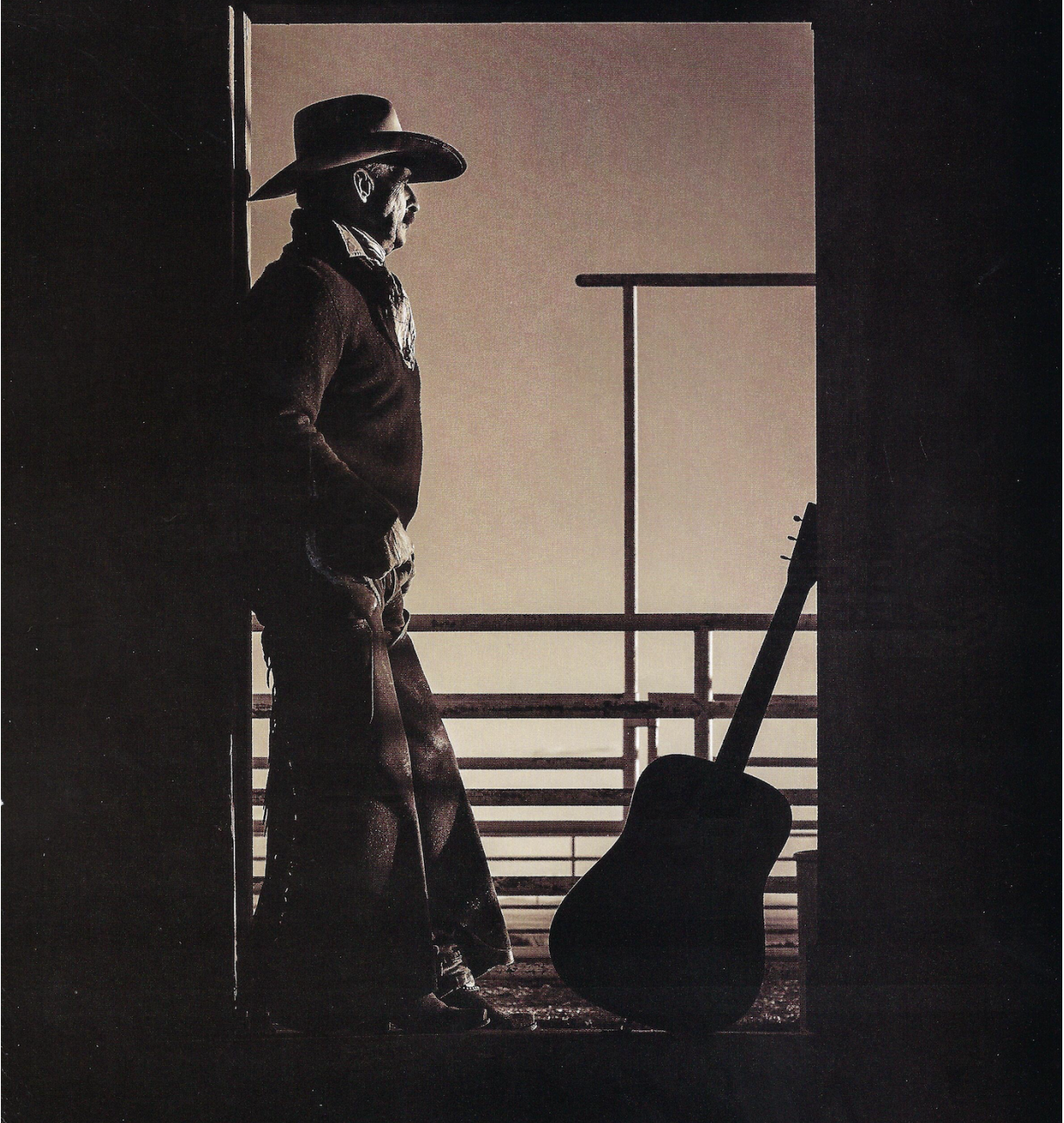


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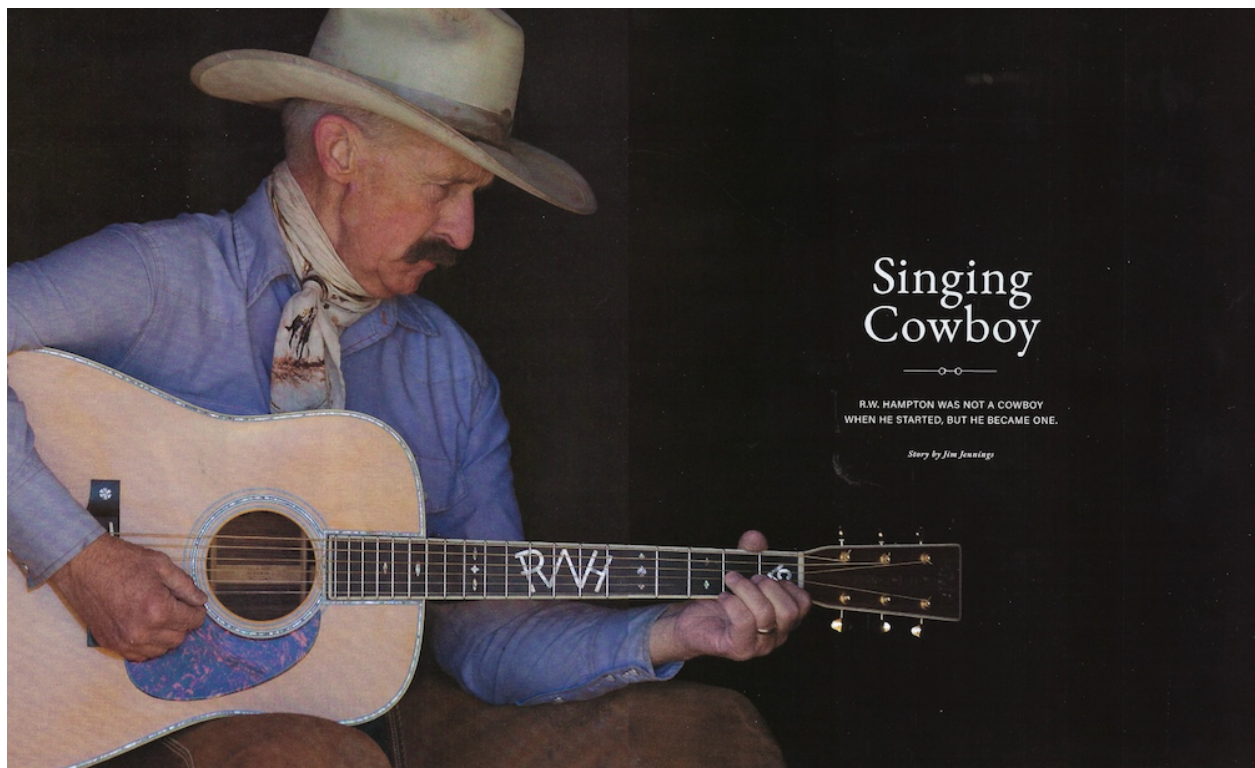
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## Singing Cowboy

R.W. HAMPTON WAS NOT A COWBOY  
WHEN HE STARTED, BUT HE BECAME ONE.

*Story by Jim Jennings*



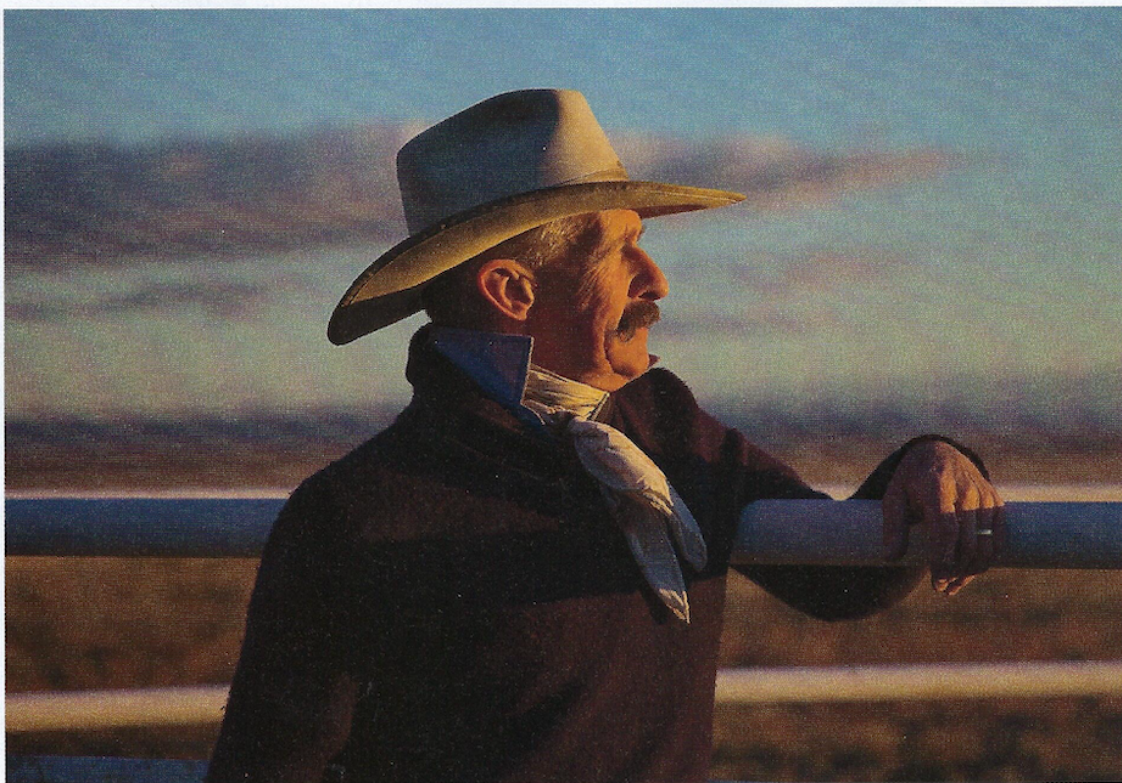
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**R.W.** Hampton is the true picture of the legendary singing cowboy. He has picked his guitar and sung songs that he has written around chuckwagon campfires all over the West. He has done the same thing in front of hundreds of people in concert halls, on television and in the movies. Kinda reminds you of the stars who made the singing cowboy image famous, stars like Roy Rogers and Gene Autry. However, there is a difference. A big one. Roy and Gene probably never saddled their own horses, and they for sure never roped a yearling bull in a pasture full of mesquite and cedar. R.W. has, because he's a real cowboy.

