

A Cowboy's Christmas



Working cowboy, Paul Decker

By Cindy K Roberts

Twinkling stars danced across the deep, blue horizon to catch up with the bright silvery moon; all shining down on the Deadman Ranch, on a Christmas Eve night. Withdrawn from urban development, the isolated Deadman Ranch headquarters sits at 7,600 feet, in a meadow; a working ranch that offers wilderness and livestock needing care, nothing more. Christmas was cold, -8 to -15 degrees set the bitter chill that cast over the snowcapped mountain side. It was a still night, nothing was stirring; just the pack of coyotes howling off in the distance trying to stir up their evening meal.

It is Christmas Eve . . . the crisp night air at the Deadman Ranch had a bite to it. The Carhart™ wrapped cowboy then came out of the cabin to check over the herd one more time. The mules that were holed up in the barn were quiet and rested. It's another Cowboy's Christmas that will soon linger away in time. Paul Decker, the lonesome working cowboy knows this all too well. Working sunup 'til sundown at the Deadman, he counted spending seven Christmas nights there. Not that this cowboy doesn't count his blessings, it's still another day, another cold, endless night and the chores need to get done.

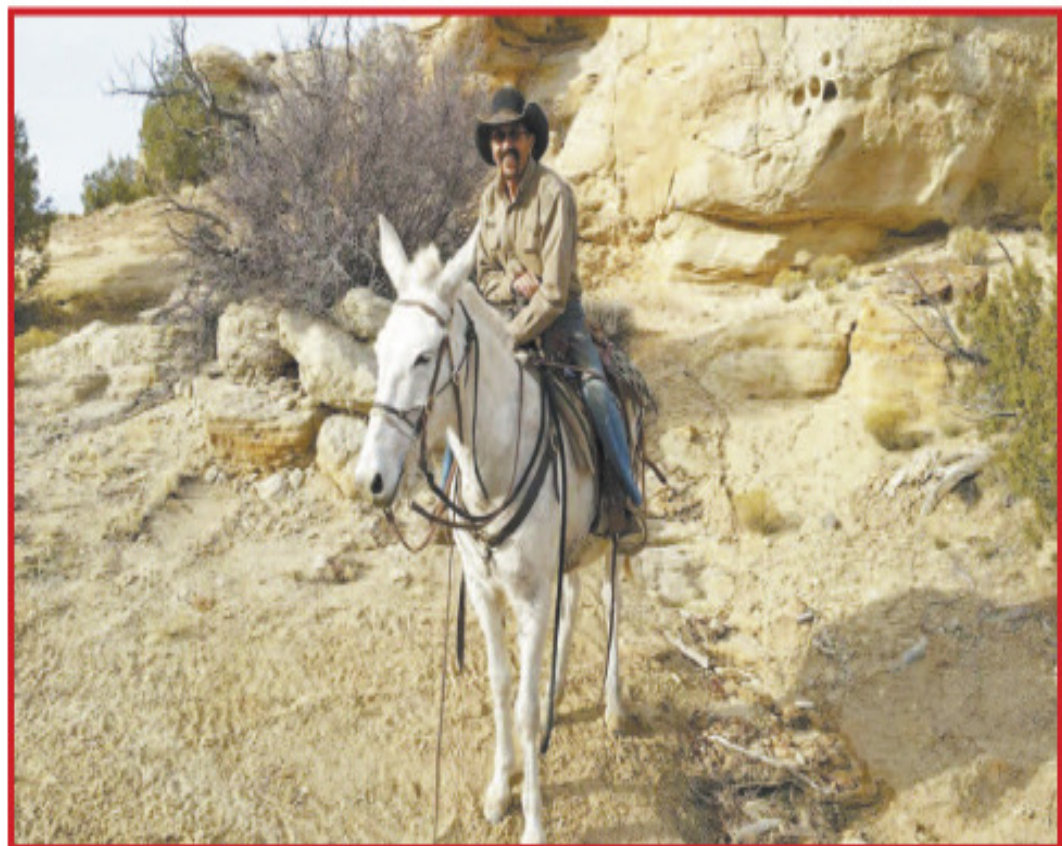
A working cowboy's Christmas is remote and so secluded; time is only spent with livestock and the heavenly creator. Mule man-packer-outfitter Paul Decker shared with me what Christmas meant to him. "A celebration of Jesus Christ and his birth, it's an awesome time for folks to get together and rejoice friendships. That's when you know life is worth livin' . . . but the Deadman was very much isolated. I lived there alone 95% of the time, no one else was up there. It was a pretty lonely existence. Every Christmas I spent up there, I pretty much spent by myself. If I had the

Internet, I would get on and wish everybody a Merry Christmas, get up in the morning early . . . it wasn't much of a celebration up there."

