



RANCH HORSE

# Horses in the Desert

**Almost everyone's vision of a desert is that of a dry, sandy area, almost void of vegetation and with unrelenting heat. That's not necessarily so — especially in the winter and early spring.**

**Story and photos by Jim Jennings**





JOHN LACEY PULLS HIS HEAVY, CANVAS COAT CLOSER AROUND HIS NECK, AND MAKES an effort to tug his felt hat farther down on his head. He is thankful for the gloves that cover his hands as he works the stiff plunger of a syringe. Almost unconsciously he turns away from the strong north wind. It is the middle of April in the Mojave Desert, and John is cold.

“Spring comes late up here,” he says, and pointing to the clouds that obscure all but the base of the mountains, adds, “It can snow in April.”

John Lacey is on his ranch in the Owens Valley of California, a couple of hundred miles almost straight north of Los Angeles. His land is in the upper reaches of the Mojave Desert, near the communities of Olancho, Lone Pine and Independence. Owens Valley is bordered on the east by the Inyo Mountains, the only barrier between it and Death Valley. On the west are the Sierra Nevadas, containing the largest mountain in California, Mount Whitney. In all but the warmest months, snow covers the peaks of Mount Whitney and several other nearby mountains that are more than 14,000 feet tall. Owens Valley sits at 3,800 feet. John’s family has ranched in this valley since his grandfather first came here from Missouri in 1870.

Lacey Livestock is pretty well centered in the Owens Valley, but it branches out into a good portion of California. John and his son, Mark, who lives with his family at Independence, lease about 50,000 acres in the valley and north of there, in both Inyo and Mono counties, on which they run 1,700 to 1,800 cows and summer about a thousand yearlings. They also have another thousand yearlings on a couple of places in the San Joaquin Valley.

**John Lacey has been in the ranching business all his life, starting in the Owens Valley of California, which lies at the base of the Sierra Nevada mountain range.**







**Mark Lacey, above, partners with his father on all the ranching operations. But when it comes time for the spring works, the Laceys and their employees count on their friends to help drag the calves to the branding fire.**

In addition, John and Mark have partnered with David E. Wood and formed Centennial Livestock. “That partnership leases land in Monterey County,” John says, “where we run yearlings in the winter and then move them – about 4,000 head – to Mono County, near Bridgeport, for the summer.” Centennial also leases about 200,000 acres of the Tejon Ranch in the southern San Joaquin Valley, in both Kern and Los Angeles counties, and runs around 3,400 cows and 3,000 two-season yearlings there.

John explains that a two-season yearling is one that is kept through two grass seasons. The cattle are bought weighing between 280 and 350 pounds in March, and sold about the first of May the following year, weighing around 800 pounds.

“If you are running 3,000 two-season cattle, there are about six weeks there when you have 6,000 head. You want to bring in the light cattle when the grass is still green. By the time the grass dries up from the summer heat, the young cattle are over any sickness and they are going good,” he says.

## **Breeding Horses**

THAT MANY CATTLE ON THAT MUCH RANCH LAND CAN ONLY be handled one way – with horses. The Laceys have always had good horses, going back even to John’s grandfather, and for that reason they won the AQHA-Bayer Best Remuda Award this year.

“I got interested in the horse business at an early age,” John says. “My dad didn’t raise many horses; he bought most of his, but we rode good horses. A friend of my dad’s raised Quarter Horses, and I kinda got the incentive to go into the horse business from him. I bought my first mares when I got out of college in 1960 and raised my first foals about 1964. I guess you could say that I poor-boyed it in the beginning, just picking up mares where I could. I didn’t have a lot of money to buy them, so I tried to breed them up.”



John bought his first stallion in 1976, a buckskin with both Anchor Watch (TB) and Question Mark breeding. He admits that he was probably more interested in the buckskin color in the beginning, rather than the quality, but through luck or otherwise, he ended up with some really nice horses. It was then that he figured out that there were four things he really needed in a horse – athletic ability, good looks, disposition and a lot of cow sense. And that’s what he’s been breeding for ever since.

