

Profile of a Wrangler: Vern Hammond

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROB MCINTOSH, DEBRA J. ANDERSON & LARRY DOBBS

From the moment I was introduced to the history of the Old West and the expansive countryside where so many stories and events took place, I've wanted to learn as much as I could about the people and places. So when I was offered the chance to meet and talk with a former Wyoming cowboy, Vern Hammond, I could not contain my excitement.

I met my first "modern day" cowboy when I was 23, but was either too shy or too smitten to ask him much about his way of life. I just knew I was enthralled. So when Vern began recollecting his boyhood, I simply listened to him tell his story of how life was many years ago in the small community of Thermopolis in rural Wyoming. I felt as if I was a little kid who was sitting at his feet, staring up at him in awe and listening to his tales. While I was playing and dreaming of the life when I was 11, here was this man who actually was bucking and breaking broncos by that age. When you live in horse country, you start early in life.

He started out with the smaller broncos, but they packed a punch just as hard as the big ones. Just picture him looking into a corral of wild broncos. As he stands there, gazing upon his new assignment, all he can see is a massive body of chestnut brown, its sides slowly moving in and out with little effort and even less sound. The boy is paralyzed with questions. He doesn't know enough yet to have fear. Then a voice behind him says, "No, not that one Vern. This one." The boy moves his head and sees a far more welcoming critter whose size even allows a little daylight around his edges. Vern is about to try his hand at bucking broncos and was sure glad it is the smaller one he gets to tackle first. At 11 years of age, that huge monster he first saw would have killed him for sure.

Vern had learned a lot watching his father, who was known for his horse skills in Nebraska before moving further west to help with the horses needed in the oil fields for hauling. So when they came to permanently settle in Wyoming in 1931, it was only natural for Vern to begin busting broncos and herding cattle. Vern started out with Shetlands, as he was still a youngster and small enough to ride them and teach them their "proper manners". But it wasn't long before he was taking on the real thing.



Photo by Rob McIntosh

When Vern was breaking broncos (he was still in grade school), he cottoned to a horse that was a good size for him and had the potential of being a good wrangling horse. He mustered up five dollars and bought that horse outright. He saddle-broke him, trained him, got him where he would do any rider proud. After a year his eyes lit on a beautiful black gelding that also had not been broke. Well, Vern knew he had to have that gelding. He sold his first horse for fifteen dollars and bought that stallion. He broke him with his brother's help, trained him, and then he rode him all the years he worked at ranches. A man had to be one with his horse if he was going to be any sort of wrangler. Vern's money was well spent. (Later on Vern was to trade that stallion for a Morgan mare which he kept until he was called up for military duty.)

During his summers he would hire on at one of the local ranches and hone his skills. When he was a mere 13 years old, he was put up for a job at the Padlock Ranch outside of Thermopolis as a wrangler. Seems the foreman didn't cotton to this idea very much, though, so he told Vern, "No, you're too young, you can't handle the job." When Vern told his buddy who put him up what had happened, the buddy went back and talked to the foreman again. Wasn't too long before Vern got the job as wrangler. As Vern says, "After that, the foreman and I never did see eye to eye much on things..."

The first summer Vern was put in charge of the horses that needed more reminding of past training than breaking. Vern calls them "...the spoiled ones; sort of forgot how to be a real horse." Along with the job, Vern was set up with his own string of ponies to break and bring along. Every wrangler had his own string. They were responsible for their welfare, upkeep and workability wherever the wrangler settled, whether for a single job or a season. There were a lot of days Vern would have his string on one side of a hill bunched up, only to find a straggler on the other side of the valley. So off he'd go to round up the straggler and then look back and see he had a dozen more. This process went on time after time after time. Vern rode a lot of hills in those days.

Vern's wrangling and cow punching days were mostly spent at the Padlock Ranch, a majority of that during the summer so as not to interfere with his schooling in Thermopolis. There wasn't much time for socializing of any kind. Vern was able to go home twice each summer, but only for a handful of days at best. He was too vital to the ranch crew, and every day gone meant more work to be

done by the other hands. The ranch began as a sheep ranch, but in later years converted to cows, giving Vern experience with both. Rarely did you see the two mixed together, though, as for the most part sheep ranchers and cow ranchers had few civil words to say to one another due to the severe culture clash. Cattle graze on grass; sheep eat it down to the ground, which makes the next year's crop harder to come by. No matter to Vern, he went where he was needed, but he mostly worked with cattle. One has to truly love this way of life to survive it. Vern did love it, he did survive it, and if it hadn't been for one of life's little glitches, he would be on his own ranch today in the vast landscape of Thermopolis.

As was true for most men Vern's age, WWII called him in to service. He joined up with the Army Air Corps, the father to our present US Air Force. When his war service mission was complete, he returned home and hooked up with ranch owner and friend Frank Smith to work on his spread. Frank's herd was an appreciable size to where he could cut out a dozen or so heifers for Vern. These heifers were range-fed along with Frank's herd but with the agreement that when Vern's herd multiplied to a hundred count, Frank would stake Vern and help him find a spread to begin his own future in ranching.

