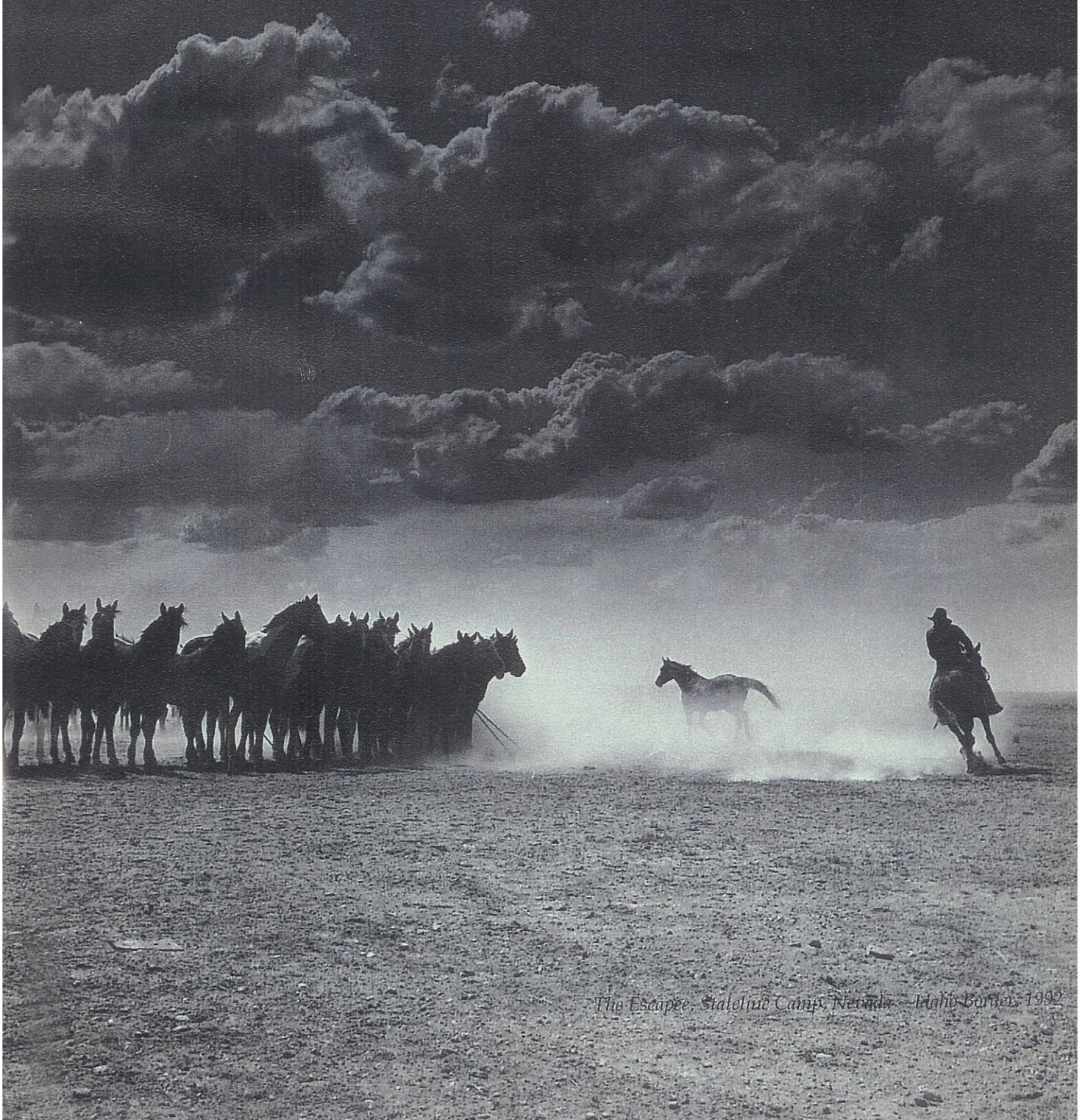


Adam Jahiel

One Man's Vision of the West



The Escapée, Stateline Camp, Nevada - Idaho Border, 1992

BY CORINNE J. BROWN

Growing up in the 1950s had its rewards. On the home front, black and white television brought the wonders of the Old West into our living rooms in the personae of *The Lone Ranger*, *Roy Rogers*, *Hopalong Cassidy* and the *Cisco Kid*, to name but a few.

