races so to speak. The dual functionality of strength and speed was more than they could ever imagined. The only other thing they needed that would make the horse even better, was the addition of the wheel. The combination of the wheel and horse made both indispensable. The world was about to change.

The first evidence of free spinning wheels was found in Mesopotamia where wheels were used only for making pottery and are dated back to pre-3500 B.C. Wheels that were used with non-rotating axles in Hungary date back to circa 3200-3000 B.C. China is given credit for adopting the rotating wheel for chariots that date ranges from 2000-1200 B.C.² Historically, in the early years of human development, inventions that propelled mankind forward took hundreds if not thousands of years to develop and to be applied in beneficial ways.

As man increasingly dominated the horse the world became smaller because people could much more easily travel considerably greater distances in much less time. Prior to the domestication of the horse, gathering a meal was the priority project of the day. With the convenience of horses and wheels, people could focus on many other things not thought imaginable in previous eras. The evolution to bigger and better things was slow, but it had begun. Horses were now a must-have-utility. The empowerment created for mankind was a world changing event. As is the case with almost everything, there is both an upside and a downside. Transportation made it possible and easier to go to war. The trade and bartering system was greatly expanded. And power was connected to ownership and wealth.

The simple definition of a bronco or bronc is a wild or untamed horse that is characteristically difficult to ride. Riders beware, in other words, your odds of staying in the saddle on the back of an unbroken horse are not high!

Bucking comes naturally to horses and is a defensive mechanism of horse behavior. It is an instinctive natural movement of lowering their head and raising their two hind legs as high in the air as possible while simultaneously kicking out. An unbroken horse is hoping this movement will be powerful enough to unseat the rider.³

It is generally believed that horses developed bucking in the wild to protect themselves from feline predators such as mountain lions, who would attack horses by dropping onto their backs from above. Thus, for a human to safely ride a horse, the horse has to be desensitized to the presence of something on its back and to learn not to kick out with both hind legs while saddled and being ridden. Nonetheless, because the instinct is always there, bucking can still occur for a number of reasons – it is easy to imagine the primary one being the realization that bucking the rider off results in not having to work.⁴ This may very well be where the term “horse sense” came from. What horse wants to be jabbed in the flanks all day by a cowboy wearing spurs.

Catching, breaking and taming wild horses is a hard-learned craft that requires disciplined experience and a certain set of honed skills. The historical tradition is to round up wild horses off the range and then train them as quickly as possible to be ridden or driven pulling a wagon or other conveyance. Training horses to accept a rider was for a cowhand generally known as a *rough rider*. Rough riders could quickly mount an unbroken horse with the help of other cowboys, primarily in a corral or holding pens and ride the horse until it is considered *bucked out*. The widely used term describes a horse that has become too tired to continue resisting what’s on its back. The general idea is to just simply wear the horse down to the point where it quits bucking.

There are many different variations of breaking a horse that have been tried, but the most widely used and generally accepted is what Fred Darge depicted in his action filled paintings. Most rough riders were commonly very experienced horsemen who knew their trade of training unbroken horses and had that very special set of skills that is required for success.

Just such a rough rider was the legendary Samuel Thomas Privett, Jr., born December 29, 1864, in Williamson County, Texas. Privett’s father was a cattle rancher in Erath County who always needed broncs to be broken and tamed. Young Samuel started his career of breaking broncs at a very early age and by the time he was just twelve years old had already established a reputation as a capable horseman and bronc rider.

Unfortunately, Privett was very badly injured and left with a horribly disfigured face from a freak accident involving dynamite on his father’s ranch when he was thirteen years old. This terrible accident also claimed the majority of his sight in one eye. Since young Samuel had red hair and now had a very badly disfigured face, his brother gave him the nickname of “Booger

Red” to account for his disfigurement. The nickname name of Booger remained with him the rest of his life. It became a name that caught people’s attention even before he became a famous rodeo star.

It took Booger six plus long hard months to recover from the painful burns and scars to his disfigured face. Sadness seemed to be a way of life for the Privett family. Within a year and a half after the accident both of his parents had died. Samuel Privett, Sr. died of Bright’s disease, a chronic inflammation of the kidneys thought not to be hereditary at the time. Booger and his siblings were left on their own. It was mutually decided to sell the family ranch and the children went their separate ways. Booger bought a small ranch near Sabinal, Uvalde County and continued breaking horses and improving his riding skills. Around 1888, for unknown reasons he sold the ranch and he and an uncle departed together for West Texas.