Frank was one of the few ranchers who mixed raising cattle and sheep. When it came to be sheep-shearing time early on in this venture, stomach ulcers kept Frank down, so he sent Vern over to Worland in an old

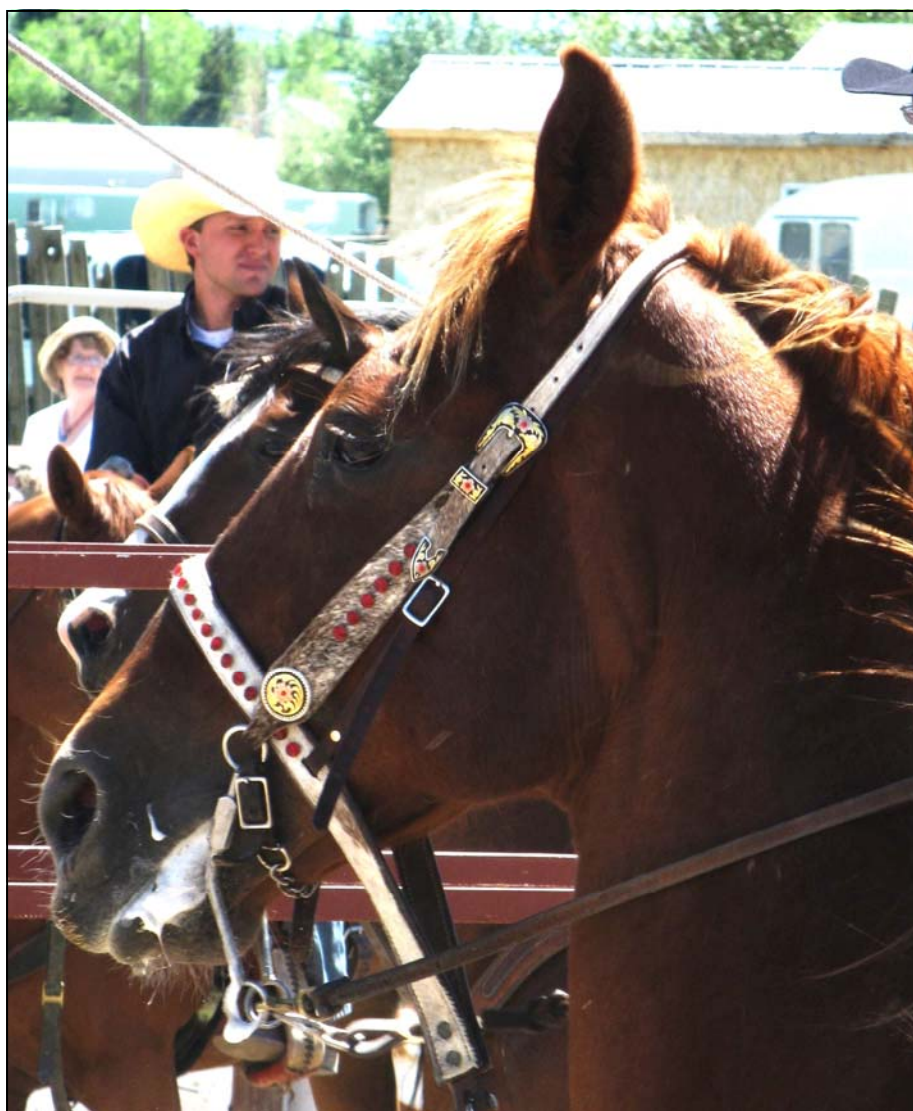


Photo by Debra J. Anderson



Photography by Larry Dobbs

but sturdy pick-up to requisition the necessary supplies needed. Keep in mind this was in the day when roads were actually ruts in the sometimes frozen, sometimes muddy earth that made any traversing bone-jarring at best. But Vern accepted the challenge and returned many hours later only to find his friend Frank gravely ill. A doctor had been summoned and later that evening Vern received word that Frank had died. With that, so did Vern's dream of owning and working his own ranch. (Frank's son, Stan, eventually became Wyoming's State Treasurer, a position he held for 20 years until he retired.)

During this time, Vern had met his future bride, Billie, who hailed from the mining town of Gebo, which lays northwest of Thermopolis. Realizing that his ranching days were pretty much over, Vern sold all his tack so that Billie would have a suitable wedding ring. To this day he jokes that she keeps his cowboying days alive by wearing his tack. Spoken like a true cowboy, straight from the heart.

Vern & Billie remained in Thermopolis for a number of years where they raised their two children and Vern was employed as an Empire Oil store proprietor and school bus driver. Eventually they moved to Cheyenne where Vern was a civilian employee of the U.S. Air Force for some 25 years. But he never left his cow punching and wrangler days far away in his memories. It was a unique way of life; it made for unique memories and camaraderie. Even when talking to Vern today, his eyes take on a glow when thinking of those days of bustin' broncs, working on the Padlock, being good at what he did.

The cowboy way of life is still out there in our Wyoming hills, alive and well. There are younger Verns out there doing the same thing he did so many years ago now. When I drive down a country road and see one or more cowboys working out on the range, I have to stop and take pause at their skills, dedication and love of a way of life that hopefully will live on and on and on. It's what Vern loved; it's a way of life I hope will never fade away. It's tough duty; it's hard on the soul. And it carries with it a magic and mystique that touches each and every one of us in some way. Long live the cowboy way of life. Can you imagine our lives without it?