





Harry Vold
Taking Stock

The land of opportunity lured Canadian auctioneer and rodeo stock contractor Harry Vold to make a name for himself south of the border 40 years ago. Today, Vold is a recent inductee into the National Cowboy Rodeo Hall of Fame and a recipient of a ProRodeo Legend Award. America has been good to the man known as the Duke of the Chutes.

By Tracey Feist

Photography by Carmel Zucker

The walls in Harry Vold's trophy room are filled with photos of the world's best cowboys who've ridden his bucking horses to eight seconds: Jim Shoulders, Casey Tibbs, Larry Mahan, and Ty Murray among them. Leather halters from world champion horses, identified by the Bar HV brand, hang prominently above those glossy 8x10s. Sterling silver trophy buckles are displayed under glass in a custom-made wagon wheel bar table. And newspaper articles, weathered by time, tell the tale of the 86-year-old rodeo legend who is Harry Vold: auctioneer, Wild West show performer, rodeo promoter, and eleven-time recipient of the Professional Rodeo Cowboys' Association (PRCA) Stock Contractor of the Year award, the most of anyone in the history of North American rodeo.

His daughter Kirsten sums up the hardware best: "I would hate to even guess how many [awards] there are." Perhaps his most recent honor, an October 2009 induction into the Rodeo Hall of Fame at the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City, tops them all. Vold himself called it "the icing on the cake."

From Ponoka to Pendleton and Houston to Las Vegas, the Harry Vold Rodeo Company has supplied livestock for the biggest rodeos across North America. I traveled to his 32,000-acre ranch in Avondale, Colo. to see and report how this unassuming grandfatherly figure could have

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the business acumen to rival the sharpest New York executive. And though I'd heard from enough sources that this man—who has done as much for the sport of modern rodeo as anyone—is a humble cowboy to the core, I was still more than a little intimidated to sit at his kitchen table.

Vold has pulled competitors out of bankruptcy—then sold their companies back to them once they were flush; when the PRCA was \$250,000 down, he drove to Colorado Springs for the better part of a year, eventually helping rodeo's most important association to get \$800,000 in the

black. It's acts of solidarity like these that have made him a central force in rodeo for 60 years, revolutionizing the industry of stock contracting in the process. And as I found out, with talk of cloning and other new methods of producing superior bucking stock, Vold isn't ready to hang up his spurs just yet. The Harry Vold Rodeo Company seems poised to continue leading the field for years to come.



Born in 1924, Harry Vold grew up dirt poor, living the cowboy life on his family's ranch in Ponoka, Alberta, Canada, where auctioneering and horse trading fed the family during the Depression. Horses were the main form of entertainment for him and his three brothers. To produce their first rodeo in 1944, all four boys helped build a 30,000-square-foot arena in Asker, Alberta.

Later, Vold made a name for himself as one of the best auctioneers in Canada, working for both the Edmonton and Calgary livestock yards. "They sent me all over the country," says Vold. "I'd get on a train at night and be there the next day, sell the sale and come home. I had a waiting list of sales to sell."

"I've been a vagabond all my life," he continues. "Ever since I was a kid, I was on the go. I was told I was like my grandfather on my mother's side, who was a sailor in Norway—I never could stay in one place. When the phone rings, you've got to go, because if you don't, you're going to lose the job."

While Vold was on the road auctioneering, he was also earning a reputation

as a stock contractor. In 1959, he was awarded one of the livestock contracts for the first National Finals Rodeo (NFR), though he lived in Alberta.

"The first National Finals I went to paid me \$75 an animal. I had seven head to haul, with no freight paid," says Vold. "And from Ponoka to Dallas, it was about 2,200 miles. It barely paid the expenses of the trip." But he knew it was a good business opportunity. Today, Vold is one of only two contractors who have supplied stock for the NFR's entire 50-year history. "Now they pay me \$5,200 an animal," he says.