Booger found employment on a cattle ranch twelve miles south of Sonora in Sutton County. And, as expected, he was a rough rider breaking horses. Wherever he went, his reputation as a top-notch bronc rider followed him. He became the go-to-man for many ranchers in the area and they enlisted his services for their unbroken horses. Booger had the distinct ability to ride horses that others were unable to ride and train. Over the years many stories had been told and retold about his keen instincts associated with breaking and training horses. His talent for breaking broncs led to financial success. The profitable well-paid profession allowed Booger to save his hard-earned money. He eventually moved to San Angelo where he purchased a wagon yard with the money earned from bronc riding.

The best short description of a wagon yard is a campground. Before the invention and popularity of the automobile, the mode of transportation was saddle horses and horses pulling wagons and surreys. Many times, a trip to and from town to pick up supplies was too long to be made in one day and an overnight stay was required. In that case, one would often put up in a wagon yard and spend the night. The yard was not unlike the present-day camp grounds with cars, campers and people all congregated together. In their day they were very useful and popular.

It seemed that no matter where Booger resided, his loyal following of area ranchers followed him to his new wagon yard location and would bring him horses to tame. Booger was never afraid of work. With two businesses to manage, he was always kept busy.

Booger was very sensitive and self-conscious about his facial deformities from the horrifying painful burns and scars. He decided for better or worse, to make the best of an unfortunate situation and started introducing himself as Booger Red, “the ugliest man living or dead.” It didn’t take long for people to accept Booger for his pleasant self-conscious personality and his amazing ability to ride horses that were thought to be un-rideable. For Booger it was how he made his living and he considered it all in a day’s work. Plus, the pay was pretty darn good.

Booger's pleasant personality eventually caught the captivating eye of a young lady by the name of Mary (Mollie) Frances Webb at a local preacher's house in Bronte, Coke County, located approximately midway between Abilene and San Angelo. They were married on December 29, 1895. Mollie was just fifteen years old and Booger was thirty-three. It became a remarkable marriage that would last a life-time and produced seven children.

Booger and bride Mollie continued to make their home in San Angelo and operate the wagon yard, breaking wild horses for area ranchers. As it turned out, Mollie became an



Samuel Thomas Privett, Jr. aka "Booger Red", Photograph Courtesy of Pan-Pacific International Exposition

accomplished horsewoman in her own right. So much so that the couple who loved horses came up with a great idea. They decided to start their own traveling Wild West show named the "The Booger Red Wild West Wagon Show." It became a very popular regional show with Booger, the main attraction riding bucking broncs, Mollie doing trick riding and six of the children doing trick riding and roping. It was also good advertising. Booger maintained his

astounding reputation of never being thrown from a horse and never getting off a horse until the ride was over.

Eventually, as would be expected records were broken. During a performance, one of the horses fell on him and broke his leg. Booger, being the World Champion bronc rider, refused to get off the horse and waited for the horse to right itself and calm down before he dismounted. He always maintained a standing offer of \$100 to anyone who could bring him a horse that he could not ride. The \$100 bill never had to leave his pocket. Booger was an exception in talent and grit among his peers and competition. He had a lifetime achievement of winning twenty-three first prizes at various rodeo competitions, including the 1904 World's Fair in St. Louis.

In 1920 Booger and Mollie sold their entire livestock and ranch holdings and moved to Miami, Oklahoma. As always, times were changing and family-owned Wild West shows were being replaced by large companies operating traveling circuses with multiple acts that even included exotic wild animals. They could travel anywhere in the United States on a train, pitch a big tent, commonly known as the "Big Top", and attract large crowds.

At 56 years of age Booger realized he couldn't continue to ride broncs forever. His wisely decided to retire at the top of his career. He was a true legend that the crowds would never forget. He and Mollie were content to set up in the grand stands and watch others ride the bucking, jumping, snorting and hoof stomping thundering broncs. One would think that after all those years, both Booger and Mollie could enjoy sitting back and reliving the many memories.

Within two weeks of his last ride, Samuel Thomas Privett, Jr. was on his deathbed dying of Bright's disease inherited from his father. He died in March 1924 surrounded by Mollie and family. Booger Red is buried near his home in Miami, Oklahoma.

In various interviews, Mollie estimated that her husband rode an approximately 25,000 plus broncs in his lifetime. In 1975, fifty years after his death, Samuel Thomas Privett, Jr., "Booger Red" was rightfully inducted into the Rodeo Hall of Fame in the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City. The recognition was more than a well-deserved honor for an outstanding horseman who became a true historic legend in his lifetime! ⁵

As with most things in this world, times, customs and attitudes change, especially when there is an opportunity to make a profit. What started out as work also became entertainment. Smart promoters always see opportunities that other people fail to recognize. The modern-day rodeo was an opportunity that finally attracted the promoters that thought they could make a profit. As always, new ventures start out small and slowly, but as time progresses with success, they gather more and more enthusiasts and followers.

