Broncho Busters and Their Saddles of Fifty Years Ago

By BERT SHEPPARD, Longview, Alta.

OF the thousands of people who each year take in the Stampedes and enjoy watching the spectacular bronc rides put up by the Rodeo performers, probably only a very small percentage know that in a bygone age bucking horses were ridden quite a lot differently on the open range than they are at the present time in the Rodeo Arena.

The day that I write about was that which preceded the coming of the automobile or "Stink Wagon" as it was often referred to. In Western Canada, East of the Rockies, it would be from about 1882 to 1907, from the time that the big ranches came into the country, till their curtailment or liquidation due to the disastrous winter of 1906 and 1907, and the settling up of the open range about this time by the homesteaders.

During this era, all over the western plains, there were located cow outfits and horse ranches or a combination of the two, that raised horses for their own use or made a business of raising them to sell. Also horses were trailed in from Montana and broke and sold in this country.

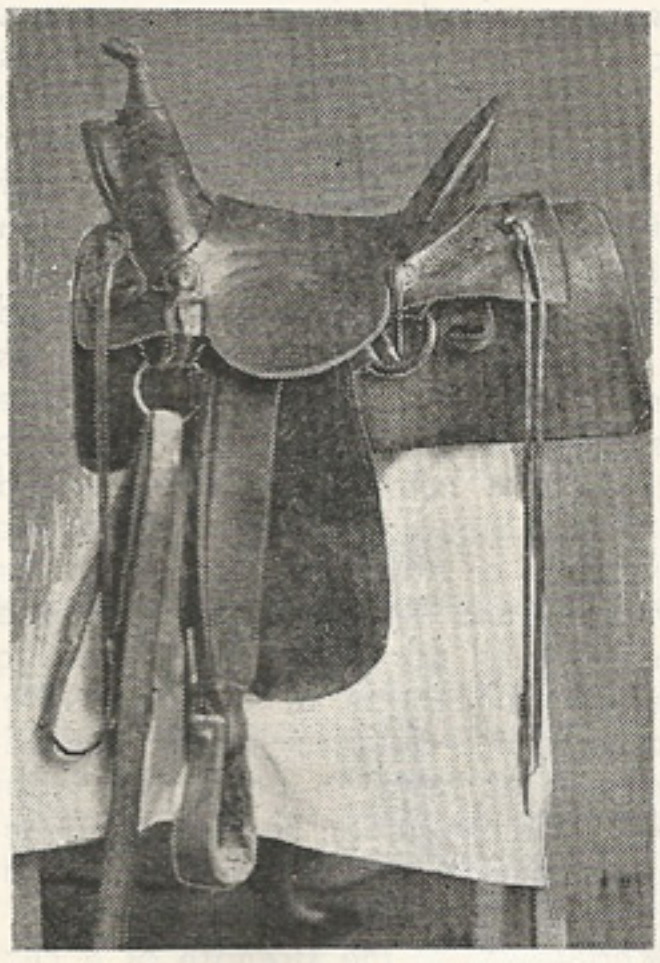
To handle these unbroken horses, there was on every ranch of any consequence one or more broncho-busters, and on the roundups by necessity there were rough string riders who rode the mean or spoiled horses.

The old time broncho-twisters and open-range cowboys were the forerunner of the rodeo hand of today. As nearly everyone who reads this article has seen the present-day broncho rider do his stuff in a Rodeo, it will be easier to explain things by comparing the two styles of riding, but by so doing, I am in no way trying to belittle the performance of the show rider of today in his arena. In the next few paragraphs I will try to point out the difference in the styles of riding and saddles of the bucking horse riders of fifty or sixty years ago with the contest riders of the present time.

The rodeo hand rides a standardized Association saddle with a fourteen-inch swelled fork. The seat is built in to throw him back against the cantle, with his legs up against the swells. He is expected to come out of the chute with his spurs up in the horses shoulders, and to continue to spur for ten seconds, when he is probably picked out of the saddle by a pick-up man. In short, he is supposed to act like a cross between a monkey and a wildcat for ten seconds and give the horse all he's got in that time.

As we all know, these boys put up some wonderful exhibitions of riding. They mostly ride behind their point of balance and ride a lot on their buck shank. The standardized rules have produced a standardized bunch of riders who all ride much alike.

