

GOODNIGHT GOES RIDING
And Other Poems

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*This book is dedicated to Earl Pickles,
with whom the author has had the privilege of
co-writing some fine cowboy poems.*

Pickles by Brian Crane



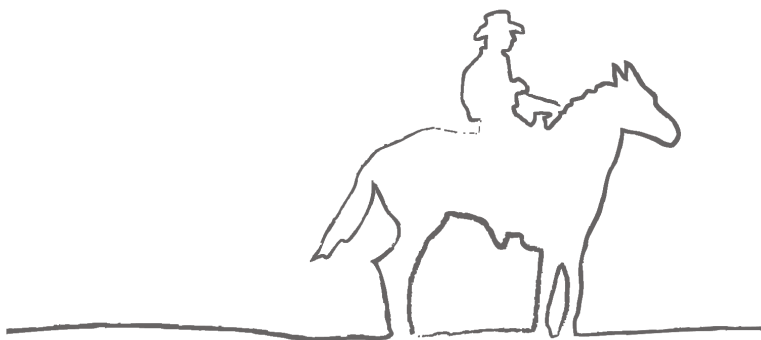
I BOUGHT AN OLD NAG NAMED VINEGAR. THAT HORSE WASN'T WORTH A PLUG NICKEL. NO SELF-RESPECTIN' COWBOY WOULD RIDE'M, BUT I RECKON HE'LL PACK A PICKLE.



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Special thanks to Rod Miller, Cowboy Poet

GOODNIGHT GOES RIDING And Other Poems



Rod Miller

Spur Award-winning poet and author

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FOREWORD

by A.J. Mangum

ROD MILLER first crossed my radar when I became the editor of *Western Horseman* magazine, for which Rod had been a frequent contributor, authoring poems and feature articles on rodeo athletes, musicians, artists and frontier history. In the genre of contemporary western non-fiction, in which the talent pool can be frighteningly shallow, Rod stood out from the crowd as a bona fide journalist and poet, one truly inspired by his subjects, and in possession of the writing chops to tell their stories with honesty, clarity and respect.

In his features and profiles, Rod steers clear of the Marlboro Man mythology that weighs down, even negates, so much of what's presented as journalism about the contemporary West. Instead, he strives to produce lively, meaningful documentation of a culture for which he happens to possess a deep passion. With a reporter's eye, he sees through affectations and clichés, and chases subjects that share a certain rawness, a collective identity shaped by a sense of adventure and a reverence for horses and the natural world. Rod's non-fiction is, at its heart, a modern twist on the real-life saga of the untamed frontier.

Likewise, Rod's poetry is infused with a genuineness that elevates his work above the medium's predictable yarns and gives the reader a front-row seat at a captivating reality-based

dramedy. You observe from a respectful distance the poignant moment shared by a young girl and her horse. You take a seat at the kitchen table in a ranch house in which the “romance of cowboy life” is balanced against the realities of mortgages, droughts and volatile markets. And you’re let in on the West’s unique brand of humor, shaped by hard luck, eccentricity, and the unpredictability of lives shaped by the land, weather and livestock. Rod is a truth teller.

And truth can, on occasion, be dangerous.

There’s an anecdote I’ve never shared with Rod (until now). One morning, more than a decade ago, while I was still with *Western Horseman*, my phone rang, interrupting a hurried round of last-minute proofreading. The first words from the caller: “I got a complaint about an article y’all ran.” The caller directed me to a specific page in that year’s February issue.

I’m sure I sighed heavily and rolled my eyes as I pushed aside a stack of as-yet-unproofed article layouts, pulled the issue in question from my bookshelf, and navigated to the page number the caller had referenced, at which point I likely rolled my eyes yet again.

The caller had used the word “article.” I was sure he wanted to vehemently disagree with the horsemanship regimen prescribed in an instructional piece, or share some seedy gossip about the subject of a recent personality profile. The page in question, though, didn’t contain a section of an “article.” It was home to one of Rod’s poems, a work that contains what is perhaps my favorite Rod Miller storyline.

In the poem, a rancher complains about a hired hand who takes a frustratingly casual approach to his work. The hand is increasingly unreliable; his work goes undone as he wastes the day with catnaps and childish games; he’s incapable of putting work ahead of play, leaving the rancher, who’s narrating the story, with few options. At the end of the poem, said rancher expresses great regret at having to fire

the hand, who is revealed in the poem's final syllable to be the rancher's father.