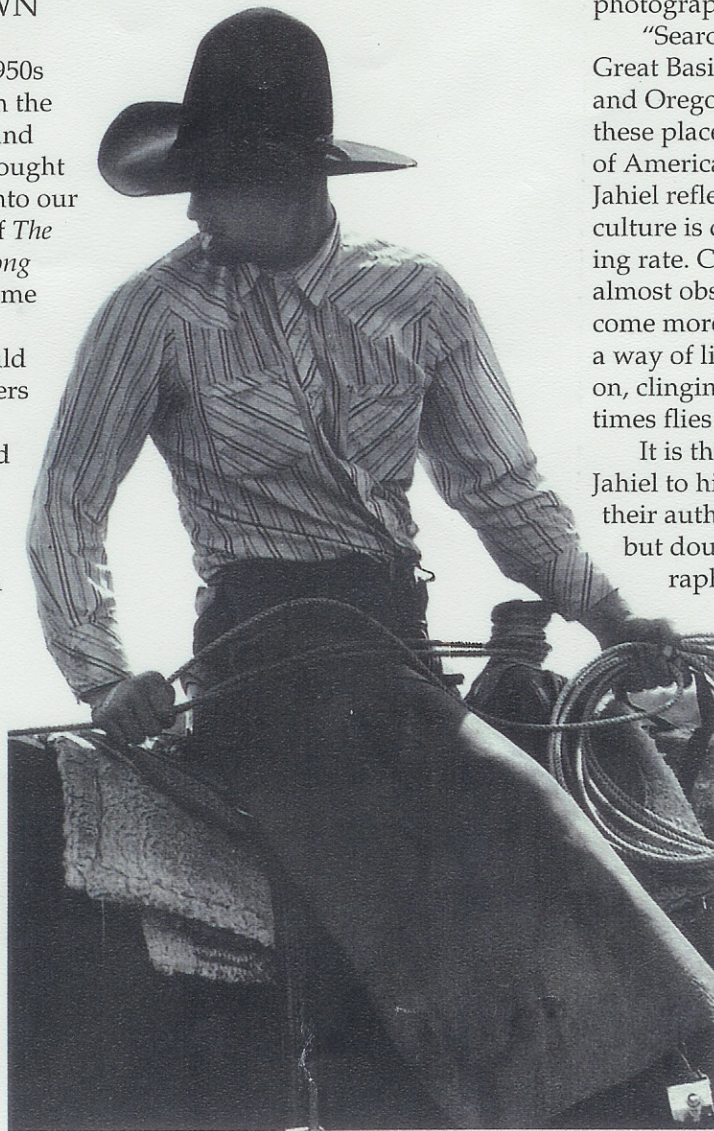
Within the decade we would all know the Cartwright Brothers from *Bonanza*, as well as the stars of *Rawhide*, *Cimarron*, and *Gunsmoke*. These and a host of other television cowboys helped create an indelible image of the American West in the minds of a postwar baby-boom generation.

Television westerns faded in popularity but were really never forgotten. Somewhere, in the recesses of the collective American subconscious, the cowboy persisted like a long lost relative, destined to surface again, forever young, handsome, and dusty from a hard day on the trail.

Could this be why the photography of Adam Jahiel feels so familiar and compelling to audiences who have never actually lived the life, but who collect his work nonetheless? Are they moved by his nostalgic images while applauding his romantic view of America's favorite hero?

Judging from his astounding success with corporate collectors and ranchers alike, Jahiel has tapped a nerve. In an era of glossy color billboards of anonymous cowboys who ride into the sunset for a variety of manufacturers, Jahiel's black and white images have an honest individuality that burns into memory, making each print some kind of perfect truth.

The truth is selective however, hardly an attempt to reach popular culture. Jahiel's vision sees past the



Wahoo Bill, IL Ranch, Nevada, 1991

athletes of the pro-rodeo circuit, the icons of the country western stage, and the celluloid cowboys of the celebrity world. Yet, his subjects are the very stuff of which legends are made, archetypal images like those set down long ago by western author Will James, or the artist Charles M. Russell.

His are the hardworking men of the land, followed through their lives by an objective camera and a finely trained eye. Searching out those images with an absolute reverence for the past, Adam Jahiel has managed to stop time, bringing images of a fading way of life into permanent focus with the most up-to-date

photographic techniques.

"Searching out cow camps in the Great Basin area of Nevada, Idaho, and Oregon, it appears to me that these places of the West contain one of America's last real subcultures," Jahiel reflects. "Unfortunately, that culture is disappearing at an alarming rate. Cowboying as an art form is almost obsolete. Ranching has become more of an industry and less of a way of life. Still, the cowboys hang on, clinging with a tenacity that at times flies in the face of good sense."

