



**Bulls Ain't  
Supposed to be Rode**

☞ **Frank Barnett** ☜

The Contemporary Sportsman

# A ROAD LESS TRAVELED

**Photograph by: Frank Barnett**



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Supposed to be Rode*

Photos & Text by: Frank Barnett  
Introduction by: Jim Stenson



When award-winning photographer Frank Barnett finally determined that photo-journalism truly was his passion and that he wanted to make his mark in the field, he went about looking for subject matter that would set his work apart from the mainstream of photo enthusiasts. He knew he had a unique “eye” for framing exciting images that many people – even other photographers didn’t possess, and he also was aware that he had the moxie to place himself into scenes that the average person just simply couldn’t gain access to – the middle of rodeo arenas or deep in the heart of one of America’s most notorious prisons.

For decades, Frank and his late wife Sharan owned an advertising agency and he was often fortunate to have venues in which his images could be published that included marketing brochures, annual reports, newspapers and magazine articles that also gained him access to unusual places. So early on, he had the personal gratification as an artist of seeing his work in print. He had also earned undergraduate and graduate degrees as a cultural anthropologist from the University of California at Berkeley and UCLA and, as a result, he had learned to look at subcultures within the mainstream of American life as


**Left:** In cowboy parlance, this bronco is crow hopping – a stiff legged jump that momentarily stops its forward motion.



one might look at a foreign tribe in Africa. His work became characterized as having a kind of “fly on the wall perspective” of people and scenes that probed deeply into the essence of the individual and the larger cultural context in which that person lived and worked.

As a younger man, Frank had been the Director of Advertising and Public Relations for the University of California Press in Berkeley, owned a bookstore in San Francisco’s East Bay and founded two fine art galleries. Prior to joining UC Press, he had also had a brief stint as a community college instructor where he would instruct his students to read *Return to Laughter: An Anthropological Novel* by Elenore Smith Bowen. In it the author dealt with the struggle of anthropologists to make valid observations without intervening in or altering the culture being studied. Frank observed that “the photographer is presented

with the same challenge. My goal as an artist is to capture the essence of the scene or individual – the heart of a place or the soul of the person. I point my camera and wait until what I am seeking presents itself. When it does, it’s often a surprise, but it never seems to lie and I never end up feeling that in taking the photograph I have somehow altered the natural course of events.”

In addition to photography, Frank is a writer and was a co-author with his wife on a ground-breaking book that studied couples across the nation who were engaged in equal partnerships with their spouses titled, *Working Together: Entrepreneurial Couples*. Today, he lives in Portland, Oregon where he continues to be an active fine art photographer. Pendleton Woolen Mills has selected six of his iconic images to weave into their limited edition tapestry series that has just been released. 

**W**hen I stumbled first into rodeo life, as a result of a tourism video production my agency was producing in Oregon, I discovered a subculture I had only seen on the big silver screen. Through the telephoto lens of my video camera I had my first glimpses of cowboy life and I was hooked like a kid who wanted to run away with a circus that had just rolled into town.

At first, I was shooting from the media platform at the end of the arena where the press was often positioned. That vantage point was far removed from the real action – a safe distance from all the stomping, dust churning, bone crushing power of 2,000 pound snorting Brahman bulls and Brahman crossbreeds that clearly had the advantage over their fragile human riders perched precariously on their backs. Each time when the large steel or heavy wooden gates of the bucking chutes were opened another cowboy would emerge on the back of a giant beast, one hand grasping white-knuckled onto a split in the rope that fit snugly around and behind the bull's right shoulder while the rider's free arm was used for balance and seemed to be reaching always for the sky. More often than not, one cowboy after another would be swung around like a rag doll and tossed unceremoniously to the ground, often to be stomped on by a raging bull. It was first on that elevated media platform, safely removed from the real action, that I learned that "bulls just ain't supposed to be rode."

