

HISTORY & FOLKLORE



Bill Brett in 1978 making horsehair rope.

From Gulf States Magazine, Fall 1979 – Has Success Spoiled Bill Brett?

by Tom LeVrier

“Nah, it ain’t spoiled me. I’m just a little bit poorer, that’s all. For one thing, my wife wouldn’t let it spoil me.”

We met Bill Brett at his small ranch on the outskirts of Hull, Texas. He lives down a winding road, in a small, rustic, natural-wood home with a large spread out back. His land and stables consist of about 25 head of cattle, five or six horses, a large barn, and a motley collection of hound dogs. He met us at the door dressed in a khaki shirt, a battered cowboy hat, and Wrangler jeans stuffed into a pair of worn, pointed-toed cowboy boots. “This place ain’t big enough to call it a ranch; it’s just a place.”

After an exchange of hellos, Brett sat back in a recliner and lit up a store-bought Marlboro Light.

“A concession to success?”

“Nah, I just ran out of hand-rollin’ tobacco. My wife has gone to the store to get some more.” Then, eyeing the cigarette suspiciously, he said, “I hear they use real tobacco in these things, but I have my doubts...no wonder lettuce is so high these

days, I think they put it in these things.”

Bill Brett, for those who don’t know, has established himself as one of the foremost western writers in Texas. He has written numerous stories and published several books, including *The Stolen Steers* and his latest, *Well He Asked Me and I Knewed So I Told Him*. He is currently working on a book about razorback hogs.

Brett writes the way he talks. He’s a natural storyteller. Writing in an almost stream-of-consciousness style, he barely allows the reader a chance to take a deep breath. His style is lent validity by a man who has lived the life he writes about.

“I get most of my ideas from other people...stories I’ve heard all my life. I get a lot of my ideas down at the post office. You’ll sometimes find 800 or 900 years of living there standing in line. You’ll hear some great solutions to the world problems there and some of them even make sense. I guess I would take more credit if I had thought up more of my stories myself.”

self.”

Brett is the archetypically cowboy. Long, lean and lanky, he would appear more at home slouched over a saddle in the rain than sitting thoughtfully at a writer’s desk. You get the feeling that if Bill Mauldin had decided to draw cowboys instead of G.I. Joe, he would have chosen Bill Brett for his model. In a world of urban cowboys, Texas chic, and the new hybrid, the quasi-Willie Nelson styled “longneck,” Brett comes through as a breath of fresh air. A taste of the real thing.

Aside from his literary skills, he is considered perhaps the area’s foremost authority on folklore of the Big Thicket. He is often asked to attend various historical expositions and county fairs to tell stories and to prove his skill at the ancient art of weaving horsehair rope.

“I like going to talk to grade school kids the most. They’ve still got imagination at that age. I don’t know what happens to it; I guess it gets driven out by the school system.

“I don’t have any writing habits as such. I just write when I’m inspired, I guess you could say. It don’t do me any good to hurry it; it just comes when it wants to. I haven’t picked up a pen in six months and I don’t worry about it. It don’t do no good to worry about it.

“I write at 10 to 12 hours a stretch for a book and about an hour for a story.” He then types it in his own idiosyncratic typing style, the two-fingered method he learned in the Air Force.

“I spend most of my time reading, sometimes 12 to 16 hours a day, more than I need to keep up this place.”

What does Bill Brett read? Zane Grey? Louis L’Amour? Jack London?

“Nah, I read mostly science fiction. They’ve got more imagination. I like Isaac Asimov. I don’t like many of the western writers; they don’t write it the way it was. It’s hard to take them seriously when they’re writing about guns that weren’t even made at that time, ones that didn’t come until 10 years later. They didn’t even write about the right kinds of saddles used back then. This showdown stuff just wasn’t true. The sheriffs

(Continued next page)



Bill Brett poses with his Western Heritage award from 1978. He was recognized for his novel *The Stolen Steers: A Tale of the Big Thicket*, published by Texas A&M University Press. Brett’s novel was the only award for Folklore Novel in the history of the Western Heritage awards.

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