

# The Cowboys' Sculptor

By LYN HARRINGTON

Photographs by Richard Harrington

**W**HEN the famous Calgary Stampede rolls round each July, ranchers and business men throughout Alberta and the surrounding countryside are milling around, finishing up this and that, preparing to take a week off for the big event.

No one is busier than Charles Beil, cowboy sculptor of Banff. For 16 years now, he's been supplying most of the trophies — and the best of them — for the outstanding events. He makes at least a dozen every year. Out of the 500-odd trophies which have been handed out, the majority, and unquestionably the most-treasured, have been the bronzes modeled and cast by the ex-Nevada cowpoke and artist.

Charlie Beil is as much a part of his adopted town of Banff as the Bow River winding through it. He hasn't been there as long, of course, only since 1930. That year he came up to take a look around Alberta's rodeos and cowpunchers. The Alberta country suited him thoroughly, and he "just never got around to leaving it again".

A dozen years ago, he married Olive Luxton of Banff, and they have two nice kids, Charles Jr. and Carol. Theirs is a nice set-up. The snug little house, sheathed in cedar shakes, perches on a steep hillside overlooking the rushing Bow River. A large room at the front of the house is the studio where Charlie can work all night, if he has a mind to. Out under the tall trees at the back is the outdoor foundry, where Beil combines and melts the metals, and does his own bronze casting.

Beil has the life most men dream of. He works when he feels like it, loafs if he pleases, takes off across the hills to help drive cattle to summer range, or goes fishing in some swift-flowing brook if he takes the notion. "I only work when I need money," he says cheerfully. "Life can be pleasant that way."

When he decides to work, he may carry on through the whole night, and admits that he works best under pres-

sure. Some folks claim Beil is temperamental. And he agrees that his clients in Calgary nearly have heart-failure just before the Stampede, for fear he won't get the trophies finished in time.

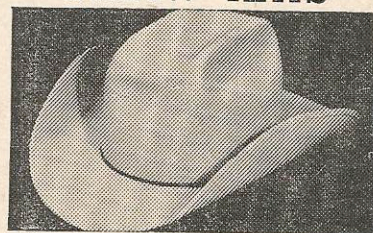
"But I always do," he says, unperturbed. "But sometime I'm going to make five years' supply ahead of time, so that I can enjoy the Stampede as much as anybody."

The trophies are on display in the Stampede City for the entire week, and are handed out to the prize-winners at the completion of the events. There are prizes for calf-roping, steer-decorating, riding bucking bronzes, and all the rest of the contests. But the most valued trophy of all is for the chuckwagon races, which are unique with the Calgary Stampede.

It's a large, complicated trophy, compete with chuckwagon and two teams of horses, and it takes a healthy amount of time to make it in the first place. Takes a while to win it, too. For the event must be won three times before the trophy becomes permanently owned. That's what makes it such a proud possession. One winner, Dick Cosgrave who is now Arena director of the Calgary Stampede, tore out one wall of his ranchhouse living-room to make a proper setting for the trophy.

In addition to his work for western Canada's biggest rodeo, Beil also has done many other pieces of sculpture which preserve the vigorous, adventurous days of the West in indestructible bronze. When the Kiwanis Club wanted to present the Hon. R. B. Bennett with some lasting memento of the West, they asked Charlie Beil to design something.

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Beil turned up with a bronze figure of cowboy and pony, that was evidently the pride of Bennett's heart. "Range Rider" was one of the very few items not sold at auction after Bennett's death. The figure was specifically willed to the Society for the Promotion of Arts, in London, England.

You can find other samples of Beil's work in the town of Banff. Over the doorway of the Post Office is the profile of an Indian in Concrete. Another Indian head, in a block of stone two feet square, (Please turn over page)

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Charles Beil of Banff, famous cowboy sculptor in his studio.



stands guard over the Brewster Industries. There's a bronze plaque on the public auditorium, and bronze skiing trophies in the Administration Building.

But his largest efforts you'll never see at all. For the palmy years of the Banff Winter Carnival, Beil each year made a 17-foot high figure of a bison, or plains buffalo, in ice. This had to be completed at the last possible moment, for fear the warm breath of a Chinook would demolish it.