As a result of my finished video our marketing firm was



nominated “The Business of the Year.” But the exciting rodeo scenes that I had shot amounted to only a small fragment of the larger production – just a few minutes on screen. However, they were my favorite part and every time I watched the hour long video my heart would pound as I once again viewed a lone cowboy run across the dusty arena with a slobbering, snorting bull closely behind him, pawing the dirt at the heels of his stirruted boots – sticky drool streaming from his mouth and snout.

With the ubiquitous nature of photography today, when everyone is carrying around a camera, whether it’s merely a feature on their cell phone or a high mega pixel image capturing device, most people think of themselves as a photographer. And for that matter, most camera buffs can pull off some pretty amazing images. Digital photography has resulted in the democratization of the art, and I suppose that’s a good thing because there’s nothing more humanizing than becoming involved in the creation of art, regardless of the medium. I know and I’ve been doing just that for most of my seventy-one years.

I’ve always believed that what separates the professional photographer from the amateur boils down to access – that is, the subject matter. And that really hasn’t changed much since the days of film. Memorable 20th Century photography can be said to be comprised of two significant commonalities, its primarily black and white emphasis and images that have been captured of subject matter that has not readily been accessible to the average man or woman on the street – famous people, historical and documentary photography, sporting events, dra-

matic war images and other subjects that have lent themselves to photojournalistic projects.

Weegee would have never been immortalized as the Chicago freelance photojournalist he became had he not possessed one of the first police scanners to be owned by a “civilian.”

That device gave him the heads up he required to be on hand to cover sensational events that included traffic accidents, violent crimes and catastrophic fires that he then sold to the tabloid press.

And, André Kertész, my absolute personal photographer hero, owes his place at least in my hall of fame, to the good fortune of having a career that spanned eight decades and several continents. From his early deeply evocative images of the Hungarian countryside to his WWI photographs in the trenches,

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Perfection in synchronization between horse and rider – riding form just doesn't get any better than this.



right down to his stunning black and white images shot in New York and Paris in the 1970s and 1980s, André Kertész continued adding striking images to an already dazzling body of work. And what a body of work it was, with images dating back to 1913 to those taken as recently as 1984. Some of those later photographs include my favorite shots of the late, great World Trade Center.

Since I had already gained access to the rodeo arena as a

videographer, when the rodeo rolled around the following year during the 4th of July celebration, I again contacted its promoter and asked if I could return, but this time as a still photographer. On opening day, I found myself in the paddock, where the animals and performers were being staged prior to entering the arena. Now I was on the ground and I could see just how huge these horses with their mounted cowboys really were, but save for the possibility of being kicked in the head, I was still relatively





removed from the heat of the real action in the arena.

I shot all that first day around the paddock and through the slits in the large gate that entered into the arena at the wildly fast paced events beyond. That night I returned to my studio and without sleeping a single wink, processed my images and placed them into a portfolio. Bright and early the next morning, I grabbed a quick cup of java to jangle my nerves a bit and took my finished proof sheets back to the event's promoter to show him what I was capable of and what I had captured the day before. The result was that he allowed me to begin shooting that very day from the chutes. I now found myself surrounded by the rodeo performers, stretching, meditating about the rides they would soon be on or just stoically awaiting their fates. With cowboys to my left and right, the animals in the pen behind me and the arena at my feet I was embarked on a career as a rodeo photographer that would last for several seasons and would soon be placing me right in the center of the arena, shooting the action and dodging bulls with names like "Widow Maker."

My travels as a rodeo photographer would eventually take me across country and into Louisiana's notorious Angola prison rodeo. After having photographed in numerous arenas where care was always taken to assure the safety of the rodeo performers and their animals it was a shock to discover that at Angola Prison, unskilled prison performers entered the arena

**Left:** Patient cowboy performers popping up like woodchucks from inside their separate chutes at the Pendleton Round-up.



without proper protective gear and were basically gladiators in savage rodeos staged for the general public's amusement. It was a blood sport that seemed to be more about revenge and Christian redemption that was played out in the arena between wild animals and helpless prisoners than it was about skill and athleticism. But that is really another story.

