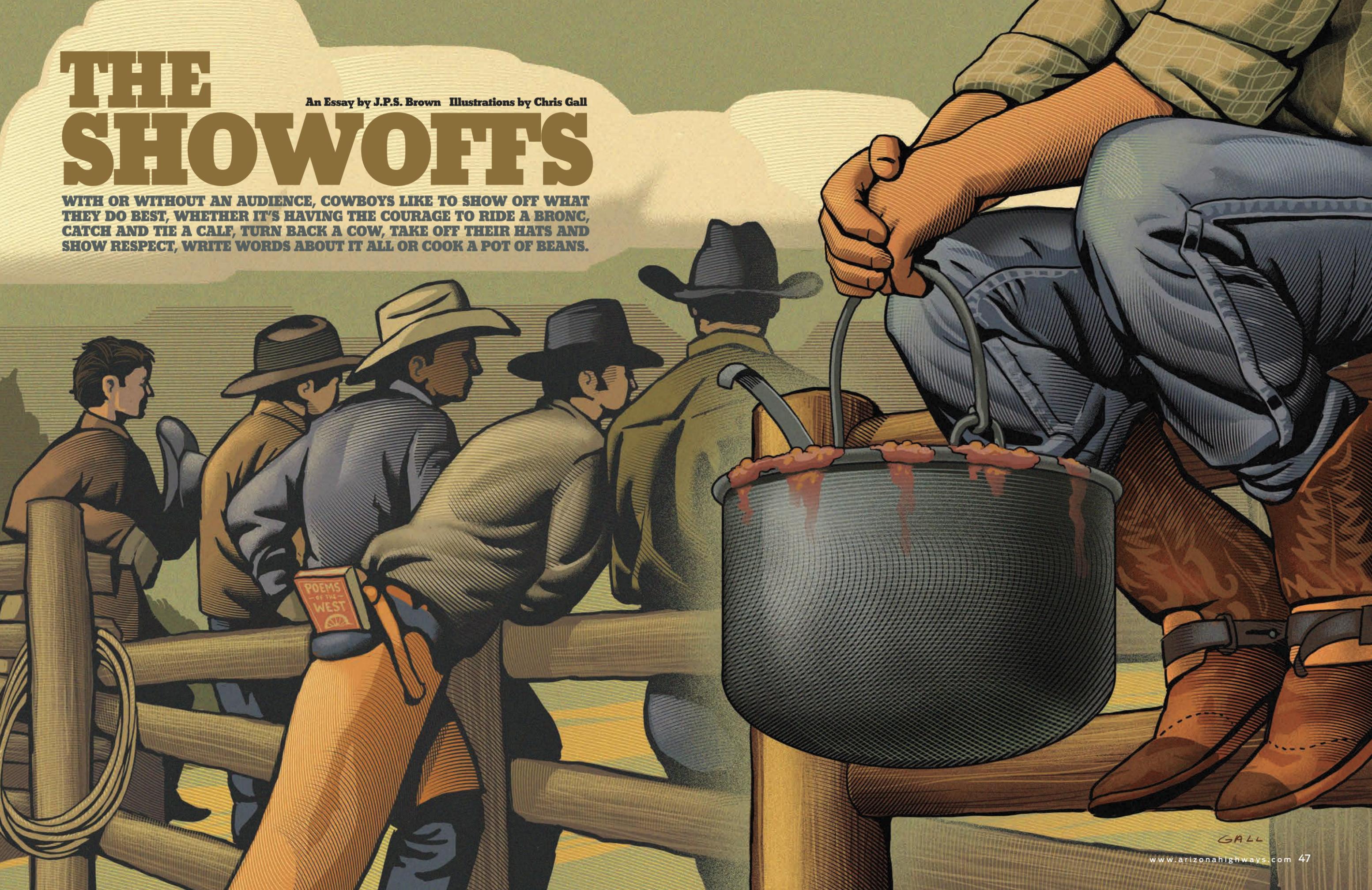


THE SHOWOFFS

An Essay by J.P.S. Brown Illustrations by Chris Gall

WITH OR WITHOUT AN AUDIENCE, COWBOYS LIKE TO SHOW OFF WHAT THEY DO BEST, WHETHER IT'S HAVING THE COURAGE TO RIDE A BRONC, CATCH AND TIE A CALF, TURN BACK A COW, TAKE OFF THEIR HATS AND SHOW RESPECT, WRITE WORDS ABOUT IT ALL OR COOK A POT OF BEANS.



GALL

Cowboys learn early that they are showoffs, but they also learn that to show off without style, or to make a brag, is no good. Besides that, no matter how much of a flash a cowboy is, he won't look good if he keeps his top horse's tail too short or too thin. Old-time Arizona rancher Vivian Brown said anybody who doesn't know how to trim a horse's tail doesn't know enough about a horse to show his horsemanship.

Most cowboys show off better without an audience; in fact, most of them won't perform for one, because they're too bashful to risk looking bad, or looking too good. At rodeos and horse shows and other gatherings, especially poetry gatherings, a majority of cowboys sit back to watch and judge the antics of more audacious cowboys. That doesn't mean they can't perform. It only means they're too shy about their words and skills to show them off in public.

With or without an audience, cowboys like to show off what they do best and what they value most, whether it's having the courage and skill to ride a bronc or a bull, catch and tie a calf, turn back a cow afoot or horseback, take off their hats and show respect, write words about it all or cook a pot of beans. How many necktie salesmen can cook a pot of beans that a gathering of other necktie salesmen would brag about? How many would even figure it's worth doing? A lot of cowboys will step forward to cook a pot of beans that they figure a crew will appreciate. Praise for their skills warms their gizzards.

An ordinary audience doesn't generally know a skillful cowboy from a gunsel. That's why audacious cowboys like to show how well their work can really be done. Cowboying is never a cowboy-versus-Indian shoot'em-up. It's no I'm-tougher-than-you-are gun duel in the sun. It's a demonstration of the work done to produce man's best source of protein. Cowboys have been trying to show people their skills