

Waggoner horses at Cedar Top, late 1960s



Wes O'Neal: Legendary Waggoner Cowboy

By Carolina Walden



Wes O'Neal at the Waggoner Ranch

“Come over here. Let me orient you,” said Wes O’Neal pointing to a map hanging on the wall inside the break room of the horse barn at the iconic Waggoner Ranch. “That’s the northeast corner of the ranch, if we turn it around this way. 535,000 acres in six different counties, all in one block. These different colors are line camps. A family, living there, looks after 30 or 40 thousand acres. This is Lake Kemp, the biggest body of water, and here is the real headquarters. This is the Sachueista HQ. Where we are is called Whiteface division. It’s where W.T. [Waggoner] came when he left Decatur.”

Cordial and welcoming, Wes invited me upstairs for our interview. Like a true gentleman, he motioned that I proceed first. Climbing the steep wooden staircase, I could hear his spurs with every step.

After settling in around a heavy wooden table, Wes began to tell his story. “I’ll turn 82 next Friday. I can’t hardly say it. Seems like I got there awful quick,” he shook his head, blinking in reflection.

Wes was born in Clarendon, Texas on November 20th, 1933. “Right after that we moved to a ranch over in Gray County,” said Wes who spent the first seven years of his life on the LX Ranch. “There was no question ever that I wasn’t going to be a cowboy.

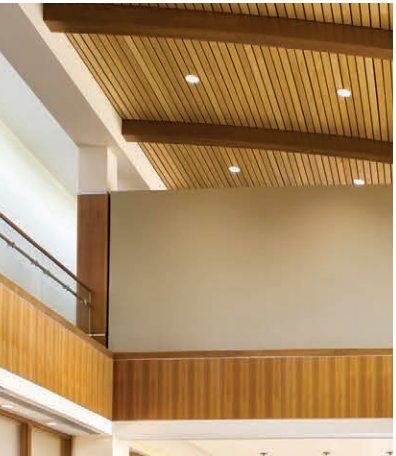
Wes has two brothers, who have also been life-long cowboys. “Joe, he’s been working here [at Waggoners] as a cowboy for 50 years. He’s the youngest. Boots is 14

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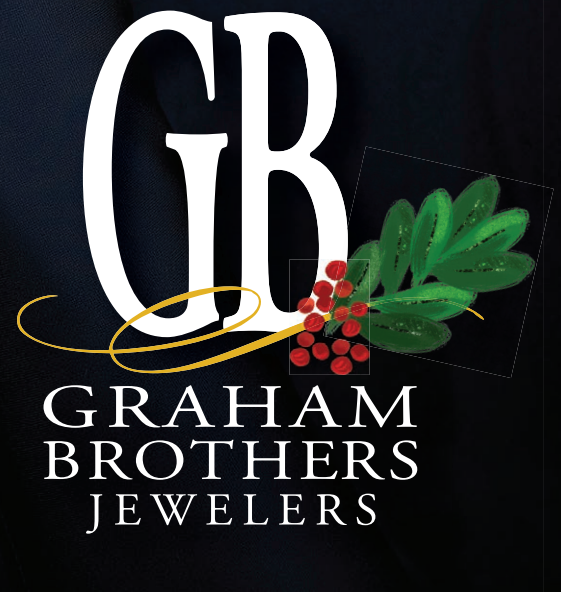


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Working cattle at Waggoners, 1970s



months older than I am. We were close growing up, even went to the JAs together.”

The boys were pretty young when they started riding gentle, backyard horses. “We couldn’t have been more than 8-10 years old, maybe 12,” Wes explained. “The first big bunch of sure enough ranch horses Boots and I broke came from the RO Ranch there at Clarendon. The summer of 1948, they sent 20 head of three-year-old broncs up for us to break. We got \$20 a head. We were rich when we got through. We rode them all a couple of months.” Wes was 14 at the time.