For now I was, for the first time, just a few feet from the

real action and the result showed in the images that I began taking that day. Ah, the wonder of access! I was shooting where few other photographers were allowed to enter – rodeos – a truly American sport and the only one to have

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evolved from an industry. Suddenly, there I was, photographing a unique sport that, like other major sporting events is performed by professional athletes in huge arenas filled with cheering spectators and next to me in the chutes were the cameras of ESPN.

Here is a sport where the National Finals in Las Vegas at-

tract more than 13 million viewers who tune in to watch what I was now witnessing through the lens of my view finder – bull riding, team roping, saddle bronc riding, calf roping and the fast paced women's event – barrel racing.

In order to shoot from anywhere in the arena, I was required to dress the role. There I was, this guy who had hailed from Chicago, grown up in West LA and attended the UC campus of Berkeley, known back then as the radical hot bed of political activism, at ground zero – right in the middle of all the action – and in full cowboy garb yet! Who would ever have guessed that I would one day be sporting a Wrangler long-sleeve shirt with pointed front yokes, patch pockets with western flaps, rope 'em Justin western boots, Wrangler jeans – and to top it off, a genuine bright white straw cowboy hat from the Resistol hat factory. Yew-haw – ride 'em cowboy! I was the old guy in the arena, but the new kid on the block, who had just run off and joined the rodeo!

My western apparel had cost me a small fortune and I was now worried about the reasonableness of my decision to become a rodeo photographer. The day before I had spent more on my cowboy outfit than I had for some of the professional cameras that were hanging around my neck. My practical doctor son had thought I had lost my mind.

It wasn't long before I graduated to the center of the arena with a line-up of other professional photographers and I began creating my own small circuit of rodeo venues – the St. Paul Rodeo, Puyallup Rodeo, Santiam Canyon Stampede, Chief Joseph Days Rodeo, Ellensburg Rodeo and, of course, the Pendleton

Roundup – where I began to regularly run into the same group of professional performers and most notably – Montana native Flint Rasmussen who had been voted the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association’s clown of the year for eight consecutive years and was adored by the crowds at some of the biggest rodeos in the country. Eventually, I had the honor of photographing Flint, his wife Katie and their two wonderful daughters, Shelby and Paige in their large motor home where I had set up my makeshift studio.

I looked forward to shooting in arenas where Flint performed and my respect for what he and the other rodeo clowns did to protect the rodeo performers life and limb grew with each encounter.

Rodeo clowns have long been a familiar part of rodeos and agricultural shows but their function was more for entertainment between the events than for the protection of the performers. Then, in the 1930s more aggressive bulls were bred and introduced into the arena. At that juncture, the rodeo clown’s job became much more serious. Today, rodeo clowns are also known as bullfighters and the barrel man. Flint is unquestionably one of the most famous barrel clowns to have ever entered the arena. Few performers can match Flint’s speed, agility and his uncanny ability to second guess a bull’s next move. Plus, the smart, former high school teacher can regale his crowd with the aplomb of the



**Right:** With the rider in the dust, two highly skilled rodeo clowns rush to his rescue.



best Las Vegas performer.

Photographing the clown's dangerous antics that are designed to distract an enraged bull from harming or further injuring a rider became one my major focuses. Since other rodeo photographers make their living from catching the rider at just the perfect moment atop an animal in shots that illustrate a perfection in form and synchronization between man and beast, their attention often dropped off after a rider was thrown. At that point, their cameras were left hanging around their necks as they busily made notations on their score cards. At the next event, those same photographers would be found at card tables selling their images out of photo binders to the performers who were looking for the shots that best represented their form – not their after ride escapes. Since selling my images to the

cowboy performers was not part of my business plan, during my time in the arena I would swing into action at exactly those moments when I could capture dusty images of riders who had become hung up, were on the ground or were busily engaged in planning their escape or in hasty retreats. It's at those exciting moments that the bullfighters and barrel man move in, placing themselves between the thrown rider and a decidedly angry animal and it's also at those moments that I've captured some of my most exciting images.