His next stallion was a son of Gay Bar King called Long Live The King, whom he bred for about seven years. Then he bought a horse called Docs First Fri Dee by Docs Fri Dee Bar. Docs First Fri Dee was a Pacific Coast reining and cutting champion, but the Laceys were only able to use him two or three years before he died. John replaced him, however, with a son of Mr Gunsmoke, whom he bred for about three years.

Next, still looking to improve their foals, the Laceys bought a son of Colonel Freckles called Jeftee, who, as a 3-year-old, had made the semi-finals of the NCHA Futurity. They were showing that horse in cutting, and breeding him, when tragedy struck again, and he died after only one breeding season.

Many of the broodmares have been raised on the ranch and reflect the breeding of nearly all those stallions, but John has also bought some mares to add some outside foundation blood. Today he is crossing his mares on a horse called RSI Doctor Pepper, a good cow horse with Mr San Peppy breeding that they bought from the Renderbrook/Spade Ranch in Texas. He is also breeding another son of Colonel Freckles, Colonel Yo Yo, who has been shown at the World Show in cutting, reining and working cow horse. And he’s planning ahead. John is looking at a couple of sons of Gallo Del Cielo, better known as “Rooster,” who is a son of Peppy San Badger, and he’s considering a son of Shining Spark.

## Using Horses

UNLIKE MOST BIG RANCHES, WHICH, AS A RULE, RIDE ONLY geldings, the Laceys ride some mares. As a matter of fact, on the Owens Valley ranches, they ride almost exclusively mares.

“When I bought my first mares, I decided I liked riding them,” John says. “I think they are tough, and we never worry if they are in season or not. We ride them and we run them in a bunch. Our program was founded on the idea of riding the mares and proving the seed stock that we were going to use in our breeding program. We even rode the mares we bought before we decided if we were going to add them to the broodmare band. My philosophy is to have nothing in the

**These yearlings manage to stay in good shape, even though they are running in the desert where only 5 inches of rain fall per year.**

broodmare band that hasn’t proved itself to be what we want.”

On the Tejon Ranch, however, cowboys ride mostly geldings. Most of the geldings that are raised on the ranch in Owens Valley, and aren’t sold, go to the Tejon Ranch.

“I’ve always thought that for your horses to have real athletic ability, you needed to integrate some speed breeding,” John says. “We haven’t brought speed in through our studs, but we have through some of the foundation mares that we have added over the years. We have raised some pretty good rope horses that have been able to compete at the highest level. I think blending in the speed and cow sense, and then riding them on the ranch and making sure they do everything right before they get out into that kind of atmosphere of competition is what helps us there.”

## Livestock Industry

JOHN SPENDS A LOT OF TIME ON THE OWENS VALLEY RANCHES, and maintains a bunkhouse there for his use, although his son, Mark, runs those ranches. John lives on the other side of the Sierra Nevada mountains with his wife, Dee, in Paso Robles. There he is closer to the Tejon Ranch. He is a graduate of California Polytechnic State University – better known as Cal Poly – and still wears every day the buckle that he won on the college judging team in 1960. John and Dee also have a daughter, Nicki, and although she is married and living in Hawaii, she is still active in the family partnership on the ranch.

John has been a leader in the livestock industry for many years, and has served two terms as president of the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association. He has also been very active in the beef cattle industry in his home state.

But he’s always been interested in horses, too, riding first the ones his dad bought and even some they caught wild on the desert. But his goal was to raise his own, and as quick as he was able, he bought those first mares.

“We hope someday in the near future to not have to buy any outside foundation stock,” John says. “I want to create our own band of mares that we can say are Lacey-bred. That’s what we have been shooting at for 40 years, and we are almost there.” □

*The Laceys will receive the AQHA-Bayer Best Remuda Award during the World Championship Ranch Rodeo in Amarillo, November 13-16.*