

W. A. "Wink" Chappell

*One of the last of the Early California Horsemen AND
my beloved step-father!*



By Lorry Wagner

On May 17, 1994, William A. Chappell, one of the last horsemen from the era of Early California tradition passed away at the age of 84, just hours before his 85th birthday--May 18. Bill Chappell, my step father, known to many by "Wink," was born into a family of superior horsemen. Both his father and grandfather were horse trainers noted for their well-trained horses. Bill mastered the understanding of the relationship between man and horse which resulted in a superbly trained horse in the tradition and methods of the vaquero.

He was raised on Roland Hill's Quarter Circle H Ranch (also called the "Bear Mountain Ranch") just west of Tehachapi, California, where cattle and Morgan horses were raised. Bill was on the backs of horses before he could walk. He was taught to train horses from a very young age. His father would sit him up on top of a post at the breaking corrals and let him watch the process. He sat there, ate his lunch, drank water and concentrated on the action. When he got older, he knew what to do. He was 13 years old when he officially started learning the business of training horses which became not only his life's work, but also his love of life. Between the ages of 13 and 16, he was given range-raised horses to ride and train. Many of these horses were 8, 9, and 10 year-olds who had been roped and branded as 2-year-olds, turned back on the range, and never caught again until they were aged. These "bucking broncos" taught him to ride anything and everything. This was the way in which prospective trainers were started to "get the hot-rod out of their system." If the youngsters of the day survived this and still wanted to learn the fine art of horsemanship, they were considered to be worth further training. After this initiation, Bill was taught the secrets of the vaqueros by some of the finest horsemen of that era. He spent 10 years learning from such great vaqueros as Pablo Apodaca, Joe Blanco, Emiliano Cordova, Rafael Quen, Garcia, Jesus Lopez, Frank and Pablo Martinez, Frank Olivera, Ortega, Catarino Reese, Juan Reyes, Tony Aroujo, Venezuela, and Valdez. Bill rode with other young men of and near his own generation who were also learning the fine art of the vaqueros' Early California traditional horsemanship. Among this upcoming generation of horsemen were Arnold Rojas, Charley Hitchcock, Abby Hunt (now famous for making fine, balanced half breed and spade bits in his later years), Billy Rose, Red Vega and, of course, Bill Chappell. Bill gave me

two Abby Hunt bits that were made for him by Abby. They are wonderful working bits and my prize possessions.



Wink with his dog Tippy, in 1940. Photo from "Cowboy Country" by Bob Powers

During these 10 years, Bill spent many evening hours in the bunk house (no TV during those days). These were the hours that the vaqueros taught him the wonderful art of braiding rawhide and calf leather reins and hackamores. He learned to make his own headstalls and other leather articles needed for training and riding horses. The men usually specialized in different areas of making their equipment and would trade with each other. I have many sets of reins, several bosals, headstalls, and a multitude of training equipment Bill made for me. Bill taught me how to braid, but, unfortunately, I never spent the time to learn what I should have. He did, however, teach me to tie the traditional "Pheodore" knot (often spelled as Feodore, but pronounced thee-o-dore) that is a must to train good hackamore horses.

Bill rode the rodeo circuit when he was in his late teen's and early twenty's--saddle broncs, bareback horses and calf roping. He won his share. He quit riding the rodeo circuit when his best friend, Fay Adams, was killed. Fay roped a calf, his horse tripped and fell on him and broke his neck. Bill was an excellent roper. Whether on the range, in the stock pens working cattle, or roping in competition he seldom missed. He taught me as much about roping as he could without cattle to work and rope here on Sierra Dawn. He was an artist with a rope.

Bill started his career by breaking horses and working cattle on ranches in areas of the San Joaquin Valley, Cuyama Valley, Kern River Valley, east to the upper Mojave Desert and west to Santa Barbara. He worked for such ranches as the Quarter Circle H, the Tejon Ranch, the Onyx Ranch, the 88 Brand, John Cudderback, Miller and Lux, The Land Company, and the Smith Ranch to name a few.