Back in March, when he took the stage at Billy Bob's Texas in Fort Worth to accept the Spirit of Texas Award from the Texas Cowboy Hall of Fame, R.W. was dressed just like you would expect. Wearing his hat, of course, along with starched jeans, a blue blazer and, in deference to the occasion, a blue tie over a white shirt, he expressed his appreciation for the award and concluded with picking up his guitar and singing a song that he had written. Just exactly what you would expect from R.W.

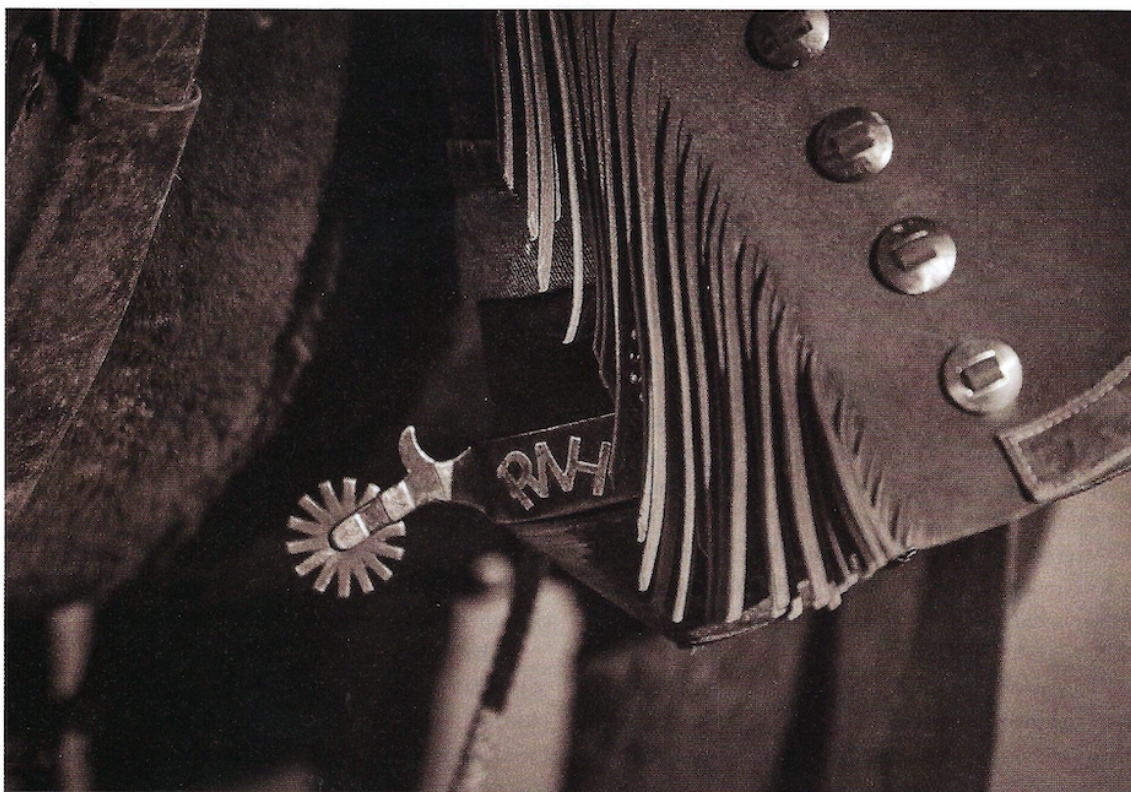
For years, and long before he became well known for his music, he made his living on some of the largest and most famous ranches in the country. As a single man, he lived in the bunkhouses with the other single cowboys. After he was married, he lived in small houses, called camps, somewhere on one of the ranches. And he always had his guitar.

"I never cared much about playing cards," he says, "so in the evenings in the bunkhouse or sitting at the chuckwagon around the fire, I would sing cowboy songs that I had learned and some that I had written."

R.W. wrote songs that were based on his experiences on the ranches, songs about cowboys and horses. For years, the cowboys in the bunkhouse were his only audiences, but then he began to get some invitations to appear in public. He started receiving more and more invitations to appear on stage until, finally, he had to make a decision. The demands of performing while holding a ranch job were too difficult. In 1998, he decided to see if he could make a living playing music.

