



Buffalo Vernon during a steer-roping contest at Pendleton, Oregon.

First King of the Bulldoggers

By MILT HINKLE and CLAUDE KEEMA

The true story of a wizard of the rope who, before he died, had to perform at "half-throttle" and still was the best!

About the authors: Milt Hinkle is well known to our readers and to all other good followers of the rodeo sport. The first white man to bulldog a steer, and a wild snortin' old cayuse yet, in spite of the ravages of time and the disadvantages of a crutch or cane, he knows his sport and those who made it what it is. Milt says "facts are facts," and here they are.

Claude Keema lays no claim to any rodeo records. In fact, he is scared of horses. He is the senior Sheriff of the State of Nevada in point of consecutive service, and for the year 1962 was President of the Nevada State Sheriffs' Association. Likewise for 1962, he received the Certificate of Achievement from the Nevada State Press Association for producing the best sports column in the State during the year.

THE YEAR was 1910. Folks from miles around were gathered in the little town of Pendleton, Oregon, to witness the first official Pendleton Round-Up. The usual events were on tap, such as saddle bronc riding, steer roping, Pony Express races, Indian sports, and the like.

One of the cowboy entries was a genial chap known as Buffalo Vernon. Short of stature, solidly and huskily built, sure of eye, quick handed and quick minded, this young man was one of the most

spectacular performers who ever graced a rodeo arena. A better than average buster, both with saddle broncs and bulls, he was something out of this world with a lasso. It would probably be safe to say that what he couldn't do with a riata couldn't be done, whether it be roping steers in competition or entertaining the crowd with a fantastic display of lariat tricks. We have seen him many times leave spectators goggle-eyed with his ability.

Some folks might swear that the Hindus with their vaunted rope stunts are in a class by themselves. Not so. Many of the waddies of yesteryear could do things with a length of hemp that said Hindus never even dreamed possible. There was nothing of the occult about their performances, either. Their acts were perfected through countless days of practice, sweat and work, combined with an inherent deftness and talent, which all put together resulted in an amazing dexterity. The boys had a repertoire of tricks that were seemingly impossible—and the master of all was Buffalo Vernon.

In exhibitions during rodeos held in Nevada after his retirement from active competition, Buff thrilled the crowds with his wizardry. Flat on his back, he would play out a great enormous loop and dance it up and down around him—sometimes almost touching the floor of

the arena, sometimes sending it fifteen feet in the air like a giant hoop on a stick.

He could make the little ones—flat ways, sideways, any way—a la Will Rogers. By our standards, Will Rogers, who used his palaver to interest the spectators, was a rank amateur alongside Buff Vernon, whose loops did his talking for him. He would skip rope through these loops, big and small. And woe to the errant calf or cow who escaped her horseback pursuer if she happened to run anywhere near Buff while he was performing! Sure as sin, that old loop would snake out, and down would go the maverick. He rarely missed.

For something different, Buff would invite somebody to gallop by on a horse. He would shake out a big sideways loop for the rider to ride through and then announce what he was going to catch—maybe the rider, maybe the horse's left hind leg, or even its tail. But whatever he named, he caught.

He didn't confine his catches to men, horses or cattle during his heyday, but even included buffaloes and bears in some instances. Frightening indeed were such antics, for the horses generally deserted the riders during such goings on, and it was then strictly man against bear or buffalo. But he performed such stunts before many thrilled audiences.

The Pendleton Round-Up crowd of

1910 was to see something still different. Buffalo Vernon was going to put on an exhibition of bulldogging, something new to the roaring West. It was strictly a daredevil stunt, originated by the Negro Bill Pickett in the early 1900s, and in his case, out of dire necessity. Bulldogging and bareback bronc riding are apparently the only rodeo sports not associated with normal cowboy work.