Despite my dry recap above, the poem is a hilarious, yet profound, commentary on the passing of a ranch from one generation to the next. In my reading (and subsequent overthinking), the son has likely observed his father's role closely and aspired to it for as long as he can recall, but even as he assumes leadership of the family business, has little appreciation for the toll the job will take, or the relief his father must feel in handing over the reins to the outfit.

To continue my over-analysis: The father, after a lifetime of hard labor, has resolved to seize every opportunity to enjoy each moment of his remaining years. In his behavior, which so confuses his son, there's an unbridled joy that brings to mind the antics of many aging cowboys who've been lucky enough to trade the burdens of their work for a brand of overdue wild abandonment. Both the son's consternation and the father's casual lack of concern – over anything – bring smiles to my face, as well as memories of my father and my uncles, any of whom I can picture in the role of the father in Rod's poem.

DEALING WITH PHONE CALLS from confused readers is one of the less appealing line items in a magazine editor's job description, as you're often put in the awkward position of having to tactfully inform a stranger that he might be an idiot. When I landed on Rod's poem, I figured the caller had simply referenced the wrong issue.

"Sir, are you sure you're talking about the February issue?" I (probably) asked. "Because the February issue actually came out in January, so you might be thinking of"

"No, it's the February issue. I'm looking at it right here."

"Do you have the right page number? Because I'm looking at that page, and it's actually not an article. It's a poem by Rod Miller, and"

"That's the one. That's the article I'm talking about."

What followed was simply bizarre.

The caller had taken Rod's clearly fictional poem (written in rhyming verse and illustrated by a cartoon) to be a non-fiction, journalistic report about a ranch on which a senior citizen had been unjustly fired. The caller insisted that the rancher should be ashamed of himself, and demanded both the rancher's name and an apology by the magazine for its unfair reporting of the situation, which seemed to the caller entirely too one-sided. No one had even interviewed the old man.

I swear I am not making this up.

In the background of the call, I could hear excited, angry chatter. The caller wasn't alone. I pictured a kitchen full of people (who somehow had nothing better to do at 10 in the morning) riled up at the treatment of a character in a poem one of them had stumbled across in a magazine that happened to be on the table. They were so upset, they were interrupting one another with imagined observations about the offending "article."

"How could an employer be so...?!?"

"It's age discrimination! It's...!"

"Such a lack of respect for his own...!"

"And it's the older generation that taught us to...!"

I was confident I wasn't the victim of a practical joke. The call was real. At an appropriate gap in the din emanating from the other end of the line, I began improvising for the caller a simplistic explanation for the words (and the cartoon!) that appeared on the page before him.

"Sir," I (probably) began. "This is a poem. You may have noticed it's written in stanzas and the lines rhyme, which isn't a traditional format for the reporting of a news story. This isn't something that actually happened."

I think I then began some misguided attempt at literary analysis: generational perspectives, themes derived from the pressures of ranching economics, potential backstories of the

key characters – all for nought. I think I lost the guy at “This is a poem.”

The call did not end well. By that point, I’d been a magazine editor for a dozen years and had endured hours of unearned abuse from uninformed strangers with an abundance of free time. Whereas I might’ve once allowed even the craziest of callers to believe he’d successfully made his point, for no other reason than to end a call and get back to work, I’d reached a stage at which I was perfectly happy to let a deranged crank bellow into the void as I (at best) half-listened, registering only that he was still consuming oxygen, as I perused paperwork or browsed headlines on the Internet.

When this particular caller realized I wasn’t giving in – that I would not agree to a printed apology, or even agree to characterize the poem in question as a news story steeped in controversy – there was some parting shot about sabotaging newsstand sales in his corner of Oklahoma.

More power to you, I thought, confident neither the caller nor his entourage could possibly have the wherewithal to locate a bookstore or newsstand. Somewhere in the Sooner State’s Osage County, there is a *Western Horseman* subscriber still fuming, his ire unrequited.

The poem in question follows this Foreword.