To date, he has released 13 albums, many of which have won awards, and he has appeared at the Grand Ole Opry





in Nashville and at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. He has also performed on stage in London, Australia and Brazil, and all over the United States. He has been honored several times by the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City, where, in addition to receiving Western Heritage Awards for his music, he received the Chester A. Reynolds Award. He has also been recognized by the Western Music Association, where he is a member of its hall of fame, and by the Academy of Western Artists. R.W. has become one of the singing cowboy stars.

### Scouts and Horses

On a June day in 1974, 17-year-old Richard Wade Hampton, known first by his friends as Dick, and later as R.W., was walking along a dirt trail in the back country of the Philmont Scout Ranch, which is in the mountains of northeastern New Mexico. Philmont is a 140,000-acre working cattle ranch that belonged to the Boy Scouts of America, now known as Scouting America. It provided all kinds of different camping experiences to Scouts from

across the country. R.W., who was an Eagle Scout and had his horsemanship merit badge, was at Philmont with the rest of his Richardson, Texas, Scout troop, and on this day, he was wearing an old beat-up straw hat and had a pair of cowboy boots tied to his backpack.

"We were going along that trail and, all of a sudden, I could hear horses running," R.W. says. "My Scout leader hollered, 'Get off the trail, boys, they're bringing in the horses.'"

Two men were driving a herd of dude horses that Scouts from different camps would ride while they were at Philmont. One of the men was wearing a big black hat, had a wild rag tied around his neck, and his spurs were jingling as he rode by, just the image that R.W. imagined for himself.

*Opposite: R.W. Hampton says he didn't have an agriculture background, but his kinfolks on his mother's side were horse and cattle people in East Texas, running cattle on a timber lease. Top: His dad's grandfather was a horse and mule trader in Fort Worth. He would drive his horses to Fort Worth and either sell them or put them on a train to sell somewhere else.*



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“We would stay at those camps up in the mountains, no electricity or running water, and it was just a dream thing for a teenager that was wired like I was. I thought I was living the cowboy life.”

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When he saw R.W. with his hat and boots, he stopped and asked him, “Hey, you a cowboy?”

“I told him, ‘I sure am,’” R.W. says, “and then he said, ‘I’m coming back to talk to you.’”

After they got those horses penned, the two men rode back up to where R.W. and his Scout troop were, and one of them asked him, “Do you know how to handle horses?”

R.W. said, “Well, I sure do.”

“I did at least know how to saddle one and get on,” R.W. says, “and then he asked me, ‘Do you want to work here?’ When I said that I did, he said, ‘Well, let’s do some talking.’”

After first visiting with R.W.’s Scout leader and then the man who ran the whole livestock operation at Philmont, and following a call to R.W.’s dad, he was hired. He finished out that summer and worked the next two summers, as well, helping to handle the 300 head of horses that were on the ranch, to include learning how to shoe them. The job also included helping care for the 600 head of cattle the ranch owned, as well as working and branding the calves, all of which was new to R.W.

“There was a whole crew of guys like me,” he says. “Some of them were ranch raised and knew quite a bit about what we were doing, and some were like I was, who knew virtually nothing. We could catch our horse, saddle and bridle him, and get on and go, and that was it. But we learned. We would stay at those camps up in the mountains, no electricity or running water, and it was just a dream thing for a teenager that was wired like I was. I thought I was living the cowboy life.”

### **Becoming a Cowboy**

Regardless of what he told the man who was driving the horses at Philmont Scout Ranch, R.W. was not a cowboy. The son of a retired Air Force fighter jet navigator, he grew up in the north Texas town of Richardson, where, capti-

vated by the 1960s TV Westerns, and the fact that the history of both sides of his family featured agricultural backgrounds, R.W. grew up thinking about horses and ranching.

As a teenager, he convinced his parents to buy him a horse, a mare for which they paid \$200. He found a place on the edge of town to keep her, and he would ride his bicycle from his house out to the horse pen.

“That mare was gentle,” R.W. says, “but, Lord, I think of the things she put up with because I had no knowledge. I had a girlfriend who lived near Frisco. She had a horse, and I would ride over there. We would court horseback. That was my entrance to horses.”

He also helped create his high school rodeo club and tried riding bulls and bareback horses.