We can best describe the action and its effect upon the crowd by borrowing a few paragraphs from Charles Welling-ton Furlong's book, *Let 'er Buck*. "In the first two shows, particularly 1910, 'Buff' was IT; he was half the show. He was one of the very first at the bulldogging game, won the *first championship* and showed a lot of the aftercomers the way. In his ornate chaps, yellow shirt and big well-seasoned sombrero... he will always be remembered as one of the most spectacular performers in the early shows.

"The last night of the 1910 Round-Up will also be remembered when enthusiasm for Vernon ran so high at the dance that 'Buff' went home minus the famous yellow topside clothing, for the dance wound up with a maverick race by all hands, girls included, for pieces of Vernon's shirt as souvenirs—such was the way popularity was rated at the Round-Up that year."

And again we quote Furlong as he remarks, "Bulldogging was first introduced into Pendleton by Buffalo Vernon, the First King of Bulldoggers. He bulldogged at the first Round-Up in 1910 for exhibition, then the next year along came Dell Blancett and entered the contest as they had both done it at Cheyenne and at the Miller Brothers 101 Ranch in Oklahoma.

"Buff Vernon also introduced bulldogging at Cheyenne and with a sprained wrist to boot. This was when Colonel Theodore Roosevelt was there and put Cheyenne on the map as a result. 'Teddy' shook hands with Buff and complimented him in the inimitable way that T. R. had."

WE HOPE that some of the foregoing information may serve several purposes. First, it will clear up any controversy as to who invented the style; secondly, any misconceptions as to who first introduced it in the Pacific Northwest; and third, it will identify the first "World's Champion" in bulldogging competition. Bill Pickett gets our credit for the first, Buff Vernon for the latter two. Buff won the competition in Pendleton in 1911 against all comers, and with it went the World's Championship trophies.

We believe too, that folks will be interested in learning all of the available facts on the life of Buffalo Vernon—for the name "Buffalo Vernon" is quite a controversial one, as we well know. The story of his life has been garnered from many sources, and the illustrations accompanying this story will, we believe, prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that this is the story of the "Real McCoy."

He was born Jess B. Shisler on the family farm in the Province of Ontario, on June 3, 1884, the son of Joseph and Agnes Shisler. He was the next to youngest in a family of eleven children. His father died when he was seven, but until he was twelve years of age he remained on the farm, which is just eight miles across the river from Buffalo, New York. Then at age twelve, he and his brother Dick, who was his senior by two years, crossed over to Buffalo to spend the winter with a married sister, Mrs. George Chapman.

With the coming of spring, the two youngsters developed itchy feet and headed for the West and adventure. The first port of call was Chicago, where the boys went to work at odd jobs to support themselves. But the lure of the wide open spaces was in their blood and, after a few months in the Windy City, they pulled freight and headed for the great Southwest.

Before they left Chicago, for some reason unknown to the family, they changed their names. A surviving sister, Mrs. Maude E. MacDonald, says, "I guess they just liked the name Vernon better." Whatever the reason, Dick Shisler became Dick Vernon, and Jess Shisler became Jess Vernon. Eventually they hit the cattle and sheep ranches of Oklahoma and Texas, and there took employment. They learned the tricks of the trade—each in his own way. Dick saw the possibilities of a future business venture, while Jess became more interested in the handling of cattle and horses and some of the cowboy stunts that went along with it. Out of these interests came their eventual careers.

After a few years, having become well-grounded in the fundamentals of sheep raising, Dick gravitated to the Oregon-Idaho country. He formed a partnership with Senator Stanfield of Oregon in that field, and remained in it until his untimely death in 1917 in Boise, Idaho, where he is buried. There were many times during the intervening years when the brothers got together as Buff made the rounds of the big shows and the rodeo circuit. Particularly at Pendleton they appeared together many times at the Round-Ups.

