

Learning the Ropes

From shoeing horses to roping cattle, students live the cowboy life at Arizona Cowboy College.

by Kathy Khoury

Day three of Cowboy College, and 13 aspiring cowboys and I are finally ready, more or less, to make ourselves useful on a real, working ranch. It feels like less, though, when, within an hour of riding out, we find ourselves face to face with a bull.

For the past two days, this class of cowboys-in-waiting has prepared for this moment. We've honed our skills at the Lorill Equestrian Center in Scottsdale, practicing riding and roping for 12 hours a day. In between, we've learned the basics of Arizona cattle ranching — everything from pasture rotation to grazing on public land. Now we're here in Mayer for four days of hands-on experience at Ed Hanks' Triangle M Ranch, one of a dozen ranches to benefit from free help courtesy of the college.

Our first assignment: Find and bring in a missing cow and calf and move this bull to water. The only problem is, it doesn't seem the bull wants to go.

Moving a cow is supposed to be like shooting pool. "Every cow has a bubble," says Lloyd Bridwell, who owns and runs the college. "The longer it's been since it's had contact with humans, the bigger the bubble." If we penetrate the bull's bubble at the right spot, in theory, he should move in the opposite direction, like a pool ball tapped by a cue. Unfortunately, this bull must have spent a lot of time with people, and recently, because his bubble is smaller than ours. When he does move, it's *at* us, in the opposite direction we want him to go. And it doesn't get any better.

The bull is clearly in control. After scattering startled students in all directions, he leads us on a spirited chase up and down nearly vertical drops, over rocky washes, across prickly pear and cactus claw and through stands of scrub oaks with threateningly low branches before backing obstinately into a cluster of bushes from which he won't be budged.

As the sun begins to sink, we give up and head back to camp. Our first mission was a complete failure, but our spirits soar. We're riding across a sage-covered plain into the lowering sun. In



Bridwell (left) got the idea for Cowboy College while he was recovering from an illness. "You, too, can be a truck driver; you, too, can be a poodle groomer," he says, reciting television ad slogans. "I thought, you, too, can be a cowboy."

spite of all evidence to the contrary, we're feeling like cowboys.

The students here have found their way to this unusual vocational school for various reasons, but with one purpose — to learn what a cowboy's life is *really* like. Arizona Cowboy College is one of only a handful of places in the country where people who were not born to ranching can learn the declining art of cowboying. And unlike Texas, where pickups have largely replaced cowboys, Bridwell tells us Arizona's rugged terrain ensures it will remain one of the few places where cowboys will endure for as long as there are ranches.

Of course, there is no shortage of places in Arizona where people can go to ride out on the range. But Bridwell claims Arizona Cowboy College is different. *City Slickers* need not apply. None of that namby-pamby dude ranch stuff for us. No siree. We've come to do it all: tend and care for horses; tack, rope and ride; shoe a horse; sleep on the hard, dusty ground; even help brand, notch and castrate bulls.

A well-liked teacher, longtime contract hand and son of a son of a cowboy, Bridwell got the idea for Cowboy College while he was confined to the house recovering from an illness. It was the first time he had seen daytime television, and he was intrigued by the unceasing advertisements for vocational schools.

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So Bridwell developed a curriculum, and advertised for six days in *The Arizona Republic*. That was nearly 10 years ago. He's never had to advertise again, and business has never been better. The number of working cowboys may be on the wane, but the romantic idea of the cowboy is stronger than ever.

Riding a wave national media attention, Bridwell has had to increase the number of sessions this year from three to 10 to accommodate the demand. Even with the added sessions, classes have swelled. A class I attended last year had just three students. This one, with 13, is the largest to date. The reason? Easy. Everyone wants to be a cowboy — even if only for a week.

A few people come to Cowboy College because they truly want to work on a ranch. But more and more students are adventure seekers. They know every line of every John Wayne movie, and for the \$850 to \$950 tuition, they come here to live their dream.

Students in this class have come from all over the country and range in age from 27 to 72. A sampling of their occupations includes middle school English teacher, orthodontist,

interior decorator, commercial airline pilot, Snap-on Tools dealer, office manager, information systems manager and homemaker. Three are women. They're all cowboys to Bridwell, who bristles at the inevitable mention of the word "cowgirl."

"Let me get this out of the way right now," he says on the first day of class. "A cowboy is a job description. It has nothing to do with gender."