He also does many special orders, like the fine head of "the richest man in Canada", Mr. Ronald Graham of Vancouver and Montreal. (Incidentally, Beil also designed Mr. Graham's charming summer home, a couple doors past his own.)

"The night I was pouring the metal for the Graham bust," he recalled thoughtfully, "temperature stood at 30 above in the evening. By morning it had fallen suddenly to 20 below zero. I sure thought I'd lose the whole thing and have to do all the work over again. But it came out perfectly, rings true as a bell."

Orders have piled up ahead of the cowboy sculptor, but he always manages to catch up with them sometime, somehow. They vary a lot, as you may have noticed. But sometimes he gets a request like one from a woman in British Columbia. "My favorite horse died last fall. Do you think you could make a model of her for me?" Beil wrote back that, yes, he could do so if she would send "the official coloring, official breed name, front and side view photographs of the animal".

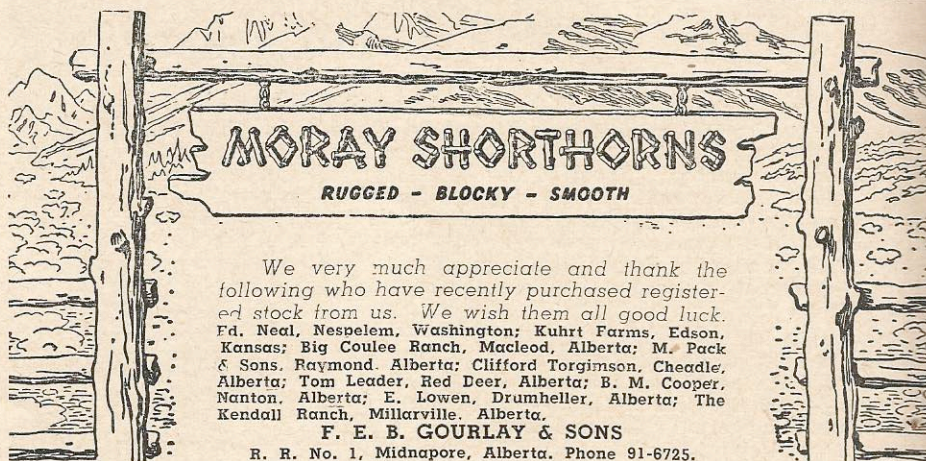
But he much prefers to know the horse personally. "Each horse has some individual characteristics of its own, maybe a way of holding its head. Just some little peculiarity that sets it apart from other horses. You catch that, and you've got a real likeness."

He doesn't just depend on some little quirk or identifying mark to make a showing, however. His work is the result of long study, of careful observation, and a lifetime knowledge of horse-flesh. Recently he added color photography to his other artistic interests of painting, etching and sculpturing. They are excellent shots, sure proof of his artistic eye. But he uses them mostly as first-handed studies of anatomy, or of ranch scenes.

"In this work it's more important to be accurate, than to be impressionistic," he explains. "Every horse has a different mouth, just like people. Some have a heavy chin, some shallow. I like to use kodachromes to check back on details, where I can't go back to check on the horse or critter itself."

Beil has had a lifetime of experience in the west. Orphaned at an early age, he has been on his own almost all his life. It wasn't horses right at first, however. He started life in the Dick Whittington manner, by shipping out as a cabin boy around Cape Horn. Later he got into the United States Cavalry by boosting his age a couple of years.

He used to make sketches back in those days, too. Once out of the service, he and a couple of buddies were getting awfully hungry at one time. Charlie Beil would draw sketches, and the others would market them in town for enough food for the trio. His roving life led him from one ranch to another as a hired hand. In his wake he left sketches of



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western life on tarpaulins, bits of paper, bunkhouse walls, and even on rocks.

It was the cowboys' own artist, Charles M. Russell, who made Charlie Beil recognize the worth of his talent. He took the young fellow under his wing, and taught him all he could about painting. They remained friends and co-workers until Russell's death in 1926. Beil led the artist's horse in the procession of mourners.

Once when they were spending the winter in California, Russell introduced his protegee to Will Rogers and William S. Hart. It resulted in a very pleasant boost for the young sculptor. For Will Rogers, Beil cast a six-horse stagecoach,

an ox team, and several horses. He made a model of Hart's famous pinto pony for the hero of the silent Westerns.

