Bridges to the Past

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WHEN I came home from overseas Army duty in February of 1947, the indigenous horsemanship of Arizona was largely of Texas origin. Hard and fast roping, split reins, and grazing bits prevailed.

I planned to start college under the GI Bill in September, so I had the spring and summer to do something with. Having crossed the Atlantic Ocean, I decided to go west to California to see what the Pacific looked like. I ended up working for the Irvine Ranch.

Today it is the site of a major ultramodern city, a great university, and the home of high-tech industries, but then it was a hundred thousand acres of prime grazing lands that stretched from the Santa Ana Mountains to the sea.

There were still many of the old vaqueros riding then. This was years before Ed Connell wrote his classic books *Hackamore Reinsman* and *Reinsman of the West,* the manuals so beautifully illustrated by vaquero Ernest Morris, which meticulously described the traditional horsemanship that had its beginnings in Spain and Mexico.

The horsemanship secrets of the Californios are not lost.

I was awed by the vaqueros, by their dallying skills with their long riatas, by the grace and beauty of their horsemanship. I envied the agility and responsiveness of their spade-bit bridle horses and the delicate-way they handled the reins. I didn't realize that I was seeing the end of an era.

Mike Bridges, at 55, is an anachronism. Horses and cattle have been his entire life. His grandfather owned the Benita Ranch, which he bought from Miller and Lux in the 1920s. It was there, near Madera; that Mike learned his horsemanship. Starting at the age of 15, Bridges has spent 40 years working with horses and cattle,

Now, Bridges has become a clinician, sharing his expertise and philosophy with students of horsemanship. He holds two kinds of clinics. One is on cow working. The other is on bridling, the transition from snaffle or hackamore to the bridle bit. He especially caters to people who have a basic foundation in soft, not harsh, horsemanship as taught by such horsemen as Ray Hunt, Pat Parelli, Buck Brannaman, etc.

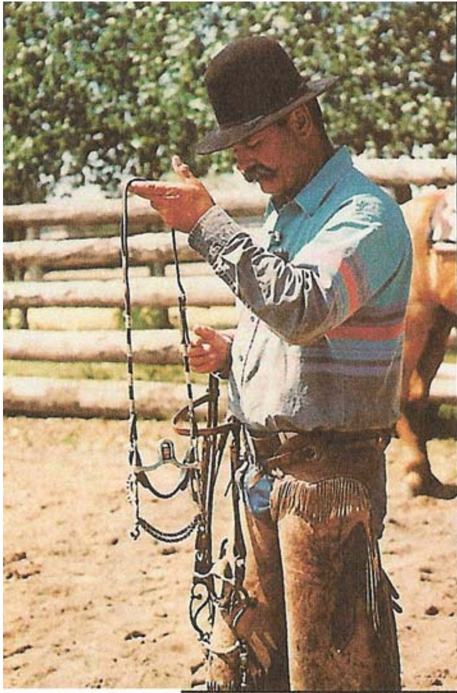
The object is to achieve one-hand reinsmanship with better results than can be ordinarily achieved with two hands. In order to do this, one must retain an indirect and a direct rein, but one hand is left free to rope with, or use in other ways.

This transition takes time and it takes patience. That's why I say that Mike teaches both technique and philosophy. It takes both. His goal is not a horse who will quickly go out and win on the show circuit-although he has won snaffle bit, reining, and working cowhorse competitions-but a relaxed and mellow mount who will respond instantly and with agility to subtle and almost imperceptible signals given by the rider's hands and body.

Years ago, on the big ranches, a green horse was worked on cattle between two experienced horses, so excessive demands were not placed on the green horse. It is more difficult today, when three or four riders go out with their horses in a stock trailer to work a pasture that, in the past, 10 or a dozen cowboys would work. Moreover, they'd *ride* out to the pasture, instead of trailering.

The cost of doing business has changed the way range cattle are worked, and in many ways, it is not conducive to the development of great bridle horses. This is one reason that the art has been lost to such a great extent during the latter half of the 20th century.