“Dad always had a bunch of horses. He’d bring one in and say, ‘Y’all stay off that thing. I don’t know how gentle he is.’ As soon as he got out of sight, we’d have a saddle on him. I think he was saying that just to see what we were going to do. I can’t ever remember when we didn’t have horses.”

Wes started school in Lefors in 1940 only to leave in the fall of 1949. “I was in 10th grade, but I knew more than my dad did,” Wes laughed. “I took a job batching on the Mel Davis ranch. That house had electricity, but it was all wood for heating and cooking. I didn’t stay there long. I didn’t like batching.”

So, Wes moved up the creek to the Taylor Ranch. “They had a cook shack and a cook. It was in the winter. We were feeding cattle with a team of horses. My job was to wrangle horses every morning. Then we’d eat breakfast and hook up and feed. I stayed there two or three months,” said Wes who then moved on to the JA Ranch. “I got there about the first of March in 1950 and stayed ‘til March of ‘57.”

At that time, cowboys started out making \$90 a month at the

JAs. “After about a year, I got to roping horses. I got \$10 extra for that,” explained Wes who went through the bronc pen there five straight years. “Back then, they broke those horses then when they were four year olds. Boots and I broke 48 head that first year. We did that together 2-3 years there.

“Bud Long was the wagon boss, and Jiggs Mann was the straw boss. When Bud took a camp, then Jiggs got to be the wagon boss, and I was his straw boss. Then when Jiggs left, I was wagon boss for a couple of years. When he left, that was when they quit running the chuck wagon, you know, pulling it with horses. We just had a deal on a back of a pickup with a butane stove.

“Back in its day, the JAs was really a good place to work. It was good cow outfit – had good horses and good cowboys. Tommy’s daddy [Tom Blasingame] was there. He was a smart man. I learned a lot from him. Of course Tommy [Blasingame] and I were there at the same time as young men.”

In 1957, Wes left the JA ranch. “I piddled around a little bit - worked in the ASC office, measuring some farm land. There wasn’t a whole lot going on, and I knew that woman that ran that ASC office. Pushing and dragging that wheel to measure that ol’ sorry land, putting it in the soil bank, paying those farmers so much an acre not to plant.... I sure didn’t like it and didn’t stay too long. It’s always been horseback for me.” Wes explained.

“Then I went up to Channing and went to work for an outfit that had bought part of the old Matadors. I didn’t like it. I stayed there a month. We got over there close to Adrian, and they were having a rodeo over at Hereford, so I quit,” Wes recalled with a smile. “I

rode quite a few amateur broncs. I wasn't anything extraordinary, but I could make about as much money as I could cowboying. We didn't have schools back then. You could just go enter for \$10. First place paid \$50. The biggest win I ever had was at Pampa. It was a big amateur rodeo back in the day, but working out there at the ranch, it was hard to get to town and go."

In September of 1957, Wes started work at the Waggoner Ranch. Just a few months later, in January of 1958, he was drafted into the service. "I spent six months active duty in the Army up there at Colorado Springs. When I got out of there it was about the first of July. I piddled around a while and came back here in September of '58. I've been here ever since."

Wes started as cowboy, then he was wagon boss for 12 years. "I selected every keeping cow. I never kept a line back or a red neck. After 12 years, I had 10,000 Herefords that looked just alike. If you'd seen one, you'd seen 'em all," Wes said, "Of course now, we've gone to cross breeding. We're 50% Hereford and 50% Angus. I think a Hereford cow is prettier. I'd rather look at one, but of course, that's not what the feeders want and that's not what the housewife wants. Nowadays, they know so much more about feeding cattle and tracking it with technology. You've got to go with the flow."

Motioning toward the window, he said, "This is the horse division here. I was supervisor of it for 25-26 years, but in 2000, I kind of took a semi-retirement deal. They hired another guy to run it. I've just been here, doing what I could since then."

