

## Martin Bergin: A Legend With Cowboy Heart

by Cindy K. Roberts

From time to time, you will hear a story about a special horse that has carried his weight in gold. A horse that has shown enormous talent and performed to the very end. An animal that loved his work and gave it his all. They call it a horse with a lot of heart. I know of a cowboy with that same kind of talent. A very special guy that has contributed to our cowboy history as a true cowboy, a saddle maker, a folklore speaker and a cowboy poet. His name is Martin Bergin and he has what I call Cowboy Heart.



He is a cowboy and a legend. The tiny jagged lines carved into his bronze colored skin, give off the look of leather that tells a story of days gone by. His wiry mustache dances the waxed cowboy curl and he wears it well.

The long and lanky frame of his body has that familiar bowlegged walk...you can tell he's had his share of broken bones over the years. His calloused hands tell the story of what true hard labor is. He wears custom made boots and he prefers wearing Levis (boot cut) to cover his long legged 36 inch inseam. Martin complained in his distinctive raspy cowboy drawl, "I have a hard time anymore finding the kind of Levis I like. Now they're all loose fittin', preshrunk, prewashed stuff...I like the old time Levis, they were so stiff they'd stand up on their own when you bought 'em brand new."

Martin grew up in West Texas and Southeastern New Mexico. His childhood was spent with "old time" cowboys. He cowboied when he was younger and learned how to make bridles, breast collars as well as repairing old saddles. He grew up listening to cowboy poetry...because that's a favorite pastime for real cowboys. His

family didn't own a TV and his first experience of watching a TV show was when he was almost 17 while visiting at a friend's house he saw The Howdy Doody Show. That experience alone amazed Martin.

He broke horses, rodeoed and he did custom branding for people. He's done a lot in his lifetime and he looks older than his young age of seventy. Most cowboys do.

His favorite meal is fried steak and fried potatoes and he claims he doesn't have high cholesterol; he eats anything he wants. He contributes his healthy living to cigarettes and cowboy coffee; and he makes a pot of cowboy coffee most every day. I know he likes his beer and he tries to stay away from Tequila.

He rolls his own cigarettes so I guess it goes without saying this cowboy legend has his quirks. Martin started smoking when he was 10 years old. "We didn't know that it would hurt ya back then everybody did it." Martin admits. "And I've been smoking so damn long that I am hooked on the things and I can't quit. I sure don't recommend that kids do it." He confesses to chewing tobacco when he is out in the pasture or working cows...and he smokes a pipe.

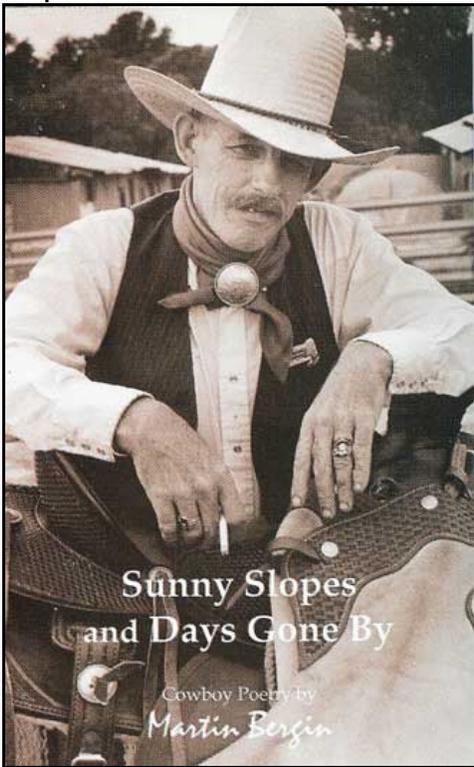
Martin refers to stalled horses as 1200-pound hamsters. He respects mules but prefers to ride a horse.

Years back, he began building saddles primarily for the working cowboy. Although he builds some show saddles and pleasure saddles, the major part of his business is building custom saddles for the true working cowboy. The true working cowboy works his horse on a ranch or in the stockyards and he is in the the saddle ten to twelve hours a day, seven days a week. He has skilled labor and there is no such thing as a cowboy union. The true working cowboy lives a lifestyle that has captured his heart that has roped an eternal spirit into his soul.

Martin's saddle making business is done strictly by referral, so don't bother looking him up in the Yellow Pages, just ask around and you will find him. Martin states, "It is almost all word of mouth...to make the saddle...it fits the horse and it fits the cowboy and it gets the job done."

The late Johnny Carson previously interviewed Martin on the Tonight Show back in the 1980's when Cowboy Poetry stampeded the country nation wide in popularity. Martin has a CD he produced and is titled "Sunny Slopes & Days Gone By". It is a collection of his very own cowboy poetry. The CD is available through the Western Folk Life Center in Elko, Nevada. ([www.westernfolklife.org](http://www.westernfolklife.org))

The most important thing to Martin is his name and his word of honor. "And my handshake... those are the most important things to me according to my family", said Martin. I asked Martin what he wanted to leave behind before he leaves this world. With a catch in his voice, an emotional and sincerely humble cowboy gave me his honest reply. It came straight from the heart...the cowboy heart. With tears in his eyes, Martin replied, "I want people to know that I've been here. Some day I hope ... someone will walk into a shop and see an old saddle up on the rack and



say 'Ill be damn, that's a Bergin'. That's how I want to leave my mark...I have had a good time. I've been very fortunate to do what I love to do and not have to punch a time clock."

I thanked Martin for the interview, hung up the phone and sat back for a moment to reflect on our conversation. I knew then how fortunate I was to get to know one of America's true working cowboys, and to have him share his sentiments with me. I turned on the CD player to listen to Martin's voice echo from Sunny Slopes And Days Gone By. He's a true cowboy legend and his voice was coming straight from his heart, the cowboy heart:

***"It's up in the mornin' before it's daylight,  
Everyone's grouchy and lookin' to fight.  
It's biscuits and coffee and leftover beans.  
Stetsons and leggin's and dirt slicken' jeans..."***

[Martin Bergin can be reached at 314-423-5990.]



Author Cindy K. Roberts is a contributing feature and column writer that has a lifetime experience with horses and mules. Cindy's equine heart, and passion for the wilderness rich in wild west history keeps her on the road with her paint horse, "Cowboy" and palomino mule - in search of the cowgirl spirit. Cindy can be reached through her web site

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