Another reason is that so many trainers specialize in the more limited and hurried field of training



Attending one of Mike's bridling Clinics, as a participant or as a spectator, is humbling.

Bridges discusses some of the gear used in his bridle courses.

This is Mike's top bridle horse, Smokey.

horses for the show arena. The emphasis has been on horse shows, rodeos, and gymkhana events. The pendulum swinging back, however.

All over the West, reined cowhorse competitions, working cowhorse contests, and ranch rodeos are increasing popularity. There is tremendous interest in the type of horsemanship taught by the previously named clinicians and their contemporaries.

Mike's approach to horse training is to manipulate behavior without inducing fear. He regards the kind of classical western horsemanship that he practices and teaches as a refined art. His goal is a unity or a oneness with the horse. He says, "His legs are your legs. His body is your body."

Bridges' teaching method is much like his horsemanship: soft and quiet. He is a kind person and a gentleman. He doesn't shout at his students, and he uses a lot of praise. Those who understand behavioral science call it positive reinforcement.

He also analyzes each horse, not just according to his personality, but also according to his conformation.

"The way a horse is built, the angle of his neck, and the shape and depth of his mouth determine his suitability for the bridle," he says.

"Just as all people can't wear the same dentures, not all horses can accept the same bit."

Participating in a Mike Bridges cow working clinic is an illuminating experience, especially if you have worked with cattle a lot and think you understand them. Watching this cowboy work, and listening to his explanations are revealing.

He points *out* that all horsemen know more about cattle than they

Handling the Reins

In the instruction manual for his courses, Mike Bridges uses, with permission, these drawings and the accompanying explanation from the book *El Vaquero,* by renowned California artist and authority Ernest Morris.

The old-timers seemed to hold the reins in quite a few ways (I've illustrated the most common). Most started out with the hackamore (figure 1) *because this type allowed them plenty of rein to take a side pull to get control or for a change of direction as needed.*

Squaw-reining (figure 2) *allowed the buckaroo to take a little advantage while the training vas working toward closed reins. It helped his horse feel the signal a little better. Sometimes the other hand was busy, so the one holding he reins had to do all the work.*

Neck-reining (figure 3) *could be done when the colt was sufficiently advanced to be trusted, and the buckaroo could hold the reins in one hand.*

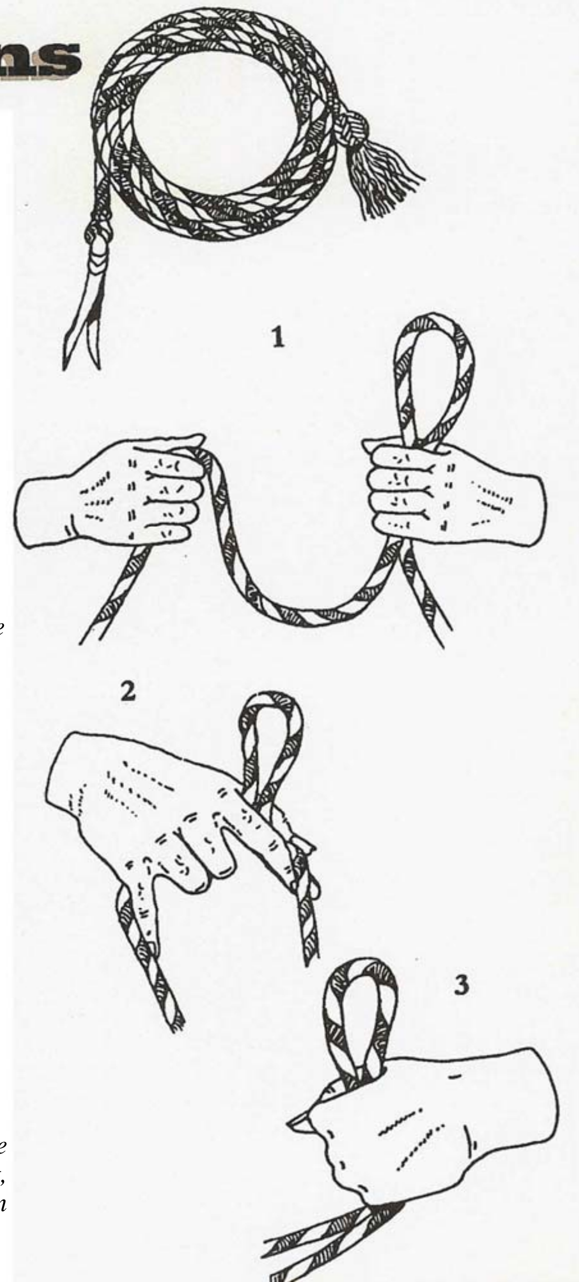
The bosal (figure 4) *did the work in this type of reining. The buckaroo held the bosal reins on top of the bridle reins, threaded through the fingers, in the palm and out; the bridle rein hung lightly on the rider's little finger.*