Paul reflects on his time spent at the Deadman Ranch: "It was empty because no one was there, it was so far for me to go anywhere, I just couldn't do it. There was ice to break, feeding cattle, tend to the horses and mules. It got dark early up there. There were times, I missed my friends, I missed my family. You know, that livestock is depending on you and that is what you have to do. We have bears up there, you know there were

times I would feel lonely – kinda an empty feeling, I would reminisce for a moment of Christmas times when I were a kid. I felt so lost at times, then you gotta get ahold of yourself, because that doesn't change nothin' you still gotta go out and break ice, feed my horses and feed my mules, give them a little extra bit of grain. I'd get about my chores and try to forget about not having anyone up there. Deadman just didn't allow for it."

Paul shared with me what Christmas was like when he was a youngster. "It was awesome. Because of that time, we were on a ranch uh in a lit-



Paul Decker taking some time off from the Deadman Ranch.



Paul Decker leading a pack string at the Grand Canyon.

the community – it was a real small town, my brothers, cousins, my sister. Everybody got together in one fashion or another. If you ever saw the movie Christmas Story, (chuckles) it was like that. My mom, my dad made sure we understood the reason for the season, that was the focus."

Prior to cowboying at the Deadman Ranch, Paul was a packer employed with the National Park Service at the Grand Canyon. "I worked at the Grand Canyon prior to the Deadman and I worked every Christmas there. [The pack mules,] we ran a duffle service and it never failed, some knucklehead would be wanderin' around in the Grand Canyon on Christmas day and needed duffle service. I knew the other guys had family and what not, so I'd tell 'em to go on home. I'd go pack out on Christmas day."

Paul Decker has a compassionate side to him that feels that Christmas is all about kids. "Christmas is the birth of Jesus, our Lord and Savior, it is about the gift and it is about giving. But today, parents just spoil their kids, they forget about the meaning, they load the stuff on them and they don't educate them, they don't teach them anything about what's real in life. You know, Cindy, really I don't think there is much parenting that goes on in our culture today. Uh I think people just think they are going to buy their kids love and whatever else, that is how they show love by giving stuff instead of loving them and nurturing them, and bringing them along and teaching

them what you know is right in the world and what makes a good person. They just spoil them with it . . . it ain't right."

Do you think ranch work would be good for children to learn about and get a better perspective about life and have a respect for animals?

Paul responds, "Yes, absolutely. I believe that kids, as soon as they are big enough to take on responsibility they need to be given responsibility. I mean not over their head not expecting them to be doin' what 16 or 18 year old kids can do, but you know, they can pick up after themselves, they can feed the dog, there are some things that they can do . . . to prepare 'em for life and to understand you know . . . you get outa life what you put into it; and if you don't put anything into it you ain't goin' to get much out of it."

"Last year at the Deadman Ranch, we had a really cold Christmas. It was a white Christmas, it was pretty, but just about daylight, the wind got up and we got a big snow – it was blowin' sideways you couldn't even be outside, you know I just went out and opened the gate to where my mules could get up by the shop and get inside the shop, I hated to put them inside the shop, but I hated to see them standin' out there and suffer. Because they wouldn't go out in the horse pasture when it was like that. They'd just hang at the

gate and look at the house, you know wantin' me to do somethin' for 'em and the only thing I could do was open the gate and let them go up to the shop to where they could go and get outa the wind. I feel bad for the cattle, because they'd be sufferin' but they'd move off into the thicker timber and get a little break from that wind, winter is hard up there, everything suffers."

My cowboy friend then shared with me what he really wanted for Christmas: "What I really want . . . just to be around friends, be able to express the love that I have for my friends, which is real hard for me to do. Livin' as isolated as I have and the way that I have for so long, it turns you into a social misfit. With me I am real leery of what I say to people or whatever . . . I have too much respect for people's boundaries, I won't open up to what I think because I'm afraid I'll step on somebody's toes. I'm getting' better, but this year I'd really like to be around you know, close friends and tell them you know what they meant in my life, I'll learn how to anyway."

• (Cindy K. Roberts is a mule promoter and the author of several entertaining mule training books available at www.everycowgirlsdream.com . She has worked with mules since 1985.)



Branding time at the Deadman (photo credit Lyndsey Garber)