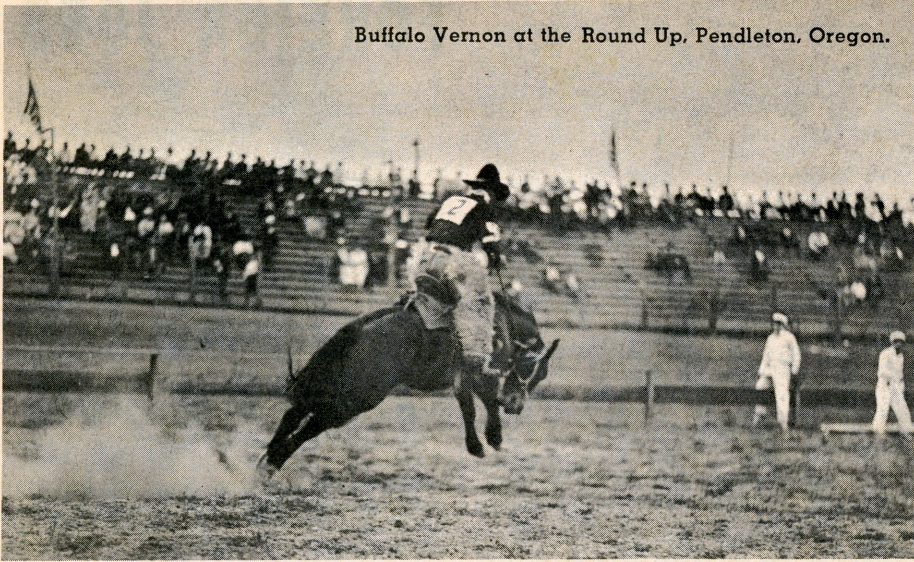
Jess became thoroughly enamored of the life of a cowboy. Riding, roping, and bulldogging were his meat—and how he did enjoy them! Nothing less than perfection suited him and he went about his work with zest. Energy, patience, skill and determination went into his practice. Out of it all emerged one of the most dexterous and multi-talented cowboys of all time. Because he was just a wet-eared youngster when he arrived
(Continued on page 70)



Top: Buff Vernon at Mountain Home, Idaho, in 1919.
Middle: Buff Vernon after joining one of the big shows.
Bottom: Buff Vernon (right) with friend Tex Garrett in Yerington, Nevada, about 1927.



Buffalo Vernon at the Round Up, Pendleton, Oregon.



First King of the Bulldoggers

(Continued from page 23)

in the Southwest country, and because he had come from Buffalo, somebody nailed the moniker, "The Buffalo Kid," onto him. As the Kid grew up, the name became *Buffalo* Vernon, and variously, *Buff*, or *Doc* Vernon. The "Doc" part evolved because of his ability to care for sick and injured livestock.

ONE THING we have noticed in correspondence with dozens of persons, is that those people who knew him best always refer to him as *Buff*, not Buffalo Vernon. We ask our readers to remember this point, in the face of any controversy which may arise as a result of this article. And as *Buff*, he lived the final dozen years of his life in Nevada. While others called him Buffalo, and he even signed his name that way sometimes, still to his intimates he was *Buff*.

Buff hit the sawdust trail, in a manner of speaking, and traveled extensively over North America, Europe, and the Orient with many of the big time Wild West Shows. Among these were the Two Bills (Buffalo and Pawnee), 101 Ranch, Clarence Adams, The Young Buffalo Ranch, Bill Dickey Wild West Show, Kit Carson Wild West Show, and the Fred Askins Wild West Show. Some of these tours were not without their high spots—either tragic, humorous, or just plain heartwarming.

Buff Vernon was thrilled no end over giving a command performance before the King of Belgium. And his hometown friends and relatives were treated to an eye-popping exhibition of rope prowess and general showmanship when one of the big shows he was traveling with paid a visit to Buffalo.

That all was not glamor and gold was obvious when the Fred Askins Wild West Show toured Australia. The show folded while there, and Buffalo Vernon and co-author Milt Hinkle had to work their passage back to the U.S.A. on a freighter, shoveling coal to fire the boilers. It was quite a comedown for a couple of top hands, but preferable to remaining there to bust kangaroos. Buff always looked on it as a big joke.

