



COWBOYS I HAVE KNOWN

By Guy Weadick

The world's greatest rodeo producer and friend of more real cowboys than any other living man. Walt Coburn, range-bred cowhand, who remembers his cow-country upbringing—and accurately portrays in vivid fiction the life of men who follow cattle.

IN THIS series of articles on cowboys, I am writing not only of those who have been proficient in cowboy sports and pastimes in the rodeo world, but as well of boys who, though they may never have entered a contest, have been engaged in the real job of punching cows for a living. I am writing especially about those whose ability in certain lines of cowboy work, whose character, or whose place in history, have made their lives interesting.

In this article I will tell you of a boy who has made a name for himself by *writing* about cowboys, their life, work, and play. And how he can write of those things! He knows the people and the country about which he writes. He puts into story form incidents laid amid scenes with which he is perfectly familiar. He writes about characters that he knew. In fact he writes about things just as they happened or would have happened under the circumstances laid down in each story.

I have known him for years. I marvel at his ability to keep on building plots and keeping his characters in action interesting to millions of readers the world over. But he knows about thousands of happenings, people, situations that have passed in review before him, and he puts them to work in his stories.

Walt Coburn no doubt has hundreds of thousands of fans who will be interested in getting

the real lowdown on him. I'm going to give it to 'em—here and now. First of all, it may be well to give a brief sketch of his background, something about the old Circle C ranch, a Montana cowsread that fifty years ago was one of the pioneer layouts in that state.

Robert Coburn was born in County Monahan, Ireland, and came to Canada in the early thirties, settling in the vicinity of Ottawa. Orphaned, he left there when a youngster and, coming to the States, crossed the plains by way of the Platte River, going to Denver in 1859. He prospected in that vicinity for about three years, then trailed north to Montana, locating at Alder Gulch, now Virginia City in '63. He mined on Moodie & Dixie's bars and in Bevan's Gulch. In 1864 he was mining on Silver Creek when Cowan and his party came along. Next took up a claim on Last Chance Gulch, now Helena. Here, he secured ownership of three claims and made three and four hundred dollars a day. In 1866 he started ranching on Big Prickly Pear Creek, near Helena. Moved to the mouth of Prickly Pear Canyon in '69, Rock Creek in '72.

In 1886 he moved to the old D H S ranch at the foot of the Little Rockies, where the Circle C outfit really began. He bought land there and ran his cattle, in the Half Circle C on the left ribs and thigh. His horses were branded Circle C on the left shoulder. They ranged from the Missouri on the

south to Milk River on the north; from near the Bear Paws on the west to the Larb Hills on the east. The Circle C sent reps across both rivers into the Bear Paws to work with the Bear Paw Pool and as far as the Shonkin near Fort Benton. They also had reps with the P Cross Square, belonging to Milner, with the Circle Diamond along the Canadian border.

When sheep began crowding the range and the nesters got to stringing barbwire and fencing up water holes, the Circle C along with many other open range spreads saw the starting of the sunset of the cattle business as it had been operated. They began selling out the cattle and horses. Spud Stevens of the Two Bar bought a lot of the cattle. The bulk of the old remuda went to Dakota. In 1915 the Matador Cattle Co. bought the home ranch on Beaver Creek at the foot of the Little Rockies and all of the land. About 80,000 acres of patented land and some 20,000 of other land that Circle C controlled. Then the Circle C outfit in Montana, one of the oldest and most picturesque, was no more.

Walt Coburn was born in White Sulphur Springs, Montana, in 1889. The family moved into Great Falls when he was six and lived there for about twelve years, during which time Walt was supposed to go to school.

The first time when school let out for the summer, young Walt pulled out for the ranch with his saddle in a gunnysack. He had a new Stetson, a pair of Levis with the legs cut short and rolled up to fit his short pins, and a pair of galluses to hold 'em up and some black sateen shirts and a black silk handkerchief to tie around his neck.

WHEN he arrived at the ranch, Horace Brewster, the Circle C wagon boss, who was the man that gave Charlie Russell, the great Western artist, his first range job, also took young Walt in hand. He mounted him on Snowflake, a little old fat pony. Walt had to get alongside a manure pile or a corral to climb him. Many times he swarmed up the pony's side via the saddle string route. From this early date he learned to read brands and earmarks, even before he learned what was in *McGuffey's First Reader*. He also learned to count the way a cowboy keeps a calf tally at a branding fire. Each summer Walt learned a little more about the cow business. His daddy was a stern sort of a man when it came to teaching the

young button the ABC's of the business. He never let him make the same mistake twice—things like the markings on a cow, where and when a calf was born and where that calf and its mammy were likely to be found, how to read strange brands, recognize a man's horse as well as his face when that man came to the roundup camp or ranch or if he met him on the range.

The boy had to learn the names of every horse in the remuda of nearly four hundred head. He had to learn to rope the right horse on a black rainy morning before daylight on the roundup, not to catch three or four bronks in the same loop when he threw out to snare his circle horse. Of course, young Walt made that mistake more than once. While he was just a button he got cussed out sometimes for chousing up the remuda by snaring some gelding out of the rough string by mistake. Night hawks and horse wranglers used up their cuss-word vocabularies on him many a time when his catch rope got the wrong horse and the rope corral went down as the result of a fifty-pound kid on the end of a rope that had caught some bronk deep down, plumb back to his shoulders.