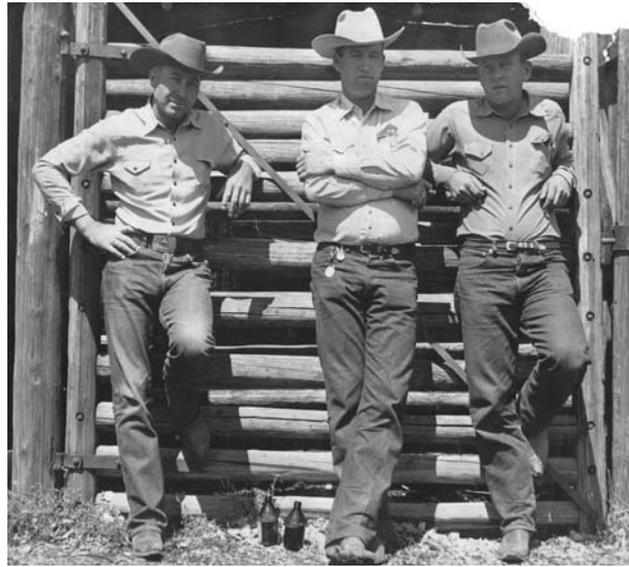
It was at the first NFR in Dallas where Vold was lucky enough to meet Lynn Beutler of the Beutler Brothers Rodeo Company, from Elk City, Okla.

"Each year they would come up to Great Falls to put on a rodeo, and I would bring [them] a load of horses from Canada," Vold explains about how his relationship with Beutler evolved. "One day Mr. Beutler said to me, 'You know we're probably ready to hire someone to run this thing or sell it.' It was probably the busiest, best company I could think of in the United States at that time."

He and silent partner Mike Cervi bought the Beutlers' company in 1967, prompting Vold to move state-side and settle in Colorado.

"I've always sensed in him a dream to get bigger, and he'd fulfilled all those accomplishments in Canada," says Winston Bruce, who competed at that very first NFR held in 1959. "In order to grow, he had to move."

By 1970 the partnership had fulfilled



The buck starts here: (Clockwise from top left) Harry Vold aboard a bucking bronc; Vold (right) and the boys from the Claggett Wild West Show, 1947; Vold (right) with Shirley Hussey (center), and Fred Galarneau (left); Crooked Nose, feared by many a bullfighter because of its crossed eyes, peers down at Vold in his trophy room; Horses have free rein on the Vold Ranch in Avondale, Colo.; Vold auctioneering a sale in the 1980s; The welcome sign from "Marshall" Harry Vold reads: "There is no other place quite like this."



‘There were more opportunities down here in the U.S. by a long shot. This is a fabulous country.’

20 rodeo contracts originally signed by the Beutlers, and Vold and Cervi had decided to part ways. Vold had to start over from scratch. His saving grace? The original 40 Canadian horses he had brought with him to Colorado when he moved—and his optimistic attitude.

“There were just more opportunities down here [in the U.S.] by a long shot,” says Vold. “This is a fabulous country!”

Vold would go on to supply stock and produce for some of the best rodeos in North America. He hired celebrities such as Festus (Ken Curtis) from TV’s *Gunslinger* and trained trick-riding acts such as The Fireballs. His performances were known for their family entertainment value.

“I used to do what we call a turnkey deal,” explains Vold. “I furnished everything, from the acts, the clowns—even a big brass band. I did it all, having what I thought was a better show.” Vold is a stickler for details, so the shirts and chaps of the pickup men had to be clean, the horses washed, and tack polished.

Fulfilling those contracts meant providing the saddle horses for rodeo committee, rodeo queens, and other dignitaries, as well as the animals used for the actual performance events—the bucking horses, the bulls, and the calves for tie-down roping. At Cheyenne Frontier Days alone, where Vold’s company has had the rodeo stock contract since 1976, Vold can be responsible for bringing up to 1,900 animals. Care and maintenance for animals has always been at the forefront of Vold’s

management philosophy.

“I never buck a horse more than twice a week,” he says. “If a horse bucks 20 times in a year, that’s a lot. That’s why I take so darn many of them!”

The Vold bucking horse breeding program is one of the most respected in the business. A 1972 bay stallion named Custer originated many of the bloodlines on the ranch today. Although Vold eventually sold the stud to fellow stock contractor Ike Sankey, his daughter Kirsten says, “Ike would probably be the first to admit it was that horse that put him on the map in the rodeo business.” In just one year, more than 30 direct descendents of Custer qualified for the NFR.

Bobby Joe Skoal, a son of the Custer stud, won Vold the world saddle-bronc championship three years in a row, from 1990 to 1992. “There were several guys that rode him—Ty Murray being one,” says Vold. “He wasn’t impossible to ride, but they scored so high when they did.” Even though Bobby Joe is now retired, Vold hopes to keep his legacy alive by cloning the horse he calls “a dream to handle with a disposition to match.”

“They took a patch of his skin, and we’re in the negotiation process,” says Kirsten, acknowledging her dad’s forward-thinking business sense. “A clone could be a possibility.”