and the reasons they are needed ever since mankind invented the job. The ordinary audience has still not learned that the "cowboy" stories that most Western novels and Hollywood pictures depict over and over again ain't about cowboying, nor the reasons cowboys capture the imagination of the world. Those stories could as well be set in New York and told about necktie salesmen and nobody would know the difference.

Cowboys believe the work they do is worth showing off so people can admire their unique and risky style. People who have seen them show off get to know how brave and skillful men can be.

A good hand who shows off his cowhorse by making an old bunch-quitting cow hunt the herd for safety feels as good without an audience as he does with one. Of course, every sashay doesn't come out right. Sometimes when he tries to show off, his rope or his cinch breaks, or his horse bucks him off. Nature might even decide to send a lightning bolt to separate his horse from its horseshoes and splatter the cowboy out on the ground with his molar fillings smoking. That would be one spectacular sight to see, but when mishaps like that happen, cowboys pay for the times that showing off made them feel good.

Rodeo bullfighter clown Chuck Henson was showing off at the Tucson rodeo when a bucking bull hooked him clear over the arena fence. He landed on top of an old lady in the second row of the grandstand. Chuck's style was to make sure everybody enjoyed the fun of it by giving the lady a kiss and smearing clown makeup on the

side of her face. Everybody laughed, and, except for his pride, Chuck was unhurt and so was the old lady. Another time at the Dallas All-Star Rodeo, he set out to cape a Mexican fighting bull away from his partner, who sought refuge in a barrel. He passed the bull successfully once, but when the bull came back he ducked under the cape, hooked Chuck up between the legs, tossed him high in the air and danced on him. Chuck emerged from that sashay with his trousers and long underwear in shreds. He had to go off by himself and sit down for a while, afraid to look at the place between his legs that had been most violated. Finally, his partner came and took a look for him and found only a superficial scratch.