Advanced reining (figure 5) *involved the bridle reins doing most of the work, while the bosal reins took a rest; they could be brought* back *into play instantly, though, if there was a danger of hurting the horse's mouth. A lot of those ol' boys packed the bosal reins for a long time.*

Double-reining was another advanced technique that took several forms. Palm-reining (figure 6) *was common in various parts of California. As can be seen, adjustments were made by simply shortening one rein and letting out the other. It had no advantage, though, over other systems, when it came to double-reining a* caballo. *Figure* 7 *shows another double-reining system that was just a little different, but did the same trick as the others. Figures* 8 *and* 9 *illustrate still other variations of the double-rein setup; these methods were alternatives, but didn't add any more to the transfer of the bosal to bit. The absence of bosal reins (figures 10 and* 11) *meant that the horse had learned to handle the bit. The way the double reins were held didn't seem to make too much difference as far as the animal's performance went. Temper and knowledge were the most important factors in how well the* caballo *responded to his master.*

The snaffle-bit reins (figures 12 *and* 13) *fit right in the buckaroo's hand. In figure* 12, *both hands are used initially and are spread apart, doing the same work as illustrated in figure* 1.

There were, no doubt, other systems of which I'm not aware, but these were the most often seen.

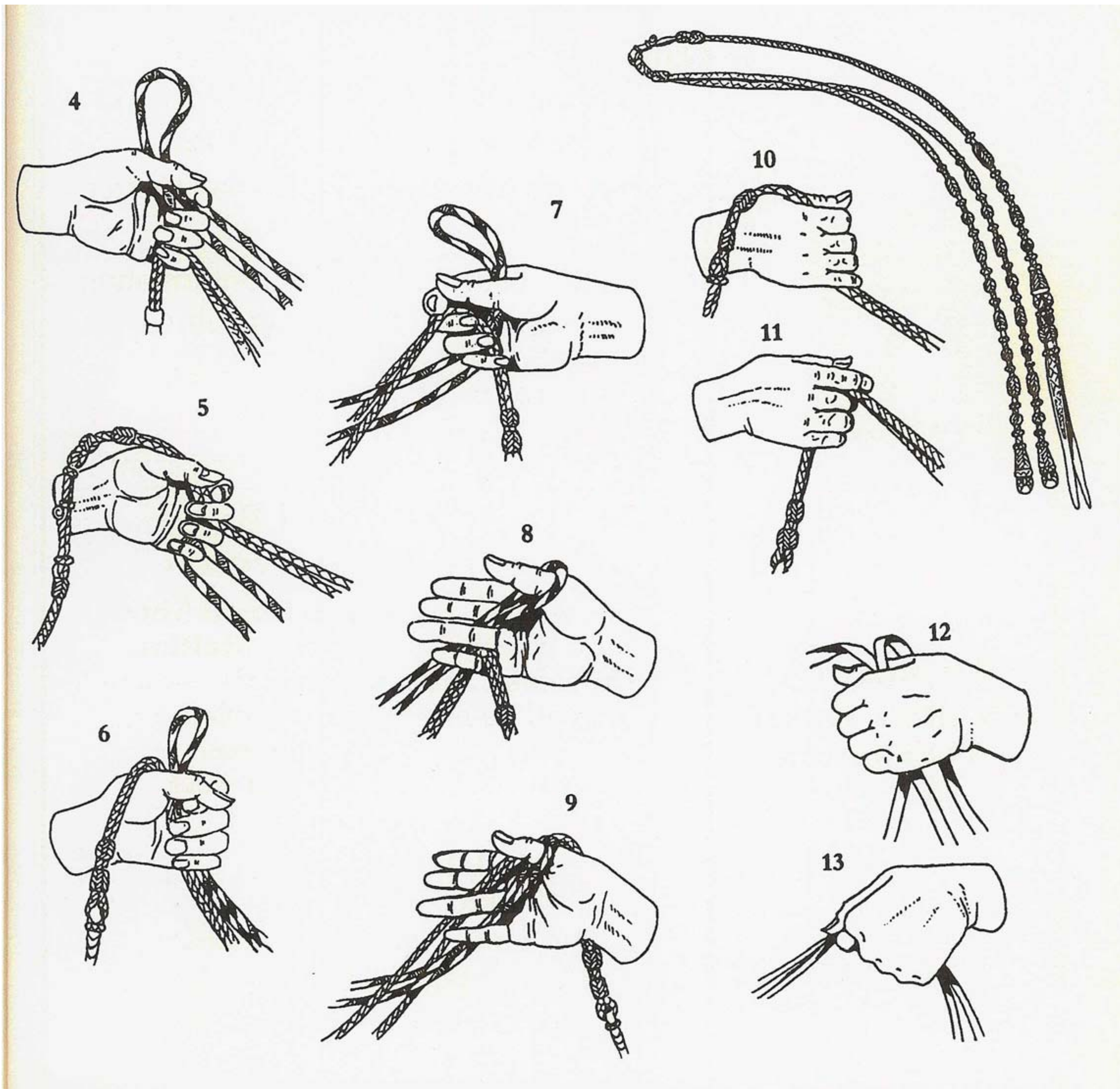


realize. They only work them improperly because of traditional methods. Like horses, cattle are a prey species. Both have a flight zone which, if invaded, will cause them to move away from you. Each has its eyes placed laterally on the side of the head, to facilitate detection of an approaching predator, and each has eyes that function independently, sending a separate message to the brain. Both cattle and horses have acute peripheral vision, and if we enter the flight zone between the flank and the shoulder, it will cause the animal to move in the opposite direction. If we enter the field of vision between the eye and the shoulder, the animal will turn away from us. If we enter it behind the shoulder, we will move the animal ahead. Mike uses these concepts to quietly control the movement of cattle.