Walt was hell for big loops. Even when Snowflake was the only pony in his string he'd stand in the middle of the corral, in the way of the cowboys, and rope the old pony instead of walking up to him—much to Snowflake's disgust and the mingled amusement and annoyance of the cowpunchers.

Snowflake and Horace Brewster were wise teachers. Walt learned the handling of beef before he knew which hand to hold a knife or fork in. He roped everything he could throw at. Somebody was always having to take his rope off something. Once, when he was trying to make his wise little white Injun pony into a top rope horse, he got set afoot, and started to fight the pony. It was the only time he ever did. His dad caught him at it and made him unsaddle and walk back to camp. The three- or four-mile walk, packing his outfit broke him from the bad habit of losing his temper and fighting a horse that saved more than he did.

Horace Brewster gave Walt his first pair of shop-made boots. Real alligator boots made by C.H. Hyer of Olathe, Kansas. They were the fanciest boots in the catalog, but the seams that ran up and down along the ankles rubbed. Soon both ankles were galled sore, inside and out, so that the lad's socks were soaked and sticky with blood

every night and young Walt hobbled around like a stove-up cowhand as old as the Rockies.

His dad made him take off the boots and wear shoes, but the youngster sneaked the boots out and when out of sight of the ranch he'd put 'em back on. Many an hour he spent admiring these, his first cowboy boots. It was Humpy Jack Davis, the night hawk, who took the shoe last and hammer that was always carried in the jockey box of the bed-wagon and pounded down the seams on those alligator boots.

It wouldn't be lying to say young Coburn slept in those boots until the newness wore off, until his feet swelled up and added to the discomfort of those galled ankles. He wouldn't have swapped those alligator boots for the Circle C herd. I have heard Walt say on different occasions he sure wished that he'd kept those boots. Although he has worn out countless boots since then, he never had a pair that he really loved like that first pair. What were ankles rubbed raw to a small cowboy that rode along on a fat white pony watching his shadow?

Then Humpy Jack gave him a pair of chaps he'd cut down from man-size till the young button could wear 'em. They were dog hair chaps and they had to fight him to make him take 'em off. No matter how hot the day, he wore those hair chaps. Wet days, he'd come into the bunkhouse to dry out by the stove. You know how a wet dog smells alongside a stove in a house. He had his troubles with the dog hair chaps.

Walt never was a bronk rider, but he never asked any man to uncock any horse in his string. When he got to be old enough to handle a bronk he broke out his own mounts. Although he was able to do his work, he never was what you'd call a top roper. His older brothers, Bob and Will, were top-hands at any kind of roping. But around the Circle C wagon, like around all other Montana big outfits, the common hands and button kids didn't get a chance to take their ropes off their saddles much. The top-hands did all the necessary roping.

AFTER the outfit sold out in Montana, Walt went to Arizona to work for Bill and Bob Coburn at Globe. He was a green hand at roping, especially in that type of country where the cattle were wild and the punchers tied their ropes hard and fast to their saddlehorns. Walt made plenty of blunders before he got the hang of it; furthermore,

he'd been crippled up in Montana the year before he went south—a busted ankle that wasn't set. This made him slow on his feet and rather handicapped him, but he managed to make a hand and was beginning to like it when the Great War came on. He joined the army—air service. After it was over he was discharged, and was broke. He went back to Prescott, Arizona, hiring out to Will and Bob Coburn. Although they were his brothers and had a couple of big outfits, Walt went on the payroll as a common hand.

Soon after this he broke his kneecap—and then his cowpunching days were over for keeps. Although he worked at numerous other jobs later, such as garage work, airplane work, surveying and lifeguard, punching cows was in reality about all he knew. While a lifeguard he found out that swimming was one exercise that he could take without going lame. At one time he wanted to be a prizefighter, did some boxing with indifferent results and back in 1910 took a whirl at the soldier of fortune stuff with a rebel outfit in Mexico.

Then one day a friend told him, after hearing him tell some yarn about the range that he should go in for writing. Two years of constant trying and receiving rejection slips instead of checks had him trying to figure out what range editors came from. Months later he clicked with a yarn and received his first check. It was for twenty-five dollars. The Munsey Company bought the story for *Argosy*. That check was the kick in the pants he needed to boost him ahead. Then he got the hang of the writing business and the rejection slips thinned out. And they are still letting him write yarns; in fact, editors now continually are tromping on his heels to give 'em to 'em faster.

In 1927 Walt met *the* girl. She herself comes from the West. They were married and immediately Walt's wife sawed off his horns and took to riding herd on the drifting cowpoke. She's made a dern good job of it, but she had a real snaky bronk to handle. Walt often says, though, while he probably raised enough Cain back in Montana, he still looks back on those early days without a single regret. Those forty-a-month cowpunching days couldn't have been any harder, rougher, wilder, or happier.

