



The Van Normans ranch in the

Great Basin area of the Northwest.

They are horseback every day.

And their remuda is one of the best.

Story and photos by Jim Jennings



HORSES



WHEN I ARRIVED IN ELKO, NEVADA, THE EVENING OF JUNE 10, I called Bill Van Norman to see what time he wanted me at his house the next morning.

'Oh, about 6 o'clock, Jim."

"Bill," I asked, "what time does it get daylight here?" "About 5."

Relieved, I realized that at 6 a.m. it would be light enough to take pictures. Back home in Amarillo, two time zones away, it's barely light enough to see at 6 in the morning.

Bill added, "By the way, Jim, did you bring a jacket? It snowed two inches here this morning.'

Not only was I two time zones away from the 90-degree heat in Amarillo, I was 3,500 feet higher and several hundred miles farther north. Elko is in northern Nevada, and although the small community of Tuscarora, near which Van Norman Ranches are located, is only slightly north of Elko, it is even higher, up around 6,400 feet.

But the snow didn't last, and shortly after 6 the following morning we were in Bill's pickup truck, climbing a mountain. We were looking for a group of yearling colts, turned out for the summer in a mountain pasture. Bill wanted to show them to me. He was proud of them and wanted me to know why Van Norman Ranches was last year's winner of the AQHA/Bayer Best Remuda Award. The Van Normans ride good horses.

It was Bill's father, Charlie, who put the ranches together. He and his wife, Della, bought a small homestead in Independence Valley, near Tuscarora, in 1945, and through the years they added to it. In later years, their sons, Bill and Robin, and their respective families, took over operation of the ranches. When Charlie died in 1996, and Della in 2000, the ranches were firmly established and continue to operate today.

Van Norman Ranches is a cow outfit. They run about 1,400 cows, calve in the spring, usually in April, and carry those calves throughout the winter. They are then sold as yearlings the next fall.

But winter comes early in northern Nevada and lasts a long time. Most years find the Van Normans feeding their cattle by mid-December, and they don't quit until the middle of April, when the snow melts. There have been years when they had to start feeding as early as the first of November, and the demands are high, from one and a half to two tons of hay per cow. Winter temperatures can get as cold as 40 below zero, but that's rare. Most winter nights are in the 10 degree range, and daytime temperatures are usually in the 20s and 30s.

Cow outfits in the Great Basin – that high desert, sagebrush sea that touches the states of Utah, Idaho and California, but lies mostly in northern Nevada and eastern Oregon - are typically big and cover some rough country. Horses are a requirement, and the Van Norman Ranches is no exception.

Bill and Robin's dad, Charlie, grew up in northern California, where Charlie's father was superintendent of the Gerlach Livestock Company. Good horses were a way of life on the Gerlach, and when Charlie came to Nevada, he brought that tradition with him.

Charlie and Della bought the geldings they used as they were establishing their ranches, but when Bill returned from the Army, he introduced a new line of thinking to the family. He felt they should start raising their own. They knew the kind they wanted to ride, so why not start breeding them? In 1969, Bill leased a band of mares and a buckskin stallion named Johnny Carlo from Melvin Jones of Carlin, Nevada, and they had their start.



All of the mares are pasture-bred, with the stallions being turned out in May. The Van Normans, who have about 50 broodmares, raise all their own ranch horses.

Johnny Carlo went back to Nick Shoemaker on the topside, and Joe Bailey on the bottom. He was foundation bred, and sired cow horses that had good bone, size and disposition. As Charlie and Bill continued to upgrade their horse herd, those were the characteristics they were looking for.

And the breeding of their horses today reflect those characteristics. Most of their 50 broodmares are descendents of Doc Bar, Doc O'Lena, Doc's Lynx,



Tillie Van Norman always rides and works alongside her brothers. In the branding pen, she takes her turn both roping and handling the branding irons.



Robin Van Norman splits duties with his brother, Bill, and handles the ranch's farming operation.

