

A Tribute To Dean Cowboys Lose One Of Their Own

Page 2 COUNCIL GROVE
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By Frank J. Buchman

If there was ever a cowboy in every sense of the word, it had to be Dean Spittles.

His death has caused a heavy void in our heart and for all who knew him. It is because he was one who seemed so insurmountable. There wasn't a thing he couldn't do.

Perhaps the reason is simpler: he was a real cowboy. It is a feeling of most cowboys that they'll live forever. And when one of their own is lost, realization comes that they probably aren't really immortal either.



Dean Spittles passed away last month at 75 years of age, after an extended battle with cancer.

Photographs of a person can sometimes reveal an inner value almost as appropriately as words. In the accompanying picture of Dean Spittles, one gets that feeling.

His ever-present ornery grin, heavy sideburns and broad-brimmed, frequently dilapidated, cowboy hat somehow seemed to eradicate any doubt that he was a real cowboy.

While Dean was older than we are, his children are about our age, and that's how we first became acquainted with Dean. We were competing in local, yokel horse shows, or "sholeos" as Dean referred to them, and the Spittles kids and cousins were regular participants as well.

Neither their horses, nor their rigs, were fancy, but they won their share and more. Soon, we realized that was the Dean Spittles way. His horses weren't always the prettiest to others, but they were typically colorful, uniquely his, and could stand their own and better in any crowd.

Come to find out, Dean's cowboy genes were inherited, because his dad who lived not far from us where Dean had grown up, always had a pasture filled with a menagerie of horses. At every parade within reasonable distance, Clarence Spittles was a participant with a Shetland pony team and carriage.

Dean followed suit and had several teams of his own, participating in parades over a wide area, and specifically going on trail rides. He was one of the first involved in the annual Santa Fe Trail Rides, became a leader in organizing and driving teams or riding horses in the week-long journeys covering parts of the original trail across Kansas.

While it's only hearsay, there wasn't a horse that the always-agile Dean couldn't tame in his younger years, but we feel privileged to have had the opportunity to train several of his horses in the past two decades.

Although his sixth sense of animal instinct was prevalent whether it be horse, dog or any other creature, Dean's early experience with driving and working horses surpassed most who are left in this day and age. After having more than our share of wrecks in attempting to break horses to drive, we finally called Dean to give us assistance with one.

Every day for a week on his way home from his town job as a carpenter, Dean stopped at our place to help us break our palomino gelding named Champ to drive. Contrasting our earlier experiences in training driving horses, with Dean's talented assistance, Champ took to the cart quickly and was soon parade ready.

The variety of horseflesh behind Dean's ranch home always fascinated us, so we offered to partner with him on raising foals out of his mares. He used our stallions for breeding, and then sold the offspring in our annual production sale with profits divided equally.

It was another success story as those colts, in a wide array of colors, sizes and shapes, were always conversation pieces, and sometimes brought remarkably strong prices, especially in comparison to what some considered "the well-bred, top conformation" offering.

Cowboys should have cattle, and Dean's herd could be considered comparative to his mare band in description, but his cowherd in recent years was an obvious delight. We'd frequently see him driving past our place with his little pickup

pulling his open-top 12-foot stock trailer with his saddled Appaloosa going to check the cows.

Guns were considered a part of cowboy essentials in earlier years, and were made more famous by silver screen cowboys. Dean was a gun collector, expert marksman, hunter and avid supporter of the National Rifle Association and its efforts.

As if he wasn't fulfilling the cowboy definition sufficiently, Dean was also an accomplished singer and musician playing lead guitar for the Spittles Family Cowboy Band. As one might envisage, he "loved to sing Hank Williams songs," and suitably fit the image in various ways.

As a complement to his musical talents, Dean and his lovely wife, Shirley, who one might also describe as unique in her own particular way, were enthusiastic square dancers. They'd go throughout the Midwest to square dances, traveling and living in a camper pulled behind Dean's pickup that had its share of breakdowns.

That's another thing about Dean though. If anything broke down, he could fix it. Shirley insisted that there was an exception one time with the refrigerator or washer or something, but every tractor, baler, combine, car, truck, motorcycle, buggy, harness, saddle or anything else, Dean could put it back into working order, guaranteed.

An obituary description of Dean seems appropriate to repeat: "He loved tinkering around his shop waiting for the neighbors to come by to visit. Sitting around a bonfire sharing stories with family and friends was one of his favorite pastimes."

Additional employment as an expert carpenter, away from his farm operations, was essential for Dean most of his life. But, when Dean could devote all of his abundant energies to the ranch he and Shirley bought just north of the Council Grove Reservoir, one could sense he had reached a feeling of complete fulfillment and contentment.

Dean was especially proud of his four children, grandchildren and great grandchildren. Interestingly, they nearly all took after him liking

horses, having natural horsemanship skills, being musically inclined, enjoying outdoor sports and possessing talent in a variety of ways.

Dean and Shirley were the largest supporters of all their family and

extended-family from the sidelines at shodeos, rodeos, fairs, talent shows and sporting events. Dean had nicknames for most family members and friends, with few called by their given names. Certainly, Dean will always be remembered for his humor and candid personality.

Memorial services for a lost loved one aren't supposed to be happy occasions, but if there was ever a "good funeral," Dean had one. The church overflowed with friends and relatives from throughout the Midwest. Pictures of Dean, his family and his horses along with his hat were displayed beside Dean's casket, which was blue, his favorite color.

Fittingly, The Hat Song and more recordings of Dean's favorite cowboy songs were played on the loud-speaker. His children and grandchildren played and sang additional tunes in the style he always chose throughout the service.

Waiting outside the church was his saddled horse, boots backwards in the stirrups, indicative of the last ride, as a team of mules owned by family members was hitched to the same wagon used to carry his dad to the cemetery.

Family and friends were mounted on their horses to follow Dean and his horse more than two miles to his final resting place where Dean's dog was waiting with an apparent mood of having lost his master.

While he may not have been as famous as some cowboys, Dean Spittles was the real thing, and his loss will be felt as his memory lives for eternity.

Cowboys lose one of their own

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