His first introduction to the Arabian was at the Tejon Ranch in the late 1920's and early 1930's. This ranch had imported mares and stallions from Arabia and when Bill worked for the Tejon under their vaquero horsemen, he trained some of these original horses and some of their offspring. He trained Steeldust horses for John Cudderback and often told me of the similarities of the Steeldust and the Tejon Arabians to my Sierra Dawn Arabians. He was convinced that the Steeldust had "close" ties to Arabian blood. Bill also spoke of the parallels of Roland Hill's Morgan horses with the Arabian. Roland had imported much of his original breeding stock from a Morgan horse ranch in Sweetwater, Texas. Roland bred 200 plus mares to one of 17 stallions each year. Bill's favorite stallion was one called Querido, whose foals made outstanding stock horses. For many years, the best of the black, 3-year-old, Quarter-Circle-H Morgans were selected for New York City Police horses. Bill started many of these under saddle, including training them to accept shooting a gun from their backs. Cold winters often found him training in the warmer areas of the San Joaquin Valley, sometimes training polo horses.

When he came to the Onyx Ranch in the Kern River Valley east of Bakersfield, California, in the 1930's, he started working as a horse breaker (as trainers of that era were called) and cowboy. It didn't take too long for the owners to recognize Bill's dedication, skill, and the fact that he was an excellent judge of cattle to make him their cattle and range boss. He did much of the buying and selling of cattle for the Onyx Ranch and was eventually in charge of the whole cattle operation. He traveled to Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, and into Old Mexico to buy cattle, mostly Mexican steers, for the Ranch. I heard many tales of the horses he was given to ride when buying these cattle, the cowboys he rode with, and the vast difference between what he termed as "Tejanna" style and Vaquero style of horsemanship.



Onyx cowboys, early 1940's: from I. Glen Alexander, Ed Chappell, Johnny Chappell, Wink Chappell and Farrell Chappell. Photo from "Cowboy Country" by Bob Powers

The Onyx Ranch ran thousands of cattle from Little Lake to Indian Wells Valley (today's Ridgecrest/Inyokern area) to Caliente to Jawbone Canyon and further south to the Mojave River area near Victorville, California, a distance from north to south of approximately 100 miles. There was a time when there were only 10 cowboys to cover all this territory. These were the days when work and travel were done on horseback. I remember the tales Bill would tell me, when we were riding green colts out in the desert, of gathering around the chuck wagon for breakfast then starting the day by roping their mount out of the remuda, saddling up, and watching some of the ranker horses put on a rodeo before settling down for the day's work. On very frosty mornings during the fall roundups, even with clear skies, it would "rain" cowboys. The horse breakers were paid a bonus for every horse they trained that "did not" buck, since most of the average cowboys were also average riders and the "outfit" could not stand the medical bills and loss of men to work the cattle because of rank horses. Bill was very proud of being one of the best "horse breakers" in the country, always receiving a large bonus each year. Even when he was out on the range working cattle, he always rode a string of colts he was training.

He loved the quiet moments as he rode through the mountains taking care of the cattle on their summer range riding that ever present string of youngsters.

One of the stories that is told whenever the old timers gather today is about a big steer on one range that was running loose with 5 ropes hanging on him. None of the cowboys who had tried to catch this steer had any luck and 5 had lost their ropes. One day Bill came riding into camp with the 5 lost ropes. "You boys can have your ropes back for \$5.00 each," Bill nonchalantly told the group. Bill had come across the steer that day, had roped him, and thrown and tied him up not too far from camp. He and another cowboy later led this wild steer back to the ranch between two horses.

Bill's background had exposed him to the broadest spectrum possible from riding the young, unspoiled horse to having to re-train horses that had been spoiled and gone sour from being ridden by ranch cowboys that did not necessarily understand the horses they rode. These horses were sent to what was at that time called the "condemned field" and were usually extremely rank. Bill and his fellow trainers often re-trained these horses during winter months while waiting for the next spring's group of horses to get old enough to start under saddle.

After over 40 years of working cattle and training horses for ranches, Bill decided to use his rare talent as a horseman to train horses, exclusively.

Bill came to the Ridgecrest/Inyokern locality in California in 1964 and started the areas first professional horse training facility in partnership with me at Sierra Dawn Arabians. In exchange for training me in the art of Early California Horsemanship, I provided the ranch base to set up the training stables. He married my mother, Winifred Mont-Eton, in 1969 and became my beloved step-father. We rode together for 28 years, training several hundred horses between us. The last 2 years of his life, when he could no longer ride colts, he was always on hand to watch me execute his teachings.