“Vold is a cowboy’s cowboy and one of the best [in the business],” says world saddle-bronc champion Billy Etbauer. “He knows what he likes and he has worked on perfecting the right breeding, the right bloodlines his whole life. Vold has horses that a cowboy likes to go get on—something that will jump and kick out.”

Winston Bruce agrees with Etbauer. “I always wanted to draw a Harry Vold horse,” he remembers. “I knew I would have an opportunity to win and that’s what I wanted. I didn’t care if I was at Ponnoka or the NFR—if he had stock there, I wanted one of them.”

Another key feature of Vold bucking stock is consistency. “Harry also has a real eye for bucking horses that will stay bucking for years,” explains Bruce, citing that the Calgary Stampede started to follow a crossbreeding program much like the one Vold was using before he left Alberta.

“You try to breed the best [stud] to the best [mare] and hope for the best, because they don’t always turn out,” says Vold of his standard-bred, Clydesdale-cross horses. “Some just want to buck, and other horses, well, you can’t make them. In this business, it’s the consistency that counts.”

Billy Etbauer also benefited from Vold’s breeding program at the 2009 Cheyenne Frontier Days, winning the only award that had eluded him his entire rodeo career: the coveted gold buckle in saddle bronc. The 47-year-old rodeo veteran made an 89-point ride on Painted Valley, an eight-year-old horse that Kirsten currently owns.

“It is the highest score that’s been on him yet,” she says proudly of the stud she raised in her backyard.

“I think my ridin’ always needs work, but I knew the horse was going to be good,” says Etbauer. “After 22 years of going to Cheyenne, it’s awful nice to have one of those buckles. I’m sure Harry was bubblin’ as much about it as I was.” The PRCA named Painted Valley the third best bucking bronc in 2009.

Today, the face of the Harry Vold Rodeo Company has changed genders. Daughter Kirsten manages the business and contracts up to 15 rodeos a year. She’s grateful for her dad’s continued involvement and says that she continues learning from him, especially when it comes to finances.

“My dad has a saying: ‘If you’ve got more marbles coming out of the sack than coming in, you’ve got a problem,’” says the 37-year-old. “That philosophy has driven all his businesses and is how he’s been successful.”

As strong bloodlines are critical to producing top bucking stock, Harry Vold’s offspring have carried on his legacy. Sons Wayne and Doug are both in the Canadian Professional Rodeo Association Hall of Fame, with Doug and sisters Darce and Dona owning and operating the Triple V Rodeo Company out of Casper, Wyo. Daughter Nancy, who passed away from complications from diabetes in 2008, was also active in the rodeo business.

Rodeo announcer Bob Tallman thinks of the Vold family as rodeo royalty.

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“Harry fits into a category with all of the greats that have ever produced our business,” he says. “He was the workin’ man’s producer and was a totally different cut than how other [stock contractors] were. They were the diamond ring-wearing, big cigar-smoking, Cadillac-driving men. Harry was old-fashioned of manner, but brilliant in style when building his [rodeo] dynasty.”

Tallman is also the man responsible for giving Vold his ubiquitous nickname: Duke of the Chutes. “He looked to me like that’s what he was—a Duke, from his prominence in the arena and his poise to his infectious smile and the twinkle in his

‘Harry was old-fashioned in manner, but brilliant in style when building his rodeo dynasty.’

eye,” says Tallman. “I can remember announcing, ‘This one belongs to the Bar HV Duke of the Chutes Harry Vold.’ I said it three or four times, and pretty soon I’d hear someone else say it, and then I knew [the name] had stuck. Every time I hear it or see it in print, I grin inside. Vold was the king in two countries, not just one.”

Back on his spread in Avondale, Colo. Vold and his wife of 38 years, Karen, tend 700 horses, 50 roughstock bulls, and a blue heeler named Leecy. During my afternoon visit, I witnessed a twinkle in Vold’s eyes that still shines brightly. As we stood in the grandeur of his trophy room and reflected on those images of rodeos past, he just smiled serenely, leaving me to wonder about all of the tales that will go untold.

On a personal note, I was touched that he remembered horse trading with my granddad long before I was born. (I wonder who got the better deal?) This unassuming grandfatherly figure remains a force to be reckoned with, and I was honored to meet him.

Raised on a cattle ranch in the foothills of the Canadian Rockies, freelance writer Tracey Feist lives with her family near Denver.