AS FOR MY POINT: Rod Miller’s work – even his fiction, obviously even his poetry – is steeped in reality. His explanations of a character’s motivations, his descriptions of an environment or a set of sensory experiences or the play-by-play of an action-sequence ... even when they’re pure fiction, even when they’re riotously funny, there’s a vital realism that infuses his work with unquestionable credibility, so much so that, at least for certain categories of readers, the simplest of yarns can be mistaken for hard-hitting news reports. Despite such dangers, that ever-present foundation of truth allows Rod to get past the surface novelty of a subject and offer readers

greater meaning – greater understanding – through vicarious experiences and unexplored viewpoints. It's an end goal to which every writer should aspire.

A.J. Mangum is the editor of Ranch & Reata magazine.

No Enjoyment in Unemployment

His staples won't stick to fence posts,
Nor his brands to a slick calf's hide.
And I'm weary of hearing his lying boasts
About the rank broncs he can ride.

He never remembers to pack a lunch
And he's forever bummin' a smoke;
His turn to buy a round for the bunch
Somehow always finds him broke.

His loops won't fit over a critter's head,
Nor can they find their way to a hock.
He often gets lost right here on the spread
When sent out to gather stock.

The calves he castrates get infection.
The hay he bales turns to mold.
Colts he schools all need correction
If we hope to get them sold.

His saddle horses are cinch-galled
With sore backs and withers fistulous.
His lasso rope is so twisted and balled
And kinked and knotted it's ridiculous.

His tack is always in disrepair.
Horseshoes he nails on never fit.
Compare his saddle to his easy chair
And you'll see where he'd rather sit.

The chaps he borrowed have gone astray.
The spurs I loaned him are missing too.
And I have to follow him around every day
To do the jobs he forgets to do.

I guess you can see why I let him go;
He's the sorriest hand I've ever had.
But, still, I just can't help feeling low
About giving the sack to my Dad.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This collection features poems about the American West. Some conform, more or less, to the styles of rhyme and meter typical of cowboy poetry. Others wander off that trail to include poems with rhyme but no meter and poems with neither rhyme nor meter. Some of my friends in the cowboy poetry universe will find the latter troubling, and a few will dismiss such poems altogether, refusing to even acknowledge free verse as poetry.

But, cowboys routinely break out of the pen and jump fences and shed hobbles and otherwise escape fetters in many aspects of life and, to me, that spirit also applies to poetry. Besides, as my friend DW Groethe puts it, "I don't waste my time on the debate. I have better things to do."

As for the introductory poem, "An Apology to Readers, Sort Of, But More Like an Explanation or Maybe an Excuse," I mean every word of it. Please forgive my poetic inadequacies and cut me some slack.

INTRODUCTION

*An Apology to Readers, Sort Of,
But More Like an Explanation
or Maybe an Excuse*

I don't like poems about writing poems
And the way a verse comes to be;
How I write and erase, rewrite and rephrase
Doesn't matter to anyone but me.

But lately I've gotten more sensitive
To stings from readers' complaints
About imperfect rhymes some of the time,
And syntax that should be better, but ain't.

Or about metaphors whittled square
That don't fit into analogies round;
Or feet that bumble and meters that stumble
And stagger with an offbeat sound.

Writing poems, though, ain't as easy
As it looks from up there on the fence.
When you assemble words from an unruly herd
The results don't always make sense.

The alphabet, you see, is a rough string
That don't take kindly to being broke.
You corral 'em and then they run around your pen
Stirring up dust that'll blind and choke.

Wrangling words ain't no Sunday picnic
And I don't know what readers expect—
With 26 letters all fighting their fetters
It stands to reason there'll be a few wrecks.

ONE
The Wild West

Goodnight Goes Riding

He rides and he rides
Across so plain an expanse
That an anthill is an eminence
And a buffalo wallow a landmark.
And he rides.

Shortgrass stems nod in
Insistent wind, waving
Through more miles than he sees
As he nods in the saddle
As he rides.

As he rides,
The saddle stops rocking
And his eyes open to see
A maw in the Llano
Fall away from the forefeet
Of the horse he rides.

Raven wings silently
Slice the sky below.
Juniper green gashes
Its way down the canyons to
Sip at Prairie Dog Town Fork.
And he rides.