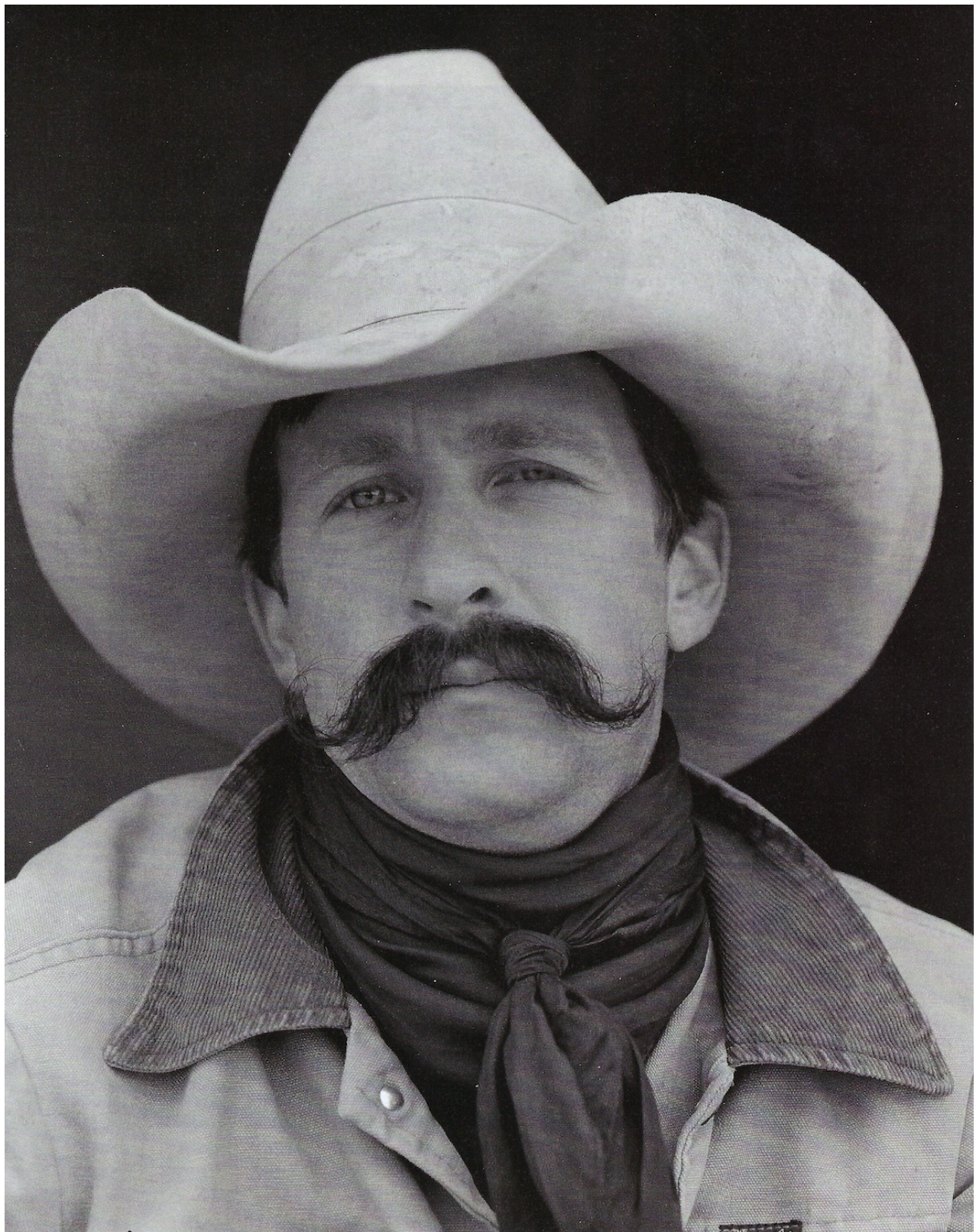
“It wasn’t far to the Mesquite Rodeo arena,” he says, “and my friends and I would go to that rodeo almost every weekend. There would be about 10 of us sharing one bareback rigging. We would pay our money, just get bucked off in the worst way and go get on another one. My dad, bless his heart, would stand at the edge of the arena in his old trench coat, freezing to death, waiting for me to ride a bull at 2 in the morning. I’m sure he wondered what in the world his son had gotten into.”

That was R.W.’s background when he got the job at Philmont Scout Ranch, but to a young man of 17, who dreamed of being a cowboy, working at that Scout ranch was a dream come true, a dream he wanted to continue. When he graduated out of the Philmont job, he started looking for a ranch job and talked to some cowboy friends that he had met at a rodeo. As a result, he was able to spend a few weeks at the famous Bell Ranch in northeastern

*R.W.’s first job as a cowboy was starting colts for the Spade Ranch in New Mexico. He worked there for two years, and called the Spade Ranch a cowboy paradise.*

KURT MARKUS





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*When it's time to go, cowboys have  
to go, regardless of the weather.*





New Mexico, but he got his first real ranch job at the New Mexico division of the Spade Ranch.

"James Vance was running the Spade," R.W. says, "and when I asked him about a job, he said he had one, but he threw a caveat in there. He asked me, 'You good with horses?' I said that I was, although I knew practically nothing, and he said, 'I have some young horses I need someone to ride, and if you can get along with them, it might lead to a more permanent job.'"

"I had never started colts in my life," R.W. says, "but I started those for the Spade, and I ended up working there for two years, which was a wonderful experience. I was so green, but there were some good cowboys there, and I learned from them."