It is this tenacity that draws Jahiel to his subjects. He treasures their authenticity and cannot help but doubt so many other photographers who travel the West with loads of clothes and props, attempting to remake the subject into something familiar something that will sell. Jahiel avoids the contrived at all costs, yet it is a sense of the familiar that his pictures still evoke. There is almost a feeling of *déjà vu*, as if we, too, had been there and witnessed that very scene. Jahiel's photographs speak, softly, but with certainty. They touch us by the intriguing blend of tone, gesture, expression, and light. Time after time, his photos succeed because they reach our emotions first and then our intellect.

Educated at the Brooks Institute of Photographic Science in Santa Barbara, California, and later, acquiring a Bachelor of Journalism degree in photojournalism from the University of Missouri in Columbia, Jahiel started out with a career in commercial photography in mind.

As a student of oceanography at the Florida Institute of Technology in 1974, he was ideally positioned to join the research team that later filmed the discovery of the *Titanic* in 1987. Descending to the ocean floor

in a French submarine, he took many of the still photographs that made media headlines around the world at the time.

Settling in Los Angeles, he thrived on the West Coast, personally and professionally. Seeking a change, the decision to move to Wyoming brought him fresh inspiration. There, an invitation to work on a book for the Padlock Ranch in Dayton, Wyoming, provided a pivotal experience that changed his life.

Observing life on a cattle ranch closely, Jahiel saw that the career cowboy worked out of passion, respect, and love. "You can't pretend," he believes. "A real cowboy knows what it takes to be good at his job."

While shooting the assigned chronicle, as yet unpublished, he developed a profound relationship with the cowboy, his animals, the landscape, and the ever-changing western sky. Those first pictures in 1989 paved the way.

I just loved what reality presented me. I still do. There is a richness and complexity in the natural world that provides endless possibilities. I never posed anyone and I have never set up a shot. In fact, I've never cropped a photo after I've taken it. I do all the editing in my head. What you see is what I got."

Confirmed by the Wyoming experience, Jahiel decided to explore photography as art whenever he could. Commercial assignments with credible clients like Universal Pictures and Warner Brothers Westerns helped further his career. But he discovered, as he reserved more and more time for his artistic work, the pictures he took of the cowboy taught him much that was valuable about himself and his own motivations.

When asked if he had finally

become his subject, he admitted, "In a way . . . I, too, am attracted to the loneliness, the isolation, and the honesty of the work. I like things simple, the simpler the better. In these cowboy's lives, and in mine, things are reduced to the most essential elements. Like them, I believe I can relate to the weight of the task and what it takes to get it done. Sort of like Don Quixote, tilting at windmills, struggling with things that are."

Until settling in northern Wyo-

ming, Jahiel considered himself something of a nomad. He fondly remembers his father, a university professor, calling him "The Tumbling Tumbleweed" when he was young. A kind of wanderlust took him to Europe and around most of the United States during college and seems to be a part of his life to this day.