As someone outside the culture of the rodeo, I learned that the event characterizes some uniquely American attributes. Unlike other sports, the family is heavily represented in the rodeo – not only in the audiences that come to cheer the performers on, but in the chutes as well where fathers can be seen with



The cowboy's best friend – with split-second perfection, two cowboy pick up artists pluck a bronc rider off his horse.

their sons and daughters who are also performers in their own right in the junior bull riding and barrel racing events. The young girls are a delight to behold as they gracefully round the barrels and head back for the finish line at the end of their clover-leaf patterned runs in the barrel racing competition that's all about the fastest speed.

The rodeo is also a sport that is heavily characterized by a sense of cooperation and camaraderie between the performers. If one cowboy is missing a crucial piece of gear, he knows that there's someone in the chutes who will be ready to step up with a temporary replacement. And, unlike other competitive sports, there's also a great deal of information sharing between the performers. "When she comes out of the chute, watch out for her, cause she'll turn right first and then take a spin to the left!" And sure enough, that's exactly what will happen.

But there is one group of cowboys present at every rodeo that posses, not only the athleticism of the bullfighters and barrel man, the riding skills of the cowboy performers but also are the ultimate example of selfless cooperation – the pickup artist and the cowboy's best friend. At the end of every 8-second ride of the rodeo's bucking horse events, there are two cowboy pickup artists who are ready to pluck the exhausted bronc rider off his steed and to the safety of the ground below. And when a performer is hung up on his horse's rigging, a heart stopping occurrence that is not that uncommon, the pickup artists are there to save the hapless cowboy from serious injury and a visit to his orthopedist. The tradition of these cowboys – perhaps the

most skilled individuals you'll ever see in any arena, dates back to the days when saddling wild horses was more than just a rodeo event. During an era when cowboys worked the open range they needed a ready friend to help them out when the saddling of a wild horse went sour or they became just plum tired. That was the birth of the pickup artist and they are still doing their job today at every rodeo. When I was shooting in the arena I always made sure to catch the action at the end of the ride when these heroes of the rodeo went into action. It was pure poetry in motion.

One might imagine that the highlight of my rodeo photography career was at the moment I heard the click of my camera shutter capture the perfect shot or that split second when I had just successfully escaped


Widow Maker who had taken a bead on my fleeing posterior and was anticipating my every zig and zag. Actually, I think the height of my career was when three of my rodeo images, *Cowboy Pickup*, *Crow Hopping* and *Bucking Pinto*, were selected by

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Pendleton Woolen Mills as images for their limited edition woven wool tapestry collection.

Few company names in the Pacific Northwest inspire as much confidence and pride as Pendleton Woolen Mills. For six generations, the Bishop family has been creating Indian blankets, robes and shawls that are highly prized by much of our native American population. In fact, they are viewed by many of America's indigenous people as "sacred objects." It is probably not an overstatement to predict there will be at least one plaid woolen Pendleton shirt hanging in the average well-provisioned wardrobes of middle-class America throughout our nation. My relationship began with Pendleton Woolen Mills when Brot Bishop, the great-grandson of the founder of the Mill, Thomas Kay, purchased one of my rodeo images for his brother Morton Bishop III. Before Mort's passing a few years ago he had been a fan of the Pendleton Rodeo and I had noted that the license plate on his pickup truck read "Let 'er Buck".

My three images were each woven in very small editions of 7 or less in two different sizes on antique Jacquard looms. It was amazing to see my photographs as huge tapestries that measured up to 48 inches high by 68 inches wide. Until then, I had only reproduced my rodeo photography as normal sized prints. When I had first stepped into the arena, I had never dreamed that one day my photographs would be woven on a loom that had been invented by Joseph Marie Jacquard in 1801 and created at a woolen mill that had been founded in 1889 with such a long history that Pendleton Woolen Mills is now a

part of the very fabric of America's old West. What an honor. And what a culmination to my few seasons as a rodeo photographer in the arenas of some of the nations most renowned rodeos. It had been well worth that initial investment that was topped off by my treasured white straw cowboy hat made by Resistol that now lives on the top shelf of my closet. 



**Above:** Patient cowboy performers popping up like woodchucks from inside their separate chutes at the Pendleton Round-up.