"Spade was a cowboy paradise for me," he says. "We rode every single day. And it was there that I learned about cowboy etiquette. I learned about not getting ahead of the drive, and about not riding in front of another man. I learned to lope up ahead and get the gate, and if another man is getting the gate, not to ride off until he's back on his horse. All things that cowboys hold onto today."

R.W. had been playing guitar since he was 14, learning to play it as a way to get him through a family tragedy in which his younger sister died. When he left home to go to Philmont, he took the guitar with him, and he kept it with him from then on, playing it around the chuckwagon campfire or in the bunkhouse at night.

While he was working at the Spade Ranch, he was asked to play for someone other than his cowboy friends. The National Ranching Heritage Center in Lubbock, Texas, had initiated an award called the Golden Spur, and it was to be presented to rancher Albert Mitchell at a dinner in Lubbock. Mitchell, who was a past president of AQHA, ranched not far from the Spade. R.W. was asked to sing the cowboy song "Little Joe the Wrangler" during the presentation.

From the Spade, R.W. drifted out to Nevada and worked briefly for the Spanish and the I L ranches, two historic ranches that follow the buckaroo tradition. "Just something I had to try," he says. But for the next few years, he drifted from ranch to ranch, including back to the Spade, then the 4 T and K Cross ranches in New Mexico, the L S and Quien Sabe ranches in the Texas Panhandle, the Z X ranch in Oregon and the Pickerel Land and Cattle Company in Wyoming, and there were others. And for the latter part of those years, he was beginning to establish a career with his guitar.

In the meantime, he had gotten married and had three

kids, so there was the responsibility of a family, which made trying to balance two careers even harder.

In 1979, while he was working for the I L Ranch in Nevada, R.W. had the opportunity to appear in a CBS television special called "Kenny Rogers and the American Cowboy." R.W. played his guitar and sang with Rogers and even creased Rogers' hat on the air.

R.W. explains, "Kenny asked me, 'R.W., what do you think of my hat?' I told him, 'Kenny, it looks like you threw away the hat and you're wearing the box.' I took his hat and dipped it in the creek and shaped it for him, and all of that was in the movie."

Six years later, R.W. was working on a ranch in northeastern New Mexico when Rogers' manager called and said they were going to do a CBS television movie of the week called "Wild Horses." It was to be shot north of Sheridan, Wyoming, and Kenny wanted R.W. in it. He loaded his saddle and headed for Sheridan. While on the movie set, he became friends with Academy Award winner Ben John-

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"Spade was a cowboy  
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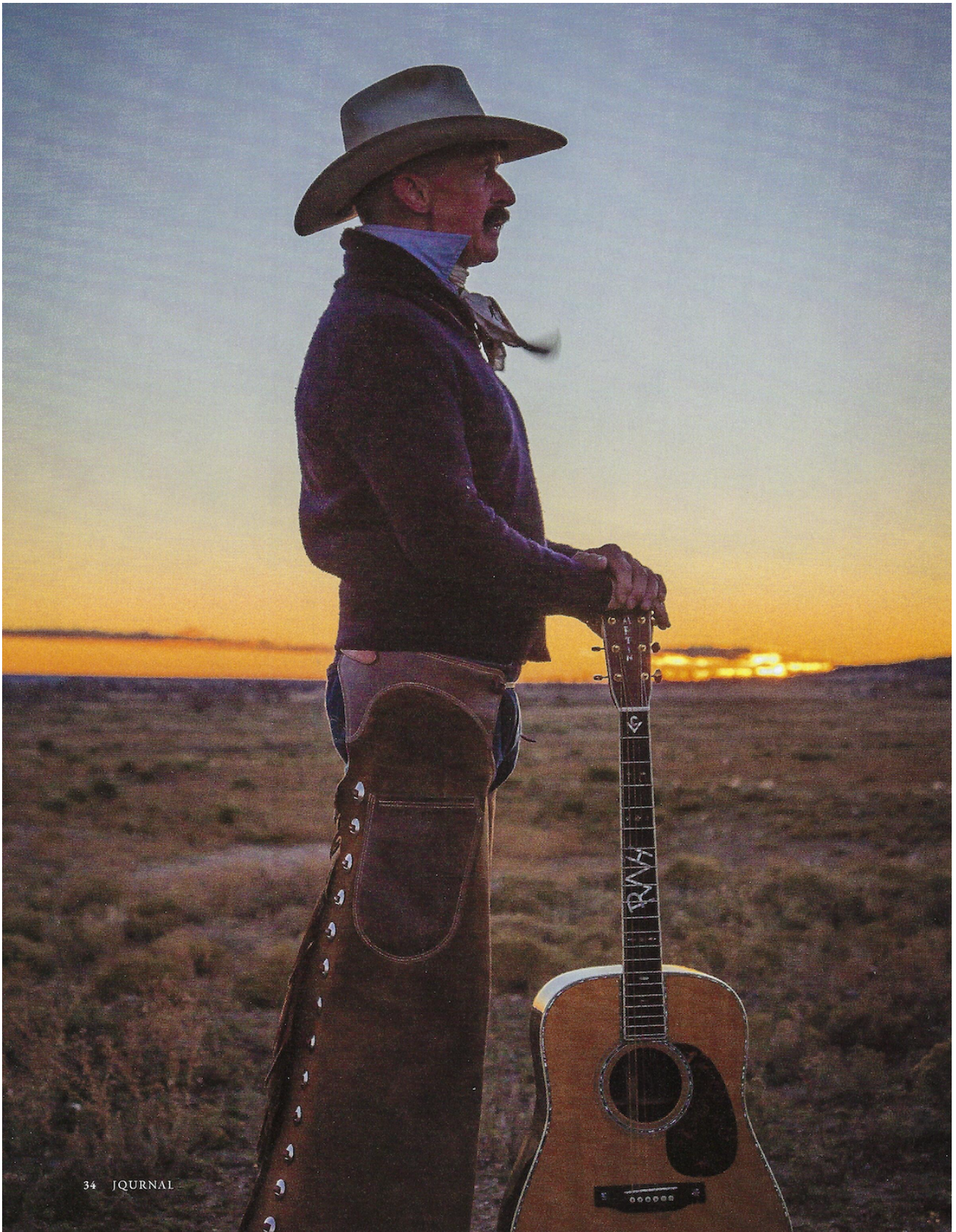
son; Richard Farnsworth, who was twice nominated for an Academy Award; and Buck Taylor of "Gunsmoke" fame. All three were also in the movie, and R.W. shared a trailer with them while on set.