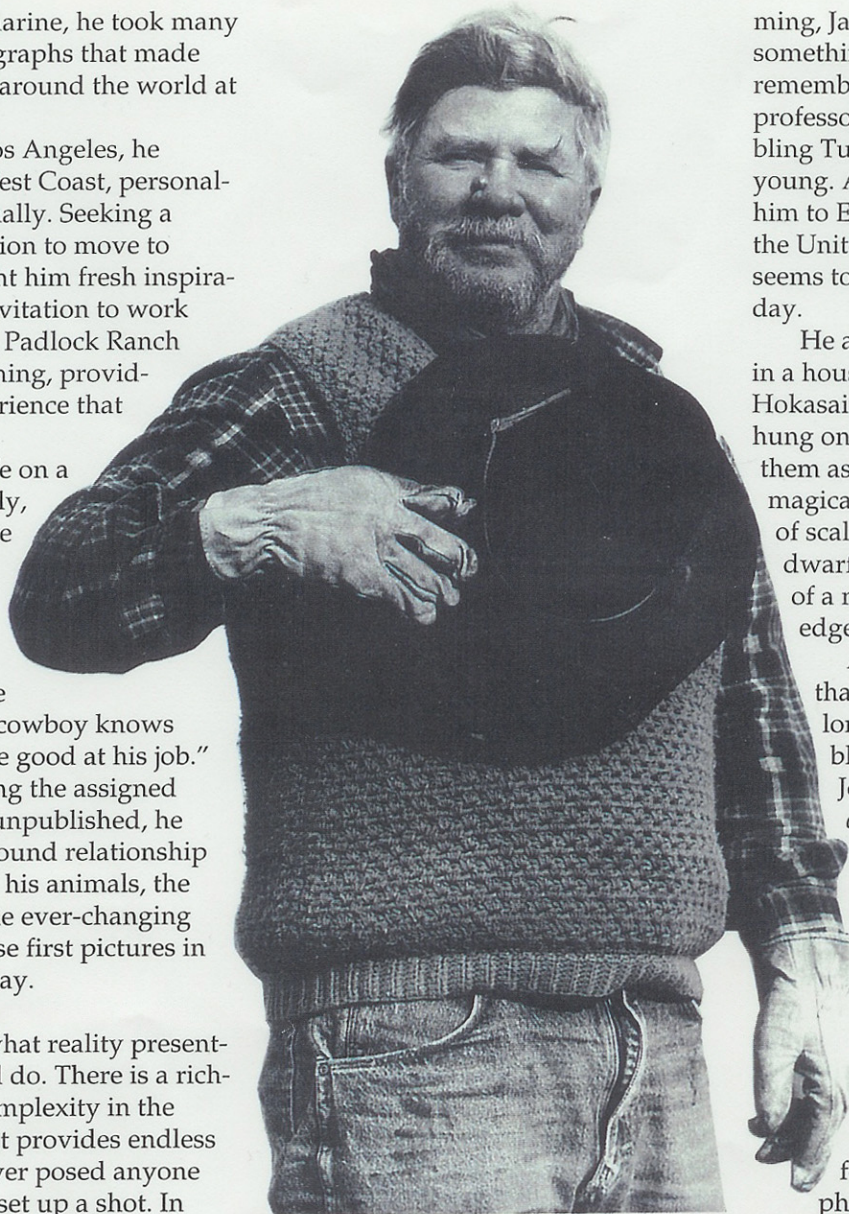
He also remembers growing up in a house where fine Hiroshigae and Hokasai Japanese woodblock prints hung on the walls. Fascinated by them as a child, he saw in their magical landscapes a forced sense of scale, where man appeared dwarfed by nature in the shadow of a mountain or by a river's edge.

An avid lover of movies at that time, he equated these lonely worlds to the memorable views in the then popular John Ford films like *Stagecoach*, *Rio Grande*, and *How The West Was Won*, and began to lay down the esthetic that has shaped his outdoor scenes ever since. His cowboys often seem to surrender to the elements and the land, acting out the age-old conflict of man against nature.

Jahiel believes the formula for a successful photograph is the perfect balance between ideas and technique. He says, "Technique is important because you have to be able to express yourself through the medium. But if you have no ideas, then your pictures have no soul. The marriage of the two makes a memorable photograph."

Asked to define the soul of a photograph, he did not hesitate. "Something that speaks to you," he answers. "The vision, not just the subject."

Technically, Jahiel relies on a medium format rangefinder. The four brackets that frame his view serve as his "stage." Then he looks for atmosphere ~ skin, dirt, leather,



Archie Bonnett, *Paiute Meadows-Ranch, Black Rock Desert, Nevada, 1989*



After the Roundup, YP Ranch, Nevada, 1993

and sweat, hoping to bring out the detail. He shoots when the moment seems right, when the first impression is also the only one. "Sort of like letting go of the reins, letting the subconscious decide," he laughs. "That's how I shoot best."

Jahiel's other camera might be a 4 x 5 viewfinder, but he prefers the equipment that allows him to grab the decisive moment. Most of all, he confesses that whatever his choice, there is always a little bit of magic, an element of surprise. He prefers to shoot in black and white because he thinks in black and white; the world distilled down to its most essential.

"Color is distracting. All I really need is drama. I crave being on top of the action and don't complain if I come back with a camera full of grit," he says. "To me, the best place to take the perfect shot is usually downwind where the dust is the worst."

When asked what he believes are the highest honors accrued by his

work, Jahiel first suggested a recent National Endowment for the Arts grant, then corrected himself. "Actually, I'd have to say it's the acceptance and approval I get from the cowboy subjects themselves. Particularly when someone comes up to me at an opening and says, "Yes sir, that's it. You got that just right. That's the way it is." Jahiel confirms their approval by adding, "I feel validated knowing I'm telling the truth."