Cowhorses show off, too. Cowboy Tom Ford's Big Red always threw up his head and nickered at the sky after he cut a slinky, snaky, crafty old cow out of the herd after she had made fools of the ordinary horses.

Cowboying is no job for anybody who enjoys a normal sense of self-preservation. Youngsters who have been raised on ranches and go to school in town are astounded to learn that most of their fellow pupils have never been spooked by anything more deadly than a honeybee. Youngsters on ranches know that if their good old gentle horses slip and fall as they cross smooth rock beside a 300-foot ravine, they might be killed. They often experience near-accidents of that kind. If the horse only slides, then recovers his feet and stays on the trail, he will have at least squeezed an involuntary squeak out of the kid.

People who grow up living through horse accidents usually learn that it's no good to be afraid. They happen so suddenly a person isn't scared very long, anyway. Every single cowboy who ever lived has been given an on-the-job fright from time to time. He might even show off some style while he saves his life. However, as cowboys grow old, if they are given to grow old, they figure they show off every time they dismount of their own accord and walk away from a horse wreck unhurt.

Cowboys love to watch good cowgirls work. Oftentimes the girls show great verve. Those who perform in the Mexican *escaramuza*, a horseback exhibition drill done sidesaddle in full traditional regalia at a dead run, do it with such headlong abandon that they make even the toughest men swallow hard.

Maudy Jane Sorrells became the owner of the Buena Vista Ranch outside Nogales when her husband Bert Sorrells died in the flu epidemic of 1918. She also became her outfit's top hand and had a reputation for performing her duties at full tilt. This griped her brother-in-law, Roy Sorrells, who had become the manager of the Sorrells brothers' 7X ranches and cattle.

Roy was overdue in delivering 200 big steers to Maudy Jane, so when the family held a reunion near the pasture where those cattle



ran, Maudy Jane enlisted the men to help her gather them. She put her sidesaddle on a tall thoroughbred horse, mounted and waited by the corral where the cattle would be penned.

Les "Cabezon" Woodell was one of the cowboys Maudy Jane enlisted to help that day. "The steers were so juicy on August grass that they bucked and played and tried to run when we drove them toward the corral," he said. "We had to stop them and hold them up often to keep control.

"Roy was a mean son of a gun," Les continued. "And that day he whined and complained about Maudy Jane because he didn't want to deliver those big steers. I happened to know that he had sold them to a Nogales banker and intended to deliver only 200 light yearlings to Maudy Jane.

"When we came in sight of the corral, Maudy Jane rode out to turn them in. The corrals were on the top of a hill. The downhill slope of the hill on mine and Maudy's side was steep, and we knew the cattle would try to make a break that way. Sonoita Creek lay across the bottom of the hill. If the steers made it into the thickets along the creek, we would need all day to get them out.

"Just before they started through the corral gate, Roy charged the leaders from the other side of the herd, turned them straight downhill and fired his pistol to make them run. I wondered if he'd gone mad, because he laughed like a crazy man.

"I don't believe the steers touched the ground again until halfway down the hill. I was sure they were gone. Then, Maudy Jane and her big horse overtook them in full stampede, turned them back uphill and stopped them before anyone in that whole sashay could make a move to help her.

"That's the best kind of showoff. The show that lady gave to everyone as she flew off the hill with her chin up and her red hair flying behind her is the finest I've ever seen.

"However, Roy would not be left behind in the showoff department. After we penned the cattle and Maudy Jane unsaddled, he roped her sidesaddle off the fence and dragged it to pieces in front of the reunion crowd. To me, that's the worst kind of showoff."

Nevertheless, as any cowboy must admit, Roy also showed a little style. Maybe not your kind or mine, but real enough... enough to provide an end to the story. **AH**