"Ben told me his story," R.W. says, "how he got in the movies, and it made me realize that if I ever wanted to have something for myself, besides being an old worn-out cow puncher, that maybe the movies and the music would be a way of doing it."

"I still had to work at my ranch jobs," he says, "but I started trying harder to get jobs where I could play my guitar and sing. However, I wore out a marriage doing it."

"My wife was the daughter of a cowboy," he says, "and to her, it seemed like her father was always changing jobs and moving. She thought I was going to end up the same way. By the mid-1990s, we were divorced, and I was a



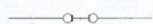


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“Dave saw that I could do my lines, that I could take direction and that I could do what I needed to on a horse. They didn’t have to double me.”



single man again. But this time, I was raising two sons and a daughter in college.”

R.W. said that he had a couple of good broke horses, and that when someone would call needing a day worker, he would go. But he had met movie stunt coordinator Dave Cass on the “Wild Horses” movie set, and Dave started calling him about movie jobs.

“Dave saw that I could do my lines, that I could take direction and that I could do what I needed to on a horse. They didn’t have to double me,” he says, “so I ended up getting quite a bit of movie work. And that was big money.”

When the National Cowboy Poetry Gathering began in Elko, Nevada, in the mid-1980s, R.W. was invited to be a part of it. The Gathering, which is still going on today, includes cowboy poets, of course, but it also includes singers and song writers. During his years there, R.W. made some of his best connections for other jobs, including one in Oregon where a decade later, he met his wife, Lisa. They were married in 1998.

It was also in 1998, after R.W. and Lisa were married, that he decided to see if he could make a living playing music. Lisa assumed the role of manager, publicist and booking agent, and they went to work. Invitations to perform were sporadic at first, but more and more came in, until today, R.W. spends a lot of time traveling to performances in much of the West. Their success allowed them to buy some land they call Clearview Ranch at the foot of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains south of Cimarron, New

*Opposite: R.W. started playing the guitar when he was 14 as a way to help him get through the death of his little sister. Top: R.W. says that being horseback still makes him feel good.*



Mexico. In 2021, they added more country, Six Springs Ranch, east of Cimarron in the Chico Hills. They run cattle on both places, and R.W. still has plenty of opportunities to get horseback and do some cow work.

Recently, he reflected on the time he spent at the various ranches on which he has worked.

"When I started out, I had a hackamore and a Texas grazing bit," he says, "nothing more. But I copied the older guys that I admired, and that's all they had. I'm just pleased that I got in on the old ways.

"Sometimes I truly can't believe all the things I've gotten to do," he says, "and the things I've seen, living at the wagon on some of the biggest and most famous ranches in the country, becoming friends with some of the greatest cowboys the modern West has ever known."

Don Cates of Channing, Texas, has known R.W. for more than 40 years. They met and became good friends while cowboying on neighboring ranches in New Mexico. Don is the subject of several of R.W.'s songs, including what is probably his most requested one, "Donnie, Catch a Horse for Me—You Know, the One That I Never Could Ride." Don says that when R.W. was trying to decide whether to go fulltime with his music, it was a real prob-

lem for him because he absolutely loved cowboying.

"And he was a really good hand," Don says. "Unlike a lot of cowboys, he loved flanking calves when we were branding. A lot of guys don't really want to do that part of the work, but R.W. loved it. And I'll tell you something else, he can really ride a pitching horse."