His students start by working a fairly gentle cow afoot. He teaches them that *their* eye is the horse's eye. Not until they understand these principles afoot does he start them working mounted.

In his classes, one rider plays the role of cowboy, another the part of the cow to be worked, and the rest of the riders play the herd. This role-playing teaches the students to understand cattle. It discourages overly aggressive yahooing behavior, which only serves to stampede and scatter cattle. It teaches them to analyze each cow's place in the dominance hierarchy, and Mike often uses a dominant cow to manipulate a lower-ranking cow in the herd.

This cowboy pays the same attention to the behavior of the cattle he is working as he does to his horse's behavior. On trail drives and during open range roundups, cattle were settled by



circling them until the found security and sanctuary in a selected area. A lot of cattle are worked these days ignoring this concept, but Mike teaches his riders to utilize the same concept even in a relatively confined corral or arena. As every cowrnan knows, a poor hand can disturb cattle and make the job much more difficult. A good hand makes it look easy.

Attending one of Mike's bridling clinics, as a participant or as a spectator, is humbling. It was for me, and I've tried to learn all I can about bits and bridling, and about the old Californio methods, which are still in use in much of the far West and intermountain ranges. Still, there is a lot to learn from a man who has been absorbing and practicing reinsmanship for 40 years and who also has the ability to communicate and pass along his knowledge.

One reason that Bridges is a good teacher is that he has experience in teaching. For a while he was a police officer in Gridley, California. He went through the FBI firearms instructor's academy, and then instructed at the Feather River Police Academy.