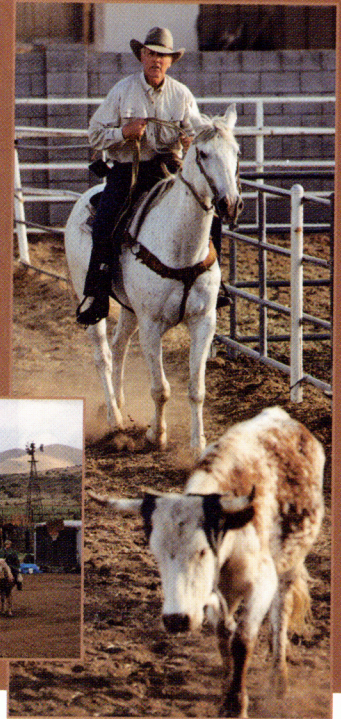
Cowboy College seems to attract people at the crossroads, and two students are here to investigate a career change. Mike, a former Tucson podiatrist, is polishing his skills before taking a summer job as a hand on a dude ranch outside Jackson Hole, Wyoming. Then there's Ron, who has a master's degree in construction management and works for his family's Vermont-based construction company. Sitting on a white plastic chair on the first day of class, he confidently sports mirrored shades and a crisp white cowboy hat. Musing about his future, he says, "I'm either going to go where the money is, or be a cowboy."

Without a doubt, there isn't much money in cowboying. The often-quoted figure is about \$5 an hour, but working cowboys will tell you that figure is based on an eight-hour, five-day work week. In reality, cowboys can work from sunup to sundown six days a week.



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It's realistic to expect around \$800 per month plus board and beef, says J.R. Jones, a Cowboy College instructor who is a third-generation cowboy and champion bull-rider. In addition, it can take a full year's wages to purchase all the equipment a cowboy needs: saddle, hats, boots, spurs and rope. It's a dangerous job, too, ranked the third worst in the country taking into account both pay and risk.

"It's a simple rule that if you work with horses, you're going to get hurt," Bridwell says. And forget about workers compensation. Unless they are seriously injured, cowboys will continue to work through an injury rather than risk a reputation as a slacker. The ranching community is small and tightly knit; word gets around.

Take Jones, for example. At 26, he has broken 23 bones including his tailbone, every finger on both hands, both wrists and ankles, assorted ribs and an arm. But he can count on one hand the number of times he's seen a doctor.

Despite the working conditions, stories of converts are legion. Rocco Wachman is a Cowboy College instructor and a recovering "hypertensive New York Italian." Wachman says Bridwell once ordered him to leave the ring during a riding lesson and never come back. He did come back, though, and ultimately took a \$50,000 per year pay cut for

what he considers the privilege of working on a ranch.

"I was the original *City Slicker*," he quips. "The only difference between me and Billy Crystal is that he went back to work and I didn't."

So what's the attraction? Cowboys aren't very talkative as a group — something to do with long hours spent with cows, I suspect — but ask them what they like about cowboy-ing and they wax poetic. They talk about riding alone through some of the most remote and unspoiled landscapes remaining in the West. They recount stories that most people can only dream of, and they speak of working in an industry where promises are still sealed, and kept, with a handshake.

But the truth is, it isn't possible to really know what it's like to be a cowboy unless you've done it. That's the beauty of Cowboy College.

"You're never going to be a cowboy in a week," says Larry, a 53-year-old Snap-on Tools dealer, at the end of the course. "But for that time, I sure felt like one."

Now back in Scottsdale on the last night of cowboy college, 13 fledgling cowboys are in high spirits having just had their first hot shower in a week. The night is a celebration, complete with awards and jokes and songs sung to strumming guitars for the last time around a campfire.

The show-stopper is a little ditty Bridwell belts out that begins, "Stop you son-of-a-bitch, my ass is killing me."

At this, the whole class erupts into laughter. When the hilarity subsides, classmates begin to reflect on their experiences, and more than a few vow never again to complain about the price of a steak.

Gordy, a 27-year-old middle school teacher from upstate New York, says, "I think people came here to live a dream, and some people realized that it was a dream that should have stayed a dream." And him? "I'm not a cowboy," he says. "That's for sure."

But Ron, the 35-year-old construction manager from Vermont resolves to come West to reinvent himself as a cowboy. "I loved everything about it," he says from underneath his now-dusty and well-trampled hat.

I think I know how he feels. While I'm not quite willing to trade in my notebook for a pair of spurs and a saddle, I catch myself plotting a return — the same way I did after my first trip to Cowboy College, by pondering that age-old journalistic question, "Who else could use this story?..."

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