Don says, "He knows about what he writes. All of those cowboy songs that he has written, he has lived them. They weren't about somebody else; that was his life."

R.W. doesn't earn a cowboy's wages anymore. However, their New Mexico ranches enable him to periodically get back to the life that he loves. He and Lisa together have six kids now, but since they are all grown, he takes every opportunity he gets to spend time on the ranches.

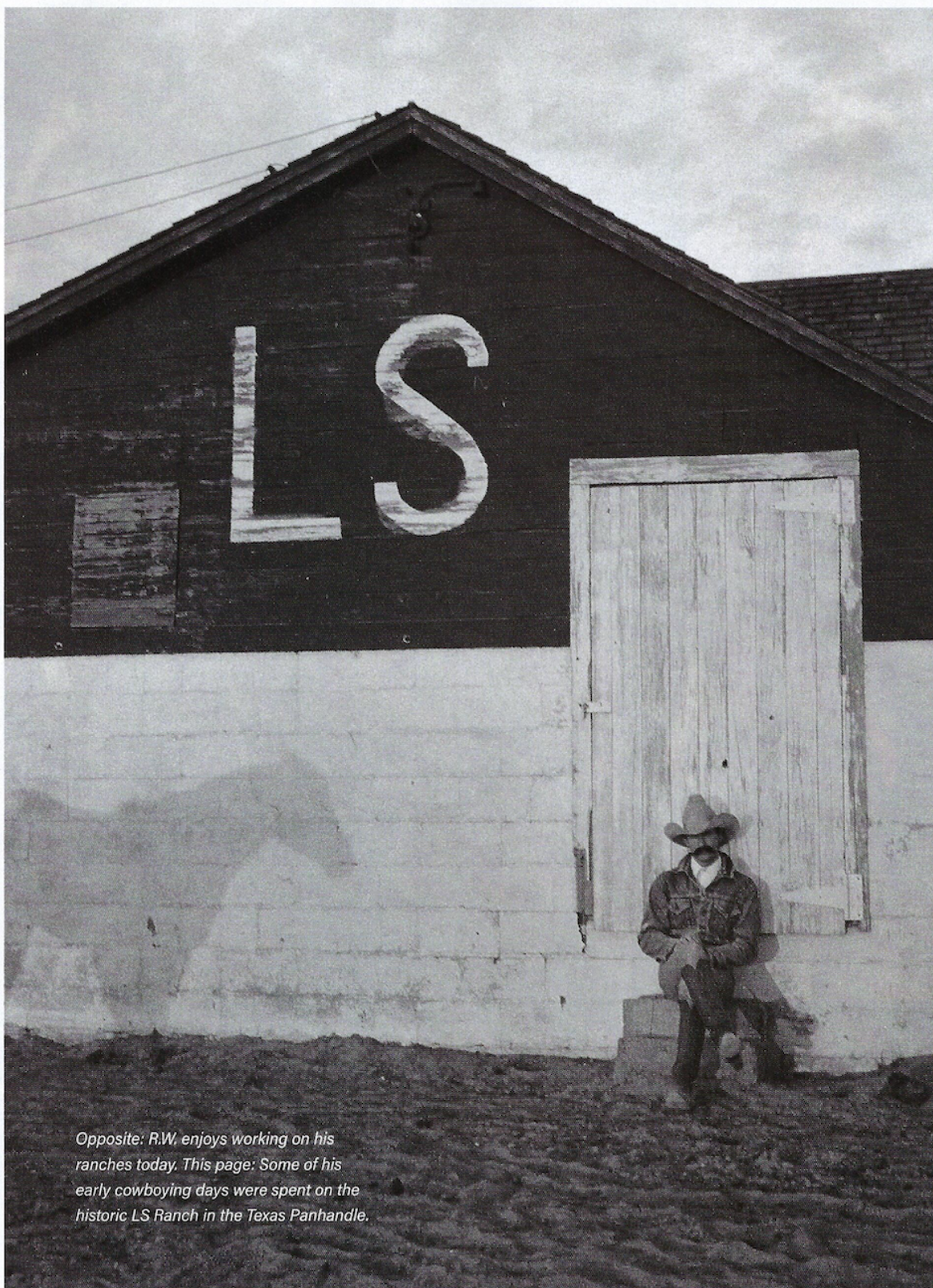
"The best stories and song material come from those real-life experiences, and I'm not done riding or writing," R.W. says.

"You know, you can cowboy on a ranch and probably never be a cowboy, if that makes any sense. The other hands won't call you a cowboy, because you have to earn those spurs. But was I ever any good? I will say this, I rode with men who were cowboys, sur'nuff cow punchers, and they called me one. As for me, that's as good as it gets." U



THIS PAGE: JAYMIE DUNLAP PHOTOGRAPHY; RIGHT: KURT MARKUS





*Opposite: R.W. enjoys working on his ranches today. This page: Some of his early cowboying days were spent on the historic LS Ranch in the Texas Panhandle.*