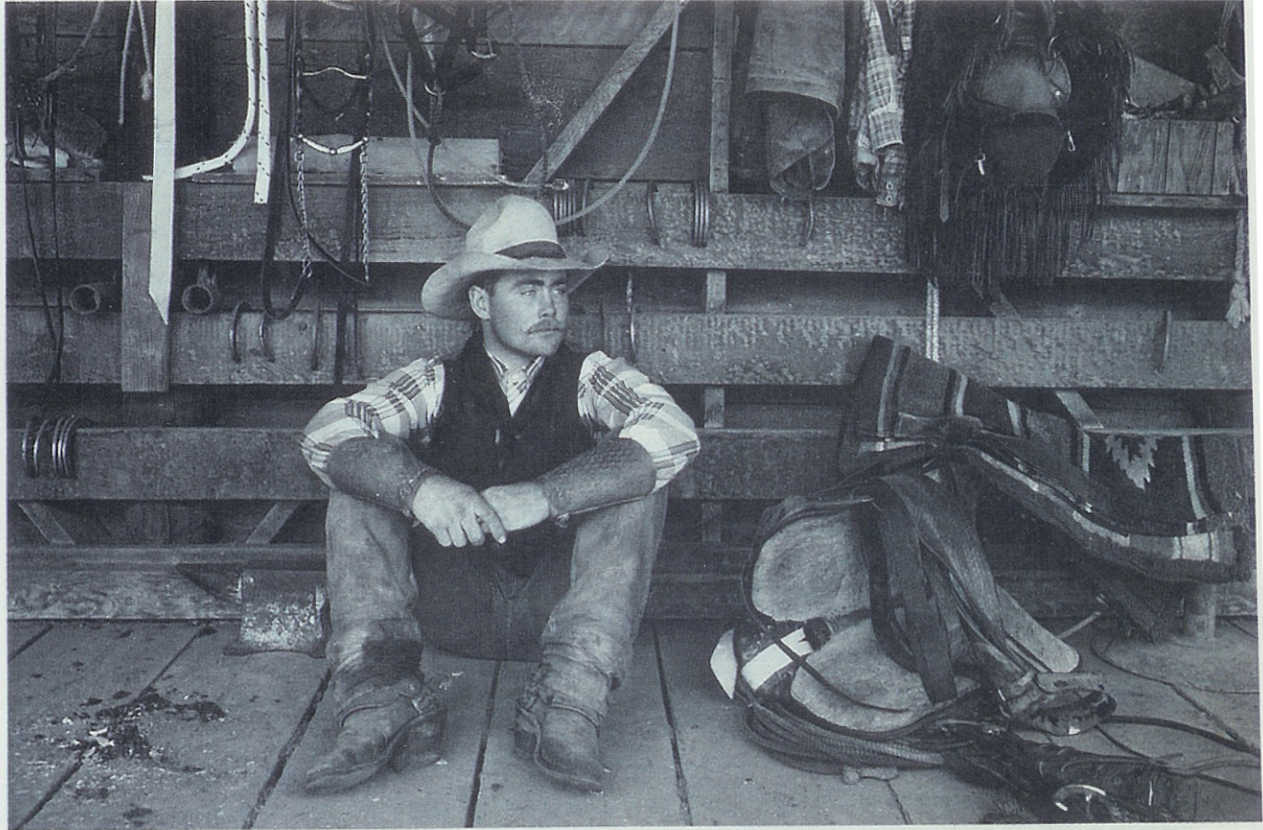
Jahiel's success can be measured by the remarkable exhibit schedule that has brought him to this point in his career. He has new commitments through the year 2000. From the Old West Museum in Cheyenne, to the Kimball Art Center in Park City, Utah, to the Pro Rodeo Hall of Fame in Colorado Springs, the list of invitational and one man shows is impressive.

It's easy to ask how and when he finds time to create; yet this artist seems to have learned how to balance

his personal life and continue his quest. A resident of Story, Wyoming, he lives with his wife and two-year-old son, Jacob, and a bevy of ranch animals as close to the source of inspiration as he can get. He's never far from a working ranch should a new idea occur.

Yet, there's nothing he loves more than hitting the open road to explore the varied ranch life that comprises Wyoming and all the other western states. Year round, good weather or bad, camped in a tent or in the back of a truck, he is at his happiest and most creative when following his cowboys through another grueling day, looking for that perfect moment, that perfect light. 🐾

Corinne J. Brown is a Persimmon Hill staff writer and novelist living in Englewood, Colorado. She recently completed a book about Scottish cattle barons in the West and the end of the open range.



T.J. Brown, ZX Ranch, Paisley, Oregon, 1993



Building A Loop, TS Ranch, Nevada, 1992



Roping A Calf, YP Ranch, Nevada, 1992



Part Of His String, Stateline Camp, Nevada ~ Idaho Border, 1992