The goal of the horse program at Waggoners is to raise the best ranch horse that they can. "A horse about 15 hands tall and 1100 pounds that is good enough to use on the ranch and still compete in the arena. We've still got some Poco Bueno, Little Peppy, and Grays Starlight breeding," Wes explains. Among others, the ranch has two sons of High Brow Cat and a couple of sons of Wimpys Little Step. "We've also got a son of Peptoboonsmal, that's a nice horse, and a son of Topsail Whiz that's producing good horses."

Wes has shown in National Cutting Horse Association, American Quarter Horse Association and Ranch Horse Association of America competitions. "I showed a little in that NCHA but I couldn't win anything. It is tough to break into, because it costs so much. It's a good sport, but I wouldn't recommend it to anyone who thinks they're going to make money," he said. "That ranch horse deal – when you do the reining pattern, then box a cow, then take 'em down the fence – is really more of a cowboy event."

In the early days of Wes' career and much of his time at Waggoners, everything was done horseback. "Cowboying as a whole has changed a lot. Everything is so mechanized nowadays. Everybody's got a pickup and trailer where you can run down there, get something done, and come on back. We didn't have pickups and trailers back then.

"You don't get rich, but it's been a good life. Of course, not every day, but you can almost say that it's one of those deals when you get up and get to do what you like to do everyday. You don't really

dread going to work. I also know at 82, I'm headed down the trail to the end of cowboying days," said Wes who had just come back from a trip to Montana, Nevada and Wyoming. "I had some time off. We were gone a month with that 6666s bunch of cowboys. They took the wagon out there. We stayed in teepees. Weaned a bunch of calves."

In 1960, Wes married Patricia Ann Young. She was the High School Registrar for 29 years at Electra ISD. "We have two daughters. They are grown. Both of them work in the school system. The youngest daughter, Tammy, is a schoolteacher in Guthrie. Our oldest daughter Tracy is in Weatherford. She is an assistant superintendent and finance manager at Weatherford ISD."

Family has always been important for Wes. "We tried to keep our priorities straight and put our kids first. Starting out, we were poor as a church mouse, but it seemed like getting there was all the fun - doing without, cutting corners here and there. It worked out."

When he took semi-retirement in 2000, Wes and his wife bought a home in Holliday, Texas. "It's a little town. That's where my wife wanted to move. Our plan was to move over there, and we might travel. But she got sick and passed away a couple years ago. Kinda did away with all the plans that we had, but even before that, we couldn't travel much, because she was sick. So instead of retiring, I just kind of hang on around here." It was in the fall of 2013 when Wes' wife passed away after a courageous battle with Myelodysplastic Syndrome (MDS).

Wes' daughters call him every day. "They think I'm not eating good or something," he joked. He sees his brother Joe every couple of days, as he is just a few miles away on the ranch. "I talk to Boots once a week or so. He's like Fro [Walden]. He doesn't ever go to town – stays right there at Guthrie. He's got everything he needs right there.

"Who knows what destiny has in store, but that's life – just keep going. After the sale of the ranch [see Waggoner story], I don't know what I'll do. My granddaughter's husband handles a lot of cattle. I could help him every day if I wanted to. He's not too far from here," he reasoned. "Reggie, my son-in-law, is wagon boss at the 6666s. I could visit them. Greg, my oldest daughter's husband, is a horse breaker/trainer there at Weatherford. I could stay there. I'm not really worried about staying busy or getting bored. We'll just see what happens.

"If I sum my life up, I'd have to say that I've got to do everyday what I wanted to do. If you pick a profession that you love, you'll never work a day in your life. I know that I'm getting close to the end of it. I wish I could tear it all down and start all over, knowing what I know now," said Wes, reflecting on his eight plus decades. "If making a lot of money is success, well I don't know what success is. I certainly haven't made any money. I've got plenty enough to live on. Maybe if you could look back and see how your children turned out and smile and they could look at you and smile, say he's done his best, that might be good enough – successful enough." ●