



# Editorial

OP/ED

Opinion - Columns - Letters

## Riding For The Brand

As Uncle Hugh used to say, "What some folks say is progress, some others call laziness."

I do not wear cowboy boots.  
Or a hat. Or a trophy buckle.  
Or even blue jeans.

And I've got more right to than some others.

But to my mind it would be like wearing a fatigue jacket or cop's uniform when you don't tote a badge or a gun for a living.

It would be more than impersonation.  
It would be disrespectful.

And I have respect for cowboys.

I spent much of my life around real cowboys.

Leon Overton was as real as it gets.

He was my hero, everything any cowboy can hope to be, everything any little boy dreams about being.

He came out of the Northeast Texas cotton patch back the last time the Republicans messed up the country.

He found work.

He said he went to bed a hoe hand and woke up a cowboy.

The line cook would dip one of them five-gallon blue enamel coffee pots into the creek and dump in a pound can of coffee. The night crew pushed the remuda up close to camp, and you handed the foreman your rope. He'd throw it on the first horse he come to. That'n and one more was your mount for the day.

If you were a good hand and got there early, you'd probably draw a pretty good cow pony.

But if you were slow out of your blankets or shirked work or got stingy on payday, you might start the day with a rodeo.

But Leon rode for the brand, and before too many years he *was* the foreman.

Of the XIT.

The daddy of 'em all.

When they worked cattle on the big spreads, they'd mill the herd while one bunch of hands built the branding fires and got the possibles ready, marking their position with two barrels about 10 yards apart..

Then the men on horseback would ride into the herd, rope and drag the calves past those barrels, where the stock was branded, vaccinated and turned into steers, providing they weren't lucky enough to be born heifers.

Leon said when you passed that second barrel, you un-dallied your rope, coiled and rode back into the herd.

Aunt Eula, who he met and married when she was cook for the outfit, said she watched him do that year after year, day after day, and never miss.

If you don't know what those last two words, "NEVER miss," mean to those who have worked on horseback, I can't explain it.

I don't have room here to write all the Leon Overton stories.

### Call To Mind



By Don M. Fisher

Besides, his oldest son is doing that. But I'll tell you two of them.

He got caught out on the prairie in one of them big Panhandle northers. His horse gave out busting through the snow, so he got down and broke trail for both of them, leading him to a line shack. See, he and Eula had adopted two boys. That was a pretty rough go back then. If something happened to him, the agency would take the boys back. No single parent adoptions.

For everybody's sake, he had to stay alive.

He found the pumphouse, but through that howling white wall, he couldn't find the shack. He struggled to the end of his rope in every direction, but he just couldn't find it.

He said he pulled the saddle and blanket off and prepared to try to shelter in the pump house, when some other lost cowhand hung a lantern in the window of the cabin.

He'd made it.

That was Leon's way of saying that no matter how high you sit in the saddle, how wide you throw your loop, nobody rides alone.

Long after Leon and Eula moved out onto the red dirt prairie, made a good life, raised their four successful children and should have been at their ease, Leon volunteered to watch over some of his neighbor's heifers calving out.

He saw one of them in trouble late one afternoon and made his way through the fence out to the suffering new mama. With his walker. He dropped the walker and threw his weight onto the half-born calf's legs, pulling the calf and saving the heifer. But it landed on top of him.

Some time later Eula got worried, and went out and found him.

"Mr. Overton, why did you do that," the neighbor asked.

The answer was obvious.

"Because I ride for the brand."

Last Friday, another passing cowhand put a lantern in the window of the line shack, and Leon Overton ended his 94-year struggle against the storm.

His like will not pass this way again.

He showed us how to be tough without being hard. To laugh at the thorns and the snakes and the storms, for he had the best sense of humor I've ever known. I couldn't go into that here because my heart is still slow trailing Leon Overton, hoping he's still out there on the prairie somewhere, still living that most important of all lessons.

Ride for the brand.

— Editorial —

# The Time Has Come In Texas For Initiative, Referendum, Recall

In recent years, the Texas Legislature has experienced something perhaps even worse than gridlock — ignorance: not in the form of a lack of knowledge, but in the form of ignoring issues that the Texas public thinks is important. Sure, the Legislature is currently wrestling with school finance, but it took a back burner to redistricting, which voters in Texas overwhelmingly thought was unimportant, last session.

About half the states in the union have instituted the grassroots capabilities of initiative, referendum, and recall as a "TAKS" test for politicians, to hold their noses to the roses they want plucked and a way to weed out politicians who just don't get it when it comes to representing the residents of the state over lobbyists.

- **Initiative** gives citizens the authority to collect signatures on petitions and to eventually place laws or constitutional amendments on the ballot for consideration by the voters.
- **Referendum** makes it possible for citizens to ratify or reject laws or constitutional amendments that are proposed by the Legislature.
- **Recall** is a procedure allowing voters to discharge and replace a public official deemed unfit mid-term.

This would be an ideal time for Texas to move forward in assuring better scrutiny and an ability to step in and act by the public. Three previous governors have shouted the praises of initiative and referendum, including former Governors Bill Clements, Dolph Briscoe, and George W. Bush, who said upon his election as Governor, "Initiative and referendum make government more responsive to its citizens, neutralize the power of the special interests and stimulate public involvement in state issues."

To enhance the performance of the Federal government, a national approach to initiative, referendum, and recall should also be implemented in such a way as to draw attention to both state and national issues from those elected, while providing a robust avenue toward keeping both omissions and commissions by Congress in check.

I-R-R has both champions and detractors:

Pros think it helps keep elected officials' feet to the fire and allows the populace to take a larger role in decision-making.

Those against think the general public is too apathetic to make important decisions and worry that lobbyists, instead of hounding legislators, would take their case to the public with glittery campaigns that might tend to mislead.

Lobbyists are totally against I-R-R, which should tell you something. It would make their jobs of influencing the votes of elected officials much more difficult, since the umbrella of the public would extend farther and would have more immediate power in dumping legislative scoundrels.

Our representatives do not write bills in the Texas Legislature; they pick from a pile of possible laws written by lobbyists, their decision usually based on whether the special interest group that wrote the bill has the influence among the legislators' peers to ensure passage. With I-R-R, lobbyists would lose the stranglehold they currently hold over lawmaking in Texas.

Of course I-R-R would not eliminate special interest abuse in this state. Slick, and expensive, PR media blitzes by those who prey on the public coffers would still influence the public, and phoney initiatives or mud-slinging campaigns would bloat the advertising world. But in the public eye, it would be much easier to expose those campaigns for what they are: An effort to continue the current system of government of the money, by the money and for the money.

The prevailing Catch-22 of the I-R-R basketball is that the party in power tends to be against it, for it could ruin these officials' abilities to get their policies approved, especially if the general public is against what they are attempting. The temporary safe haven for them to exploit the public is reduced, and, as we all know, there are prices (votes) to be paid to lobbyists who financed their ascension into public office. The sphere, is therefore, bounced back and forth and nobody tries to pop the net.

Everyone agrees on one thing — these are volatile times at all levels of government.

To bring the citizens out of the shadows of apathy and into the real world of decision-making and governmental education will strengthen the outcome of the country. Now is the time to take aim and put it through the hoop.

— Written By W. Leon Smith and Don M. Fisher