Mr Gun Smoke, Poco Leo Bars, Bert, Bueno Chex and Colonel Freckles. Stallions the ranch is using include Colonel Zippo Pine by Colonel Freckles; Madonnas Blue Bee by Flying X6 out of a Jackie Bee mare; Little Elmer Fudd by Little Lena Doc; Red Bandana Two, a Leo-bred stallion; and Showstoppin Boon by Peptoboonsmal.

All the mares are pasture bred, with the stallions turned out in May. They raise all the horses used on the ranch, and ride mostly geldings, although they try to ride all the fillies that go back into the broodmare band, and will occasionally ride a mare for ranch work. Those not used, are sold, either by private treaty or in their annual sale, which this year will be held September 14.

As mentioned before, winters are harsh, but the horses are

accustomed to it. Bill says, "We don't feed our mares much hay or grain. There's normally plenty of grass in the hay meadows in the summer, and during the winter, if the grass is down there, they'll paw that snow off.

"Besides," he continues, "they winter with the cows. When we feed the cows, the mares push in there and get some hay. But two months before they foal, they start getting alfalfa.

"These mares were born here, and they know how to survive. You go to California or Texas and buy one, and bring her up here, she's going to die if you don't take care of her. It takes them a couple of years to get accustomed to the weather."

Bill and his brother, Robin, are partners in the operation, and according to Bill, it's an ideal situation. They farm 10,000 acres, most of which is hay that is fed to the cattle



Ty's wife, Ronda, has a calf roped and is headed to the branding fire, while Bill comes around for a heel catch. Traditions in the Great Basin dictate that when working cattle, all calves are headed and heeled, and most ropers use ropes of 50 feet or more. Notice the additional coils of rope in Ronda's hand.

during the winter. Farming is what Robin enjoys, so he takes care of that end of it, while Bill is in charge of the livestock. Each thinks he has the best deal.

Bill's whole family is involved in the ranching, including his wife, Geri, their daughter, Tilly, sons Troy and Ty, and Ty's wife, Ronda. It's a family operation, and when there's work to be done, everyone is horseback.

In the Great Basin, cowboys - or buckaroos, as they are called there - take many of their traditions from the early day California vaqueros. That includes their equipment and how they ride their horses.

"We will start riding our colts in the spring of their 2-year-old year," Bill says, "but we will only ride them about 10 times and then turn them out for six months. We'll start using them when they are long 2s. They'll still get some breaks, but from then on they are pretty much a part of the string.

"We'll ride them in a snaffle bit until they are 4 or 5 years old," he continues, "and then put them in a hackamore (bosal) for a year or two. Then they'll be in the two-rein for a couple of years, and then into the bridle.

Bill explains that with the two-rein, the horse is ridden with the hackamore, but under the hackamore is a full bridle with a curb bit, usually a spade or half-breed. The horse might carry the bridle with no reins attached to the bit for a few days, as he learns to hold it in his mouth. Then the reins are added, and for the next year or so he is ridden with both the bridle and the hackamore. As the horse gains experience, the reins to the hackamore are used less, and those to the bridle, more.

'We believe their teeth aren't mature enough for a bridle until they are at least 6 or 7," Bill says. "Of course, there are a lot of

horses that are not done that way, but if you've got a nice horse and you plan on showing him in the bridle, it's definitely the best way to go."



Troy is in vet school but spends vacations on the ranch.



Ty is the oldest of the Van Norman children. He and his wife, Ronda, live and work on the ranch.

It's midmorning as we drive down off the mountain. We have already shed our jackets in the rapidly warming morning, and Bill figures that Ty, Troy, Tilly and the others have the

> cattle gathered and are at the branding pen, which is the plan for that day. Bill's mind hasn't been far from there all morning. Even though our mount so far has been the pickup, he has been wearing his chinks (chaps) and spurs since before 6, and his horse is patiently standing in the trailer waiting on him.

> Bill jumps his horse out, pulls up the cinch and steps aboard. As he shakes out his rope, he motions for me to follow him into the branding pen. He wants to show me another reason why Van Norman Ranches was judged to have the best remuda.



Ronda joins her husband horseback on the ranch most days.