Although today, Walt knows about all the leading tops in the rodeo world, himself being an ardent rodeo fan, as well as having donated various trophies to many of the major events held at various prominent rodeos, a great many of the old

range hands were in their prime when he was a button. Of course, Horace Brewster was his leading light as a youth. Then there was Horace's brother, Charlie, as wild a broncho rider as ever forked a bad 'un. And he was a kid when Charlie Park rode bronks in the Montana rough strings. He recalls when Henry Grammer worked for the Circle Diamond.

In after years he became well acquainted with Clay McGonagil around Globe, Arizona. Another real one Walt remembers was Tom McDonald who ran the Bear Paw Pool. He knew the Reynolds boys from Texas who had the Long X; Bill Jaycox who ran the Square; John Survant who ran the Circle Diamond; Jake Myers from Oklahoma who ran the Circle C's after Horace Brewster went to Glacier Park to oversee the packers there. Kid Curry and his brothers and other members of what was known as the "Kid Curry Gang" were neighbors to the Circle C when Walt was a kid on the ranch. He saw and knew most of that famous Wild Bunch, as well as other outlaws that worked in that vicinity.

When his brothers, Will and Bob, had the Wineglass, Cross S and Cross UP outfits in Arizona, Walt got to know such real ones as the Sanders boys at Globe, Pecos McFadden, Ed Bowman and Ike Rude. All the rodeo tops Walt met after he'd quit cowpunching. But few of the old-time range hands had time or money to go from one rodeo to another around the country, as rodeos in those days were not as numerous as now. Most of these top range hands, although known as real ones on their home ranges, never got to be universally known like the boys of today who annually tack up new records for roping and riding. Walt thinks that the old-timers, given the same rules as the boys of today would make the present generation sweat to beat 'em.

Most of the old hands in Montana that Walt knew have passed on, but they made cow-country history in that state. They got forty-a-month and grub. They rode their string out. They cussed the outfit, but would not bar holts or weapons when they fought for the same outfit. The Circle C had the rep of being a tough spread. Walt has seen plenty of fights on the ranch and on the roundup and in town. In fact took part in a few of them himself. "Swap your bed for a lantern when you hire out to the Circle C," they'd tell a green hand in town. And they didn't lie a hell of a lot when they said it. But, any old-timer will agree that in its day

the Circle C had a remuda of top horses and a crew of top hands.

Walt is of the opinion that Humpy Jack Davis of the Circle C was the best nighthawk that ever held together a remuda of a stormy night. Jack could drive a four-horse team of bronks where many a man would hesitate to ride a horse. With the temper of the devil, the legs and arms of a six-footer and a humped back, he'd ride any horse cut to him, and to see him drive a four-horse team was something to talk about.

WHEN Walt was a forty-a-month cowhand for his dad, the old gentleman told him, that if he'd keep out of trouble for three months he'd raise his wages. But Walt never was able to raise the forty-dollar wage. Just a common cowhand. Spent his money as quick as he could in town, because as he said, "time in town is short, an' a feller can't spend no money in a winter line camp."

"You're a damn good cowhand," his dad, and his brothers Bill and Bob, used to tell him, "but you're no good at handling men." They were right.

"You might be a good flyer," said a brass hat, hardboiled Army Colonel, when he broke Walt to a buck private, "but you'll never make an officer. You haven't got what an officer needs." Walt figured the army ramrod was right. Sergeant's stripes suited him fine. He was a common hand.

Recently Walt Coburn said to me, "You know, Guy, I don't write for the 'slicks.' When a cowhand reads a story of mine and likes it, I'm satisfied. Again, I'm just a common cowhand working at writing yarns about the country and life I love. I get a queer sort of a lump in my throat when I put the Circle C outfit in a magazine story. I only wish the Old Gent had lived to read some of 'em.

"But he's on the other side of the Big Divide and Bill an' Bob have followed him to the new range he found. There's Wallace an' me an' my younger brother Brick left. They got the trail broke for us boys. Got an outfit started yonder side of the Big Divide, where Charlie Russell is fooling with his paints an' oils, swappin' yarns with Will Rogers. No fences where a cowboy goes when he dies. No sheep to smell of. Just open range. I don't reckon the cowboys will be in bad company when they get crowded off this fenced-up range."

So there you have Walt Coburn, ranch raised and today as always a cowpuncher at heart. Lover of the great outdoors. Knows the type of men and

horses and country he writes about.

If you have never read his books, you'll sure miss something if you don't read *Ring-tailed Rannyhans*, *Mavericks* and *Barbwire*.

Any of the motion picture producers that are looking for material for a real Western photoplay would do well to look over Coburn's stories and deal with him to act as technical adviser if they ever produce one of his yarns. If they don't try to "improve" on his story they'll have a "different"

Western picture.

This suggestion is not made simply to boost Coburn. It's a plain statement of fact that should appeal to the business sense of those in the motion picture industry who say they want to do something that people will accept at the box office.

Any of the Coburn fans can address him care *The Range Riders' Club*, WEST, Garden City, N.Y., and his letters will be promptly forwarded.

