

ART OF THE TALE

Mike Capron lives by his own “cowboyology” code, one that draws from the Old West and speaks to the hearts of those who read his stories and view his artwork.

By **KATE BRADLEY BYARS**



The scent of cedar wood burning is like a sweet perfume drifting through the open back door of a wood-faced building in Sheffield. Since 2012, the small West Texas town has served as the home of Mike Capron's art gallery, studio, meeting ground and cowboy museum, all rolled into one. The building houses his pencils, brushes and canvases, but also holds a wealth of information on cowboying, including historical saddles, bits and reference books. It takes more than one pass to see all the gallery has to offer. Similarly, getting to know its owner is like peeling back the layers of a well-wrapped gift.

Throughout school, the interests of roping and drawing comingled within Capron, and he worked to become a true cowboy artist. His path to owning his own gallery, having his art grace the walls of collectors, and illustrating books by Western authors such as Ed Ashurst wasn't without its twists and turns. But to Capron, that is what makes it such a good story.

BORN IN OTTOWA, Kansas, in 1945, Capron listened to his grandfather's tales of cowboys he knew in Montana. As an action-hungry 5-year-old boy, Capron yearned for the same kind of adventure found in those stories.

“That probably started [my entire interest in cowboying] right there,

those Montana cowboys,” he explains. “That connection caused me to pursue ‘cowboyology.’ I went in deep search for more cowboy knowledge, and it came in little pieces through the years. We had no television, but we had the radio. I listened to ‘The Cattle Call’ every

ABOVE: Capron drew this to illustrate a story by Carl Lane Johnson. “Mike Cade was a cowboy that worked for Carl Lane Johnson and he was in a story called ‘Way Before Daylight to Way After Dark.’ Memorable moments are wrecks, like this, when things go wrong!”

OPPOSITE: With decades of cowboying under his saddle, Mike Capron brings an authenticity to his art that comes from experiencing the scenes he creates on canvas.



morning. All I could think of was riding and roping—I wasn't so much interested in cowboying and the cow as I was roping the cow, which was exciting."

At 12, Capron's family moved to Abilene, Texas, home of the cowboy in his mind. In high school a friend gifted Capron *The Charles M. Russell Book* by Harold McCracken, which introduced the young artist to the legendary Western painter, who became an inspiration for his art.

"I was floored! I didn't know people [could paint cowboy images], and that inspiration had me immediately testing to see if I could copy those [paintings]," Capron says. "It gave me interest and confidence to pursue education away from all the other [subjects] I was having trouble with, like chemistry and algebra. I was a senior in high school

and started following Charlie Russell close, real close."

Capron's first goal after high school was to hire on with a ranch. Immediately after graduation, he day-worked on ranches near Artesia, Texas. His first true cowboy job was near Ruidoso, New Mexico, working on the Mescalero Apache Indian Reservation, which included 700 sections and 7,000 or more Hereford cows. Capron was one of 15 cowboys who stayed on the wagon year-round.

"I thought that was home sweet home with \$125 a month and room and board," he says. "I had a hand-me-down pair of leggings and a cheap saddle, but it didn't matter. It was perfect to me because we rode and roped every day. You didn't see the same country two days in a row following cows."

Life was perfect for the cowboy and sometimes artist, yet the growing conflict of the Vietnam War called him to duty. Capron registered for the draft and enlisted in the United States Marine Corps. With six months before he was due at boot camp, Capron carried his interest in Charlie Russell to Montana, where the master artist created most of his work.

"I went to Great Falls and all the places in Montana to soak up all the Charlie Russell that I could," he says. "I went back [to the Marine Corps] and found a correspondence course [called the Famous Artist School] to get something out of the next three years. I would do the lessons, send them off, they would critique them and send them back to me. I dearly loved it."

Serving for three years in the Marine Corps also provided him with a spiritual connection to God that persists today. One time in Vietnam, Capron and his fellow soldiers were stuck on a hillside, defending it against a near overwhelming force. While he considered himself religious, it wasn't until that night he truly felt God had a plan for him.

"There was no great lights or voice [that night]," says Capron. "But there was a peace across my shoulders. We got our job done and got through that night, and that peace, to this day, I still feel and understand the meaning of that peace."