The American English word *rodeo* is taken directly from the Spanish word *rodeo*, which roughly translates into English as *round up*. ⁶ The modern-day rodeo as we know it was

derived from the cattle industry of the early American West. The origin of the cattle industry in the southwest began with the Spanish and Mexican settlers. Although the Spanish brought horses and cattle to the southwest beginning in 1519 and 1521, it wasn't until the early 1700's that cattle became an industry with the developments of the early settlements and ranches along the lower Rio Grande. It seems cattle and horses naturally go together because cattlemen cannot need horses to work their livestock. The people that put it all together into a productive and manageable venture were the Mexican vaqueros with their skills at handling both cattle and horses. ⁷

In the early 1820s the first Anglo-American settlers started moving into Texas. As these settlers moved from Southeast Texas to Central Texas to West Texas and other settlers moved to these areas from South Texas, a blending of the Anglo and Spanish-Mexican cultures occurred. With the Spanish-Mexican knowledge of riding, roping, herding, and branding available, events occurred that culminated in the Southwest cattle industry. The era of the American cowboy had begun ⁸

The end of the Civil War brought about a chain of events that changed not only the Southwest, but the entire country. There was a classic economic equation of supply and demand developing in the Southwest and Midwest. The Southwest had a vast oversupply of cattle and the Midwest had huge demands for these cattle. The job was to gather and move 5,000,000 plus head of Longhorn cattle to the railheads in Kansas. As the cattle drives to the north began a lot of jobs were created for able young cowboys looking for work. The remarkable skills of the range cowboy were to eventually lead to competitive contests that ultimately resulted in standard events for rodeo. The cattle and horse skills developed and used by the early vaqueros, ranch hands and drovers in their daily work continued to evolve until the professional sport of rodeo was established for both men and women. ⁹

The abundance of wild cattle and horses and an Eastern market for beef after the Civil War led to cattle drives to the railheads, which made ranching a profitable business. The adventure and independence of herding cattle to market or working on the open range caught the imagination of many young men seeking jobs. They bought saddles and signed on with an outfit driving cattle. Even though herding cattle on trails to market was a job sought by many, it was often a very difficult and dangerous occupation.

The range cowboy and the cattle industry flourished in the Southwest, especially in West Texas and the Panhandle of Texas, with the establishment of large ranches such as the JA, XIT, Waggoner, Four Sixes, and Pitchfork, along with many smaller ranches. Open ranges were fenced in the late 1880s and the cattle industry changed to a more confining job for the range cowboy. When communities sprang up, social occasions, especially Fourth of July celebrations, gave cowboys a chance to challenge the bronc riding and roping skills of cowboys from other ranches. Soon, local contests became annual events.

Since the cowboy's work was often seasonal, some cowboys also signed up to exhibit their skills with wild-west shows such as the first one William F. Cody (Buffalo Bill) staged in his home town of North Platte, Nebraska, on the Fourth of July, 1882. Wild-west shows led exhibitions of rodeo skills in the East and eventually in Europe. By the 1890s rodeo had become a spectator event in the West.

Rodeos became an annual event in many places. One of the earliest "bronco-busting contests" on record was held on July 4, 1869, in Deer Trail, Colorado Territory. Two of the earliest rodeos on record were held in Pecos, Texas, in 1883, the first to give prizes, and in Prescott, Arizona, in 1888, the first to charge admission. The first indoor rodeo took place at Fort Worth in 1917. By the late 1920s rodeo had become an annual event in some places in the East. In New York City, the Madison Square Garden Rodeo often lasted for thirty days. It was followed by a two-week rodeo in Boston. This gave rodeo national publicity and established the foundation for what is now a national entertainment venue.¹⁰

As rodeo grew, many new organizations were formed and all vied for members, recognition and dominance. It is still going on today. Rodeo entertainment is no different than football, baseball, basketball and many other sports. They are all after the network television contract and the associated dollars that come from being recognized on national television as entertainment.¹¹



Calgary Stampede, Photograph Courtesy of Wikipedia



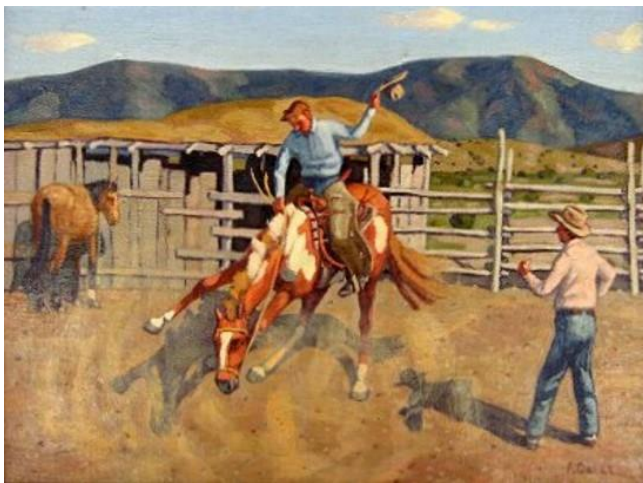
Annual Stamford, Texas July 4th Rodeo Poster from 1930, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Robert E. McKee III