Although the stables trained all breeds, Bill and I concentrated on Arabians for the show ring. He trained many champion show horses, rope horses, and just plain pleasure horses. He trained many people of all

ages to ride and enjoy their horses. At one time he had over 200 students. Bill retired from training for the public in 1974 at the age of 65, but continued to ride and train the young horses we bred and raised at Sierra Dawn Arabians until he was 83 years old. When he reached the age of 70, Bill stopped starting the young horses. It was too dangerous at his age. I started our young horses and he took over when they were settled and he could concentrate on preparing them for the bit and finishing them. I continued with the training stable, riding the horses brought in by the public for training.

Bill never knew what he would face each day and what talents would be called upon. When a group of people moved out of the area, they had chickens. What else would a person do with chickens they couldn't take with them but find a home for them on a ranch. Sierra Dawn Arabians got them. They were set free--no pen or containment. They laid eggs, hatched chicks, and before long there must have been at least 50 chickens running around. Then the chickens started to challenge the horses for the grain. They would jump into the grain trays and literally chase the horses away. It was time to get rid of the chickens. A local family was told they could have all the chickens they could catch. They caught all but one cantankerous rooster whom they chased for better than an hour. Bill watched this keystone comedy of errors and finally could not contain himself. He took his rope, circled it over his head a couple of times and let it fly toward the rooster--right over it's head with the first loop. That was the end of the chickens.

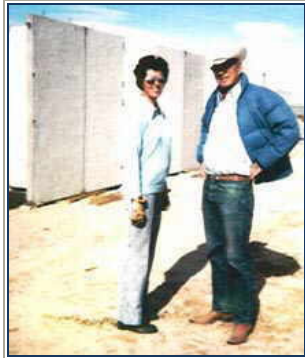


Bill "Wink" Chappell, 1940, Onyx Ranch, Kern River Valley, Ca.. Bill was in charge of all cattle operations in addition to starting young horses under saddle. Photo from "Cowboy Country" by Bob Powers

Bill was loved by all who knew him. He was fiercely proud of his horseman's background and ability, and rightly so. He enjoyed everyone he met. He liked people, but he loved horses and his horses liked him. When Bill went to the barn or the fields, the horses came to meet him. He couldn't wait for the spring's crop of foals at Sierra Dawn. He would look them over and determine what he was going to do with them when they were old enough to ride. When these foals turned 3 years old, Bill and I would split them between us and we would work them along with the horses brought in for training.

Bill's passing is a great loss to the world of horses and all of us who are involved in that world. I am so thankful that my life led me to be able to have had the opportunity to be trained by Bill in the Early California tradition of horsemanship and to have had 30 years with him. There are so few of us left that have had the opportunity to continue the unbroken chain of passing more than 200 years of this knowledge and expertise to the next generation--200 years of vaquero horsemanship that was of itself derived from several hundred years of warhorse tradition from Spain and the Moorish invasion which had been converted to working cattle by the Early Californios in the 1700's. I have committed myself to carrying that tradition on to the next generation and pray that I am worthy of the 30 years Bill spent teaching me his knowledge of these vaquero methods. He taught me so much--to start the young horse, the art of handling the snaffle bit and the hackamore, how to finish the horse in the half-breed and spade bit. He taught me to understand the balance and leverage of bits, the relationship of the braided reins balanced with the "braided buttons" to finite communication between the rider's hand and the horse's mouth, how the bit and curb must properly fit and be correctly adjusted to accomplish this communication, and the importance of "keeping a good mouth" on a well-trained horse. I had to learn how to trim my horses' feet and to properly shoe them because, according to vaquero tradition, only the rider truly knows how the horse needs to be shod to travel right and he must be able to correctly trim and shoe the horses himself. I was taught how saddles must fit the horse and how to have my saddles custom made to fit not only the horse, but also myself. Bill even taught me how to have my "bench-made" boots

made (that's vaquero lingo for "custom made"). The list goes on and on. I feel his presence every day I go to the barn and saddle up, handle the breeding, or work the young foals. I am sure he is still watching over me to make sure "I do it right." He will always be with me. It can only be that Bill is looking down on us from the world of Green Pastures where he has joined all his old friends and teachers, and as he is now riding some of the many horses he trained and so loved.



Lorry, (Larry, taking picture) & Wink, building the concrete tilt-up barn, 1978



It took us one year of weekends to build this barn. Looking at the finished barn from the arena entrance.



Wink showing Ibn Nasah, stock horse, 1969 San Joaquin AHA Show, Tulare, CA