"I have moved on through life, but I always start anything I do with, 'Are you sure, Lord?' If I get a good feeling, I am gone and moving on that mission. Some mornings I tell God that the brushes won't work themselves and that He needs to help with the message and the meaning behind each piece."

FOLLOWING HIS TIME in the marines, Capron took a turn as a welder. Three weeks before he was to travel to Australia to work on a cross-continental pipeline, Capron met the love of his life and now wife, Anne. Although the job was supposed to last for six months, the work cut off early, and Capron returned to the United States. He and Anne soon aligned their shared interests of living



Whether illustrating letters from Australia to his love, Anne, or experiencing the working ranch world, Capron has always tried to incorporate his two passions, cowboying and art.



In his gallery in Sheffield, Texas, Capron not only makes the art, but he also frames and ships it to buyers.

far from town and pursuing the cowboy lifestyle.

"After Australia, I didn't want to weld anymore," Capron says. "I wanted an old cowboy job and to stay in Texas. I went from \$2,400 to \$200 a month. We took a ranch job at Nickle Creek, Texas, and leased the filling station. We pumped gas, fixed flats and I worked on this ranch with cattle. At that time, it was the beginning of the cowboy story telling."

In the filling station, Capron also kick-started his art studio. Until that point, Capron's art showed up basically in only two places: the assignments he completed through the Famous Art School, and, like Russell, in his corre-

spondence—he illustrated letters, helping to tell his written stories with drawings. In Nickle Creek he began painting cowboy experiences on canvas.

"I set up the studio at Nickle Creek and told Anne we would start getting some paintings in some galleries," he says with a chuckle. "From 1969 to 1972, I saved every painting I did, which was about 24 paintings. I hauled all 24 to a gallery in San Angelo [Texas] to see if they could get displayed. They said they were nice, but no. I asked how to further my education, and they said I was close to Jan Herring and told me to call her. I then asked who was Jan Herring, and I was told she was a fine art instructor."

For two years, Herring worked every month with Capron, teaching him the fundamentals of fine art. He continues to draw from those lessons today.

He also kept gaining cowboy experience. In 1972, the Caprons went to work at the 6 Bar Ranch on the Salt Flat of the Big Bend region of Texas and stayed there until 1982. Moving to Fort Davis, Texas, they worked on the Long X, Kokernot o6, LR French and Brite ranches, all in the Big Bend region. During those years, they welcomed a son, Wilson, and daughter, Liz. Next, the family moved to the Figure 2 Ranch north of Van Horn, Texas, then to the San Francisco Creek Ranch, in Brewster



At the gallery, stations for painting, sculpting or reference material are situated around the building's large main room.

County, Texas, and then back to the 6 Bar from 1994 to 2004.

"In 2004, the ranch employment ceased for us. We decided to pursue the art business full time and moved to Midland, Texas," Capron says.

SPINNING YARNS IS nothing new to a cowboy. Sitting around the campfire, stoking it with wood or watching the flames, sets the tone while stories weave around wrecks with cattle, interesting characters and good horses. For Capron, creating a piece of art is similar to telling a good tale.

"To tell a story, you first had to understand what a good story was about," he says. "It had to have a good

beginning, a good body and a good ending. But if it leaves you unsatisfied, it is not a good story.

"Just like a good story, art has to have ingredients of emotion. I want to see the title of the piece along with the picture because that is part of the story. [Charlie] Russell had the best titles in the world, and they were a piece of the history."

For Capron, the title needs to be as strong and true as the stroke of his paintbrush. When he started his own website and joined social media, the tales Capron told around the campfire found a modern platform. Soon, the High-Minded Horseman website invited him to provide "Tales of Texas."

Though it lasted only a year, sharing his stories with illustrations struck a chord in Capron.

"I wasn't sure how the Internet would connect with people and share these tales. It was a one-sided thing, kinda like telling a story in a dark closet. Quickly, I realized it connected with a lot of different people," he says. "The social aspect of the Internet and the comfort in this mode of communication has just increased. Even people my age can make lots of old cowboy connections again.