He rides a game trail
Off the caprock,
Wends past hoodoos of
Eroded Permian
Imagining longhorns
Grazing under shaded
Mesas and mesquite.

Plants a ridgepole over a
Badger hole, nails up a door
And calls Palo Duro home
For himself and
A hundred thousand cattle.

And he rides.
He rides.

Migrations

I hear them in the evening winging northward—
 Their eager, maybe longing, kind of sound.
It reminds me that we'll soon be done with calving;
 That branding time ain't far from coming 'round.

And I think how fall works really ain't that distant;
 Shipping calves under sundown pewter skies
Wherein arrowpointed flocks are winging southward,
 Trailing echoes of urgent, mournful cries.

Tools of the Trade

Three busted legs on the left side and another one on
the right.

Feet both mashed when falling broncs chose them as places
to light.

Near lost an eye to a broken rope. Dallies took a finger and
a half.

Got twisted in the coils and 'bout lost an arm one time
roping a calf.

For forty years I forked a horse
for forty a month and found;
two score years in the stirrups
at forty a month and found.

Pile-driving mounts on cold mornings rattled my
backbone loose,
leaping and lunging and plunging, snapping my neck like
a noose.

Black nails on a thumb and two fingers. Horseshoe nail
scars on the rest.

Hoof tracks all up and down both legs. Bite marks all
over my chest.

For forty years I forked a horse
for forty a month and found;

two score years in the stirrups
at forty a month and found.

Plumbing runs slow, if at all, from leather pounding
my backside.

Knees so bowed a dog can run through. Toes point
outward and wide.

My hips are kinked in a permanent bend, fingers curled to
fit reins.

There's no part of me that ain't used up—if you don't
count my brains.

For forty years I forked a horse
for forty a month and found;
two score years in the stirrups
at forty a month and found.

From winters up on the high line to summers down on
the border,

all those outfits over all those years couldn't have
worked me harder.

They took all I had—and not just me—used every hand
they could find.

But with all they took—and all they used—they never
wanted my mind.

For forty years I forked a horse
for forty a month and found;
two score years in the stirrups
at forty a month and found.

Equitation Equation

The laws of nature are immutable;
Mathematical laws are inscrutable;
Now and then with these realities I collide:
That equations must balance
In each and every circumstance
Is at odds with what happens when I ride.

Each time I saddle up and mount,
By a strict mathematical count,
One dismount is required for equilibrium.
But my equestrian situation
Disagrees with that calculation—
I fall off horses more often than I get on 'em.

Boot Salute

Boots. Boots with runover heels
Dangling spur rowels like tiny wheels.
Some cracked, split, with leaking holes
And only memories of soles.

Branding pen boots splashed with blood.
Windmill boots layered with mud.
Rubber boots to water hay.
Galoshes for a winter day.

Worn and dull, scratched and scuffed.
Sunday boots, shiny and buffed.
Dancing boots, likely to kick.
Barhopping boots, smeared with sick.

Boots piled up by the back door,
In the car's trunk, on the truck floor.
Young. Old. Boots of all ages—
Tally books; calendar pages.

Most joined up like man and wife.
A few doomed to an orphan's life.
Now and then they get mismatched
When in the dark a "pair" gets snatched.

But I've got boots, thanks be to God;
If not for boots, I'd go unshod.
Don't know how to tie shoelaces.
Boots. All the time, all places.

Don't Just Sit There

It's held a gather of henhouse eggs
and huckleberries plucked in the wild.
It's fanned a passel of recalcitrant mounts
bucking out ornery and riled.

I wave it around whilst sorting calves
—I'll even throw it to turn one back—
and it's mighty handy as a bludgeon
to beat off a mad cow attack.

It affectionately swats my wife's backside,
and balky horses, smart on the rump.
It's been feed bucket for a bait of grain
and trough for water drawn from a pump.

It's even been used as a signal flag
to start a Fourth of July race.
And it's done lots of duty at naptime
as a sunshade plopped over my face.

It sweeps snow from saddle seat in winter
and brushes summer dust off my duds.
(It once served as emergency underwear
when I's caught unaware in the bathtub.)

It's no wonder it's worn out and weary,
battered and tattered till it looks half dead
—I've kept this old hat so damn busy
it ain't had time to just sit on my head.