The old time rider rode a narrow fork saddle. Swell-forks had not been invented then; they came in with the farmers after the turn of the century. I understand there were more of them in use on the last General Roundup in 1907. Quite a few of the old time saddles were built on White River trees. I have no idea when or where it was originated, but the truth could well be that it was the best tree that has ever been designed for breaking horses on a ranch or riding a rough string on a roundup outfit. The cantle boards of these trees were fairly high and sloped back with the top of the cantle bevelled back. The bars were thinner than those in the present-day saddles. Occasionally a tree would break across the bars. The forks were fairly high and sloped ahead a little. Also, the horn was high enough so that the hand could hook around it solidly when climbing on a bronc. The old saddles had very little leather in the seat and were built to tip a rider into the middle of the saddle. This is where the old balance-riders rode. Take a look at the Charlie Russell pictures and see how the cowhands sit erect in their saddles, right over their point of balance, so that they could shift with any move their horse might make, their weight being fairly evenly distributed over the horse's back. Most of the modern saddles are built to tip you back so that all your weight comes on the horse's kidneys. In the old stock saddles, the thin bars and light seat covering allowed a rider to get close down to his horse. Most of them were built with a three-quarter loop seat; that is, the stirrup leathers looped through the



The Meanea saddle was popular with oldtime riders. Above property of Dick Merriam, High River, Alta.

seat and there was a hand hold under the fork with which to pick the saddle up. Where the modern saddles have a rounded up seat, the old saddles were more flat just behind the stirrup leather loops. This was important as the edge of the seat at this point would catch a rider's leg whenever a horse twisted and

(Continued on Page 251)

BRONCHO BUSTERS

(Continued from Page 186)

gave him a chance to shift to the right position. If a horse caught his man off balance and tried to jump out from under him, the sloping cantle came into effect. As long as he hit it he would slide down into the seat when the horse hit the ground. Another place where the straight fork had a decided advantage over the swell fork was in getting on a bronc. The twister of long ago figured that if he had a foot in the stirrup and a hand on the horn, he should be able to get on no matter what the horse did. The critical time was after the rider's right hand left the stirrup as his foot went in till it hooked the horn. Speed was essential as some spoiled horses would freeze till they felt the rider's foot touch the stirrup when they would turn themselves loose. With the old style saddles the rider's hand could streak straight to the horn and his forearm lie flat against the fork, which gave him good purchase as he rolled into the saddle. The left knee was placed low near the point of the shoulder, and his leg was well over his horse before he straightened up. The swell on a tree is in the way in getting off a bronc as well as getting on. Most of the old saddles in this country were double rigged, but some were single, sometimes called centre-fire.

The old time twisters, due to the nature of their work, were rugged individualists. They probably had six or eight head of horses to ride a day. These had to be caught, a bridle or hackamore put on, saddled and stepped in the middle of, without the use of a chute, and ridden out and back into the corral. It was a fight a lot of the time. The old unwritten code was that a horse should not be beaten over the head or spurred in the shoulder. Whereas the Rodeo rider receives marks of merit for spurring in the shoulders, the broncho-buster stood a pretty good chance of getting "fired" if caught doing it. Everything in front of the cinch was supposed to belong to the horse. The old timer had no one to help him and probably did not want anyone around. To a lot of the good rides that he put up, his sole audience might be a lone jack rabbit or a coyote. He was in constant danger of being kicked when pulling up the cinch. Sore horses would bite and chase a man out of the corral. If a horse started in to buck before the rider was on, it was sometimes necessary to hang and rattle with only one stirrup till he quit. There was no whistle in ten seconds, no pick-up men and no Boy Scouts to run out and help him if he got his wind knocked out. The horse might start the ball rolling either by bucking, falling over backwards or stampeding. These riders had to be masters of every situation that arose and they came out on top most of the time. It took just as much skill to handle a stampeder as it did to ride a horse when he bucked, and was much more dangerous, as he might run towards a cut bank or into timber. Chapps were not used much when breaking horses, as they were too hot and cumbersome and there were some riders who could ride them without spurs.

Horse breaking consists of encouraging a horse to do the right thing and discouraging him from doing the wrong. When a horse decided to buck he was discouraged while bucking by whipping him with a shot loaded quirt. A top rider would whip him every jump until he quit and then either pet him or leave him alone. The easier he rode his horse and the more rein he gave him the better rider he was considered. A horse catches his balance with his head, and if ridden with a loose rein while bucking is less likely to fall down. If he did fall down the rider tried to hang on to the reins. Some men used a leather blind on the Jaquima (hackamore), which took the place of a brow band. This could be slipped down over the eyes and was very handy. Every rider had his own individual style of riding and method of handling horses. One of the Old Timers that I worked under at the Bar U Ranch and talked to quite a bit, was Johnnie Franklin of Macleod, who had been a famous bucking horse rider and all round horseman. He showed me his methods of breaking horses, told me about the oldtime saddles and explained the fine points of his riding ability. He was a short, heavily-muscled man and a very rugged personality. Franklin was a balance rider and rode a medium length stirrup. When he stood up in his stirrups, he was just able to slip his hand between his crotch and the saddle seat; this enabled him to shift his body in the saddle without taking his weight off the stirrups. When a horse was bucking he rode straight up in the middle of his saddle, directly over his point of balance. Just before the horse hit the ground he straightened his legs out, breaking the jolt with his knees, which threw his legs back towards the saddle skirts. This automatically tipped him ahead a little in the saddle ready for the next jump.