"It has always been an everyday occurrence with cowboys, and I don't think it is any different than it was back then. Now, we just have a different way of connecting on the Internet. We can continue to tell our stories that used to be put in books by J. Frank Dobie and the great authors of the West. I feel connected to these stories and individuals. It's a different way of communicating our cowboy language."

For Capron, the authenticity of the tale is of the utmost importance, but he will take artistic license with a few small embellishments. Most of his art and the stories he shares—included in his weekly newsletter and posted on his website, mwcapron.com—are created from real-life cowboy experiences.

"There aren't many that can claim to be a true cowboy artist," Capron says. "I'd as soon be labeled a cowboy as anything else because that is what I always wanted to be. Still, to this day I am always amazed at how many people work to be labeled a cowboy but don't want to go through the pain or the education of knowing how to be a cowboy.

"You've got to be able to ride and rope. If you can't, you aren't a true cowboy artist. The second thing you've got to be able to do is paint or sculpt. That part is probably as taxing as the riding and roping, and takes as much time. Whatever your passion may be, and it so happens mine is in the field of cowboy artistry, go for it." **WH**

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LOOSE LATIGO

A loose latigo can turn a rather simple ride into an extreme event. Mr. Horse starting out fresh and full of energy steps on an unfastened latigo. He thinks that someone has come out of a hole and kicked him in the belly. Mr. Horse is quick to take offense, as he is looking for an excuse to unload Mr. Cowboy, so he can make a dash back to his buddies in the remuda. Mr. Cowboy better be ready, or get ready in a hurry, he'll need to do some fancy riding because there's a good chance this cowpony is going to step on that latigo again! When he does, he'll be thoroughly convinced that someone is running along underneath him kicking him in the belly, and he can't see him. So Mr. Horse will be doing his best to out-jump and out-kick this thing that's under him.

Sweet talk, nor hollering and screaming, usually doesn't help at this point. It's best to take a deep seat and enjoy the ride. This is where the contest begins and it doesn't end until either Mr. Horse runs out of wind or Mr. Cowboy gets bucked off and the cowpony escapes back to his buddies. Another good reason for the cowboy to learn how to ride under extreme conditions. Cowboys, cowpunchers, buckaroos, gauchos, and any other nomenclature you have for the individual who finds himself a-horseback tending to bovine in the cattle industry have one thing in common: they're all tough enough to get the job at hand done and they don't quit until it's done. Costumes, uniforms and get-ups don't have anything to do with the man who gets the cow worked. The terrain and equipment at hand determine the methods. — Mike Capron, from his "Tales of Texas" blog



This painting, titled *Loose Latigo*, won the Trappings of Texas Best of Show for art in 2010.

MAKIN' TRACKS



Makin' Tracks, an 8-by-10-inch oil.

Any excuse will do to get a cowboy to saddle up and go somewhere. He'll cross unthinkable canyons and climb unbelievable mountains for the slightest reason and be glad to do it on the shakiest of horses. But asking him to make tracks for no reason at all is like asking a soldier to charge into battle without any bullets.

A cowboy will never ask for a raise if he's spending his company time ridin' while taking care of ranch chores. But just ask him to saddle up and make some tracks for no reason at all and he'll probably be looking for the next place of employment by sundown. Cowboys aren't the most serious souls but they'll face grizzly bears before they will be made fools of.

They'll charge across terrain that looks like a moonscape for the slightest reason but just try to get him to lope in circles for no reason at all and you're liable to hear some unladylike terminology. There's something about teaching a horse to go somewhere in a straight line that builds character and I think it does a lot for a man, also. It's a job, a purpose and adds reason to the project at hand.

Nothing worse than meandering through the given task and stumbling across the landscape not knowing where you're going to put your next step. Kinda like asking a lady to dance and you're doing a two-step but the band is playing a waltz. You had better get with your partner if you expect to complete the dance. Riding has a lot in common with a dance in that it's all about timing and getting in step.

I think riding gets a little bit more confusing as a horse has four feet on the ground and a man and a woman have only two apiece. I think both are a worthy endeavor and it would be hard for me to decide which I enjoy the most. A good fiddle and some Texas swing is sure hard to beat with a beautiful lady, but I'll give equal credit for a sure-footed pony crossing a piece of rough desert under an early morning sunrise. —Mike Capron, from his "Tales of Texas" blog