Beil picked up some of the bronze casting technique at the School of Arts, Santa Barbara, but it was slim pickings. He literally re-discovered the process of casting which had been lost for centuries. "You won't find it in any texts," he says, "not even in historical books. I just sort of smelled it out for myself."

He is remarkable in that he is probably the only Canadian sculptor to carry his work through from the very beginning to the finished trophy. Not to become too technical about it, here's how the lost-

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wax process goes.

He makes the model first in plasticine, from which he makes a plaster cast, and a wax cast. The latter is swathed in plaster again, with a core of lightweight material. This is heated for a long time, and the melted wax drains out, leaving spaces inside the plaster jacket. Beil then pours in molten metal to fill the space formerly occupied by the wax, which is now "lost" or spent. That's roughly the idea, though it's not something you learn to do in one easy lesson.

It takes anywhere from one to six weeks to create the model itself, and one figure completed per month is a good average. Sometimes he designs smaller figures, such as the animals in the vicinity. It is not every sculptor who has the wild folk coming around to pose for him.

In the winter, as many as twenty deer come mooching around the back door of the snug house, looking for a handout. Mrs. Beil dries bread scraps all summer in readiness. The deer make the circuit of the neighborhood, finding Banff's permanent residents very hospitable. Once a moose came to breakfast — practically thrust his head through the window. And bears come around fairly often, but only one was encouraged to come back. Charlie wanted to study his muscles.

The thing that is so fascinating about Beil's bronzes is their remarkable fidelity to life. The tiniest details are accurate, such as the buckle on the leather strap of the stage coach, the bolts of the undercarriage, the links in a chain, or the yellow mud splashed up on the harness. His skill and confidence in his work has increased with maturity and years of experience. He is quite critical of his early efforts now.

His accuracy is attested by the critical cowboys who scrutinize his models. When they proclaim a figure "perfect", as they usually do, you can be sure that it's a work of art. "Actually," Beil says, "a perfect model of a horse wouldn't look right. By actual caliper measurement, the modeled horse must have slightly longer legs than the real animal."

In other words, he has used artistic license. The horse looks taller to the man on foot than it really is. And certainly, the greenhorn in the saddle for the first time, thinks that any horse must have legs at least fourteen feet long!

#### STATISTICAL SUMMARY

	1952	1951
†Cattle to stockyards ....	247,750	358,180
†Cattle direct to plants ....	129,683	153,633
†Insp. Cattle Slaughter ....	348,022	397,757
*†Insp. Calf slaughter ....	186,154	221,214
†Insp. Sheep slaughter ....	85,651	78,140
†Insp. Hog slaughter ....	2,205,776	1,640,078
†Feeders to country ....	18,137	46,526
† January 1st to May 10th.		

Exports of live cattle, hogs, sheep and dressed meats to U.S. prohibited February 25th, 1952, by U.S. Sanitary embargo.

Average prices of good steers up to 1,000 lbs. and good cows week ended May 10:

Steers per Cwt.	1952	1951	Av. yr. 1939
Toronto .....	\$24.28	\$32.50	\$6.77
Winnipeg .....	21.85	31.13	6.18
Calgary .....	19.67	31.88	6.03
Edmonton .....	21.00	31.00	5.72
Chicago .....	30.85	33.90	.....

#### Cows per Cwt.

Toronto .....	\$20.58	\$27.25	\$4.86
Winnipeg .....	15.78	26.50	4.57
Calgary .....	13.33	26.95	4.07
Edmonton .....	14.00	26.65	4.05

Cold storage holdings in Canada at May 1 (in pounds):

	1952	1951	5-yr. Av.
Beef, frozen ....	9,363,000	9,037,000	13,546,206
Pork, frozen ....	41,418,000	28,685,000	28,903,082
Mutton & Lamb ..	1,783,000	1,307,000	3,149,553

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This is believed to be the first shipment of cattle to Italy, Stock Yard officials report. The young heifers, from three to seven months old, are being sent to build up the depleted herds of that country.

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3/4"	1.050	0.824	350 lb.	0.140 lb.	400 ft. coils
1"	1.310	1.070	200 lb.	0.181 lb.	300 ft. coils
1-1/4"	1.660	1.380	200 lb.	0.267 lb.	300 ft. coils
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