Illustrating long stirrup riding — a pen and ink sketch by Ballie Buck, oldtime wagon boss of Circle Ranch. Courtesy of Guy Weadick.

As the horse went ahead he went with him, throwing his weight back and straightening out his legs again as the horse hit the ground. Whichever way a horse decided to go he swung his shoul-

(Continued on Page 258)

BRONCHO BUSTERS

(Continued from Page 251)

ders in that direction. As a horse took his head he let the lines slides through his fingers giving him all the rein he wanted, all the while swinging his heavy quirt. When a horse reared up to fall over backwards he threw his weight on his left stirrup as the horse went on the teeter, at the same time placing the palm of his right hand against the horn, pushing himself off to the right side as the horse went over. If a horse turned a pinwheel, he threw his leg over the horse's neck and lit running. Johnnie Franklin preferred riding with heavy tapaderos which had to be balanced just right.

Another top hand and balance rider that I broke horses for and had some interesting talks with was Herb Millar of Pekisko. Herb spent a good part of his life at the Bar U where he broke a great number of horses, rode some of the worst outlaws in his day and made it look as if it was very easy. He was slim built, stood about five foot ten and weighed around one hundred and fifty. He rode his stirrups so long that he could just get off the saddle a very little bit. He rode straight up and threw his feet out from the horse as the horse went up, letting the saddle roll under him, guessed him right and caught him as he hit the ground. He was another who rode a lot with "taps". Different people have told me that he was the prettiest rider they ever saw, and a lot of people thought he was the best rider in the country. Both Millar and Franklin rode saddles built on White River trees.

Another colorful character and ex-broncho-buster who was in charge of the purebred Percheron mares at the Bar U twenty-five years ago was Bert Pearson. He came in from Wyoming about 1900 with horses. He weighed one hundred and eighty pounds, was broad-shouldered and long in the back, standing about five foot ten. Bert was strong as a lion and very active. He broke a lot of horses in this country and took all the rough ones in his stride. He rode a very short stirrup. When a horse started in to buck he stood right up in his stirrups and bent down over the horn, his body being about parallel with the horse's back. All the time the horse was bucking, he slapped him on the nose with a short piece of tug. He was one of the few men who could throw a horse out of its stride when he went to run away. When a horse took off, he would run his right hand up the off side line until it was about four inches from the bit, lean a little to the same side, and give the horse's head a pull. This would make him turn a somersault, Bert leaving the saddle as he went over. Rod Redfern was another strong rider, about whom I previously wrote an article for the CATTLEMEN, so I won't say much about him here. But I would like to mention the fact that he could throw his leg halfway over the saddle, keep hold of the horn and ride his bronc to a farewell with his body down alongside of the horse.

The last of the old-time balance-riders was Emery La Grandeur. He showed them all up in the contests that he rode in, both Canada and the United States from 1913 to 1916. But some of the Old Walrond Ranch men and also Herb Millar said that Johnnie Franklin had seen the day that he could outride him. Franklin and La Grandeur had both worked at the Walrond.

There were other good riders in those days such as "Nigger" John; old George Baker who, the drunker he got, the better he could ride; Mounkes of the Quorn Ranch; Frank Ricks; Joe Lamar who, when a horse fell over backwards, cleared him by turning a backhanded somersault over the cantle, landing on his feet out behind his horse; Frank Arnold; Van Cleve; Birney Freehiller; Lee Marshall; Charlie Mickle and Jack Crownover, who was the first broncobuster they had at the Bar U. He rode a centre-fire saddle and long taps with which he slapped the horse's face each jump.

The different styles of riding, skill and all-around horsemanship of these old time riders will never be duplicated, for the simple reason that the age and conditions that produced and perfected them are gone, never to return, for today we are in the iron grip of the machine age. Of the riders whom I mentioned, Herb Millar and Rod Redfern are the only ones left. The old style saddles that they rode are museum pieces now in big Western cities such as Denver and Cheyenne.

Kenneth Coppock has given us the CANADIAN CATTLEMEN, dedicated to the Ranching Industry, both past and present. It would be interesting reading, and a fitting memorial to the Old-Time Riders if people who knew would write authentic stories about the methods and styles of riding of the men who broke the many thousands of range-raised horses that were used by the Mounted Police and in the Boer War, used as cow horses on the ranches and roundups and were practically the sole means of transportation in this country in the early days—then mailed them in to Ken for future publication in the CATTLEMEN.

1949 Directors of Canadian Aberdeen-Angus Association. Left to right: Cameron McTaggart, Aurora, Ont.; Tom Henderson, Guelph, Ont.; J. P. Sackville, Calgary, Alta., Secretary; H. Morrell, Edgeley, Sask., President; C. C. Matthews, Calgary, Alta.; Cowley Webster, Two Creeks, Man.; C. Argue, Grenfell, Sask.; Roy Ballhorn, Wetaskiwin, Alta. R. V. McCullough of Red Deer, Alta., was not present. — James Rose Photo