Although throughout the past 4 decades he has always worked with cattle and horses, there were a few other positions that broadened his background. For 2 years he was state regional brand supervisor in south central California for the Bureau of Livestock Identification.

He presently manages his own cow-calf operation near Benicia, Calif., living on the ranch with his wife, Jill, and their two young sons, Roy and Justin.

In the past he has worked for many ranches, buckarooing for 8 years in Nevada, and managed grazing leases as cow boss on California ranges owned by the U.S. Navy. This last extensive operation was recommended by the U.S. Extension Service as a model range management project to be studied by the University of California College of Agriculture at Davis.

At the bridling clinic I attended, each horse (and my mule) was carefully fitted with a lightweight bosal and then meticulously fitted with a bit and bridle. Great attention was paid to the thickness of each animal's tongue, the depth of his mouth, the thickness of his lips, and the angle of his head in fitting an appropriate bit from an extensive collection of Spanish silver bits. All of us in the class had to learn how to hold both the hair hackamore reins and the rawhide bridle reins in one hand, while the other hand held the romal and gave or took up slack. We learned how, when a second hand was needed in the early stages of training, how to reach *under* the dominant rein hand instead of over it. This prevents twisting of the upper body, which sends confusing signals to the horse.

Many of the principles taught were known to me, but others were new. Their importance needs to be emphasized here because they are overlooked in many riding disciplines and these principles are the reason the finished bridle horse is so incredibly light and responsive to the rein:

- Every time you stop, take one or more steps backward. Do it differently each time.
- Never lead or tie your horse by the bridle reins. It can only desensitize the mouth. The true reinsman will lead or tie a horse only with the mecate, which puts pressure around the upper neck and never on the mouth.
- Don't leave the bridle on when the horse is tied. It can only desensitize the mouth. Never leave a horse loose wearing the bridle.

Understanding the bit, and the fact that the horse must learn to use his tongue to elevate (carry) the bit off the bars of the mouth, is critical to this kind of horsemanship. I thought I understood how the leverage bit works, or should work, but I have a much better understanding now. I see the importance of how the bit hangs from the bridle, how it encourages flexion at the poll to allow the bit to float in a position of comfort in the mouth, and how the smallest finger movements of the rider's hands send a preliminary signal to the horse.

Behavior scientists call the signal a bridging stimulus, and it's used in training animals to perform complex maneuvers.

For the first time, I understand how the spade bit works and how in trained and disciplined hands it offers the height of communication with the schooled horse.

The clinic was an educational experience. As one English rider said, "I've had a conversion experience."

Another student said, "The most important thing I've learned from Mike is not to let the adrenaline run, out the end of my fingers."

There has been a lot written about I the old Californio-style of horsemanship. It has had a strong influence on western riding in general. The buckaroo styles and methods originated there, and a lot of the gear and methods seen in horse shows today trace their origins to the vaqueros from the far West.

We know that the culture was conducive to good horsemanship. They had basic techniques that came from Spain, the best in the world at that time. They lived an unhurried lifestyle. Horses were started at 4 or 5 years of age, and it was expected to take years to produce a finished horse "straight up" in the bridle.

When I moved to California in 1957, it was still the custom to leave one, two, or three tufts of hair standing up at the base of the horse's mane. This indicated whether the horse was green and still in the hackamore, in a transition stage, or a mature horse straight up in the bridle. I haven't seen that custom for many years.

It takes time and patience to produce a good reining horse, and the early California ranchers had both. They also did a lot of riding back before the age of jeeps, pickups, and ATVs, and they lived in a climate that permitted riding and grazing all year.

They were fantastic ropers, with their lariats of 60 feet and up, dallying on saddle horns devoid of rubber, on single-rig saddles. They were also great horsemen. An inept or rough hand could not hold a riding job. It's a shame most of this disappeared after WW II ended, but a few purists, like Mike Bridges, are still around and we can hope that they will lead a revival of_ the kind of horsemanship that was both an art and a science.

Robert M. Miller is a frequent contributor to the magazine and has written two Western Horseman *books:* Imprint Training of the Newborn Foal *and* Health Problems of the Horse. ....