

Old SCHOOL

After more than seven decades in the saddle, this Kansas horseman is still hard at work educating horses and riders.

Part 1 of a series

By Frank Holmes

THE COWBOY MOVED HIS MOUNT QUIETLY through the herd. Slight in stature and a little bowed with age, the man nevertheless exuded an air of quiet confidence. Settled deep in the saddle with hands resting lightly on the reins, it was obvious that he had been there and done that.

John Ballweg



Moving a cow away from the herd, the rider took an even deeper seat, dropped the reins and let the cutting horse do its job.

And after spending more than 75 years in the saddle, John Ballweg of Olathe, Kansas, knows exactly what the job entails.

Lone Star Roots

JOHN P. BALLWEG WAS BORN ON JANUARY 26, 1923, IN Mansfield, Texas. A third-generation resident of the Lone Star State, John's family has ties to the area dating back to the 19th century.

"My great-grandfather was born and raised in Germany," he says. "He immigrated from there to Milwaukee in 1852 with his wife and three sons. Shortly thereafter, the whole family walked from Milwaukee to the Madison, Wisconsin, area – a distance of 80 miles – to claim a homestead.

"When the Civil War broke out, my grandfather – Martin Ballweg – fought for the Union. He enlisted in 1863 and was mustered out in Brownsville, Texas, in 1866. On the way home from there, he passed through the Dallas/Fort Worth part of Texas. He liked the area and decided to relocate there, so that's how I came to be a Texan.

"George and Cora Ballweg, my parents, were cotton farmers. Our farm was just a little ol' 125-acre plot, so eking out a living on it was a little tough. We farmed with horses and mules and also had milk cows, hogs and chickens.

"To help make ends meet, Dad traded horses and mules. By the time I was 12, I was expected to pull my share of the load by riding any and all of the young horses we either traded for or bred."

John's entry into the competitive side of the horse world also occurred at an early age.

"We had a neighbor who had a lot of land and a lot of horses," he says. "He stood several studs, including a Paint horse. My first good horse was a little Paint mare from this man's program. Like any other kid, I ruined her by racing her too much. I ran her against everyone who dared, and she was tough to beat. I guess she sort of put it in my mind that horses and winning was a good combination."

As the 1920s gave way to The Great Depression of the 1930s, young John progressed through school, all the while continuing to work alongside his father on the family farm. Then, in the early 1940s, there was a war to be fought and a wife to win.

War and Peace

"I GRADUATED FROM HIGH SCHOOL IN 1940," JOHN SAYS. "THE Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor in December 1941, and that propelled us into the war. Right after school, I moved to Wichita Falls, Texas, and found work with AT&T – the telephone company.

"In October of 1942, I volunteered for service in the armed forces. They ran me through a bunch of tests and figured out that I was mechanically inclined. So they put me in the Army Air Force and trained me to be an airplane mechanic. After some extensive schooling, I was sent overseas, first to England then to Scotland."

While stationed at Leuchars Air Base, near St. Andrews, Scotland, John met and married Jane Daisy Bett.

"'Daisy' was working for the telephone company in St. Andrews when we met," he says. "Her folks owned a fair-

sized farm that was located literally on the edge of the famed St. Andrews golf course – where golf was born in the 15th century.

"We dated for a while and then got married in August of 1945 – just a month after Japan's surrender brought an end to the fighting. After the war, I was transferred to Berlin. They wouldn't let Daisy go with me, though, so she stayed back home at her folks' farm.

"My plan was to re-enlist and then get transferred permanently to Berlin. This way, it would have been easy for Daisy to join me. On the Fourth of July, 1946, I arrived back home in Texas on a 90-day leave. And then the Army changed the deal on me: They wouldn't send me back overseas, but they would let me choose a stateside assignment.

"So I chose Fort Worth Army Airfield, which later became Carswell Air Force Base. Daisy joined me there several months later, and we stayed in the Air Force until 1954. In a lot of ways, it was less like being in the service and more like being at home. We were close to my folks' farm, and that enabled me to get back into horses."

Basic Training

IT WAS AT THIS JUNCTURE IN THEIR LIVES THAT JOHN AND Daisy acquired their first noteworthy AQHA-registered mounts – Surgeon and Charger's Sugar.

"We bought Surgeon from Dr. Albert Plattner of Grand Prairie, Texas," John says. "He was a 1946 palomino stallion by Pretty Buck and out of Texamino Punkin by Rattler. He was a Waggoner-bred horse, and pretty good for that day and age.

"'Sugar' was a 1945 dun mare by Charger and out of Baby Lou by Old Joe Bailey. I gave \$97.50 for her as a 4-year-old. She was an honest little rope horse with a good stop that went on to produce an AQHA Champion named Stormy's Sugar. And he, in turn, was the maternal grandsire of Al Dunning's great buckskin performance gelding, Expensive Hobby.

"Back in the late 1940s and early 1950s, there was either a cutting or a roping in our area nearly every night. I'd finish up at the base and then Daisy and I would take Surgeon and Sugar to a show. We never really had the facilities or the cattle to train at home, so the shows were all the training the horses got.

"But we watched and learned what to do, and what not to do. And, as time went on, we got a little better at it. I got out of the service in February of 1954 and, six weeks later, went to work for Bob Sutherland of Kansas City, Missouri. I worked for Bob for 12 years and this was the only salaried training position that I ever held."

At the time John and Daisy made the move from Texas to Missouri, Robert Q. Sutherland's R. S. Bar Ranch was one of the best-known Quarter Horse establishments in the nation.

A consummate breeder, trader and promoter, Sutherland's program featured the stallion Paul A and his get. In short order, John was placed in charge of showing both the stallion and his foals. Of Paul A's 11 AQHA Champion get, the lanky Texas cowboy showed 10.

He also showed a stallion named Power Command. ■

Look for Part 2 of this article in the January 2012 issue of The American Quarter Horse Journal. Frank Holmes is an equine historian, author and freelance writer from Pueblo, Colorado.