Bronco Buster, Burnham Ranch, 12" x 16" Oil on Canvas Board, Circa 1937, Collection Mr. & Mrs. Robert E. McKee III

There is no other image of the early wild west that brings back romantic imaginations than a bronc buster perilously situated atop a wild bucking horse, holding on for dear life with only one hand while using the other for balance. It can only be described as living dangerously because of the many occasions it ends quicker than expected. The horse has no interest in becoming a servant to man and having to work most of the day for the rest of his life and the rough rider is bound and determined that from now on he is going to be the boss with no questions asked. It is an age-old custom of man versus horse. The horse may win temporarily, but in the end, man eventually takes control.

Fred Darge produced many paintings of a bronc buster struggling to endure the contortions of a wild horse determined to pitch him to the ground. Breaking broncs was every day ranch life and considered all in a day's work. It was a popular subject matter that people liked because it spurred their imaginations and they enjoyed looking at the drama and imagined the snorting and thunder of the horse's hooves hitting the ground. These particular scenes may have been one of Darge's most popular subject matters. They ranged in all sizes in order to accommodate the buyer's budget. A successful artist must paint what people want to buy.



The Outlaw, New Mexico, 9" x 12", Oil on Canvas Board, Circa 1950's, Collection Mr. & Mrs. Robert E. McKee III, Man calmly standing in the corral thought to be Fred Darge.

Over the years there have been a number of artists who have painted the subject matter of bucking horses with dramatic skill and success. Famous artists Charles M. Russell, Frederic Remington, Charles Schreyvogel, William R. Leigh and Charlie Dye, are but a few of those who quickly come to mind. Their paintings are so life like and powerful they are often remembered forever in viewer's minds. Darge, unlike the above mentioned artists who painted the dramatic pictures of bucking horses, never strayed from his often-repeated original objective:

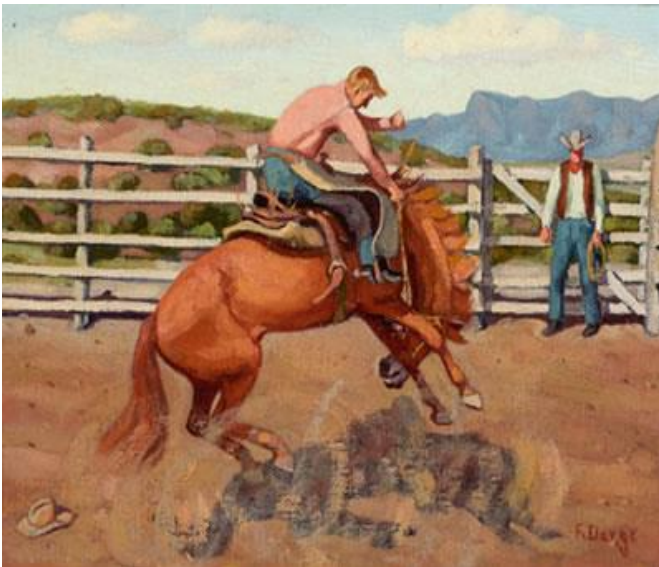
“I want to register the ranchman as he lives today, his daily habits, his mode of living and doing business, before this part of the country (meaning Texas) gives way to progress and the civilization of the big cities, which today, in many instances, has taken the romance out of the West, paved roads instead of trails, automobiles instead of horses”.



Bucking Bronc, Burnham Ranch, 10" x 12", Oil on Canvas Board, Courtesy Heritage Auctions 2011

Darge instead gave us a hard-working ranchman or hired cowhand doing the necessary job of taming a wild bronc that can be used on the ranch for working with cattle or other horses.

His attention to detail is well illustrated in this small painting. He painted the dust and shadows as well as the bronc rider's hat which had been dislodged onto the dirt. One has to wonder if the cowhands on the sidelines were needed to rescue the rough rider.



Strawberry Roan, Size Unavailable, Oil on Canvas Board, Courtesy Heritage Auctions 2011

In Strawberry Roan, Darge aptly executes another bucking *bronc*. The shadow is very well done for a quickly moving horse. Note the hat on the ground. This time Darge moved it to the left side of the painting. Maybe he was trying to keep it out of the dust for the rider. Notice in all four paintings how skillfully Darge has stirred up the dust. You can almost hear the thunder of the hooves hitting the ground. These paintings may be small, but they are large in action.

Darge's bronc scenes were perfect works of art for those who lived and loved the ranching life as well as for collectors who lived vicariously through the art of the

American West. Darge fulfilled the thirst of masculine fantasy for the market of the bronc buster.