In the early 1920s Buff seemingly "disappeared." He no longer showed up at any of the shows and most of his old-time intimates lost contact with him completely. The whys and wherefores are bandied about to this date. Every

excuse in the world, from getting shot to pulling a bank robbery and getting a long sentence in some Big House, has been offered for his disappearance. Nothing could be farther from the truth, for Buff was not a larcenous man. Fight he might, if the occasion warranted it, or hoist a few during the noble experiment known as Prohibition, but nothing worse than that.

Two wounds—one to the body, and one to the pride—accounted for what later came to pass. In wrestling a maverick one day, Buff was horribly gored, causing a hernia wound which was never properly repaired, and which eventually led to his death some years later. With this affliction, he was done as a competitor, and even as a working cowboy—thus, the wound to his pride. A glamorous figure, by one sad twist of fate, suddenly was reduced to the status of an onlooker, so to speak. Like an opera star suddenly bereft of his voice, Buff couldn't, and wouldn't, take it.

He left the scenes of his triumphs behind. He wanted no pity from his colleagues, and most surely he evaded it. His break with rodeoing and with most of his friends was clean. With the exception of the few exhibitions heretofore mentioned, he stayed away from the game. But how wonderful he was, even when performing at, what to him, would have been about half-throttle.

Buff moved to Yerington, Nevada, about 1926, and remained there until his death on October 23, 1939. He worked for several years at the Bluestone Mine near the town. When the mine shut down, he divided his time between trapping and a second-hand business, with a bit of farming, cattle tending and veterinarian work thrown in. He endeared himself to grown-ups and children alike, and many a yarn he spun of the glory days gone by—but never in a spirit of brag-gadocio, always on a sound foundation of truth. We have checked out his stories with dozens of persons and have found that, if anything, he had a tendency to downgrade his accomplishments. Such was his nature, as all of those who knew him best, will attest. His sisters arranged for his body to be shipped to Buffalo, and he lies buried there in the Shisler family plot. So much for Buffalo Vernon himself.

We know that this story may be received with raised eyebrows in some quarters, but to the best of our knowledge, memory, and research, it is the

100 per cent true story of the First King of the Bulldoggers. We ask our readers to read the story, examine the pictures, and check out any of the sources listed below, for most of these people *knew* Buff Vernon, and will agree that this is his story.

To those who, in the light of some peculiar stories handed down through the years, may doubt what we say—may we remind you of how often Jesse James, John Wilkes Booth and a horde of others have—remarkably, from time to time—risen from the grave? Seemingly unmarked and unscathed and ready to boast of their bygone deeds, they have never been too convincing. That's just the way it is here.

We give our biggest thanks for help in the compilation of this article to Buffalo Vernon's sister, Mrs. Maude E. MacDonald, and to her son, Reynold J. MacDonald. We further acknowledge the interest and information supplied by the following, whose names in most cases are household words among the rapidly vanishing clan who pioneered the great game of rodeo and its twin, the Wild West Show either as competitors, promoters, or historians: M. F. "Pete" Peterson, husband of the late Lorena Trickey of bronc riding fame; Fay Ward; Mabel Strickland Woodward; L. H. Hamley; T. Joe Cahill; Goldie Griffith Cameron; Michael Harrison; Helen Clark; J. Jack O'Keefe; Jack Armstrong; Mildred Searcey; Glenn DeSpain; and Art Morgan.

Western Gun Collecting

(Continued from page 29)

shape. The biggest pistol was, naturally, the large Remington .44 cap-and-ball new model Army with a full eight inch barrel and bearing the original walnut grips.

The smaller gun of the lot, I have not yet shot, but it seems to be about .44 caliber and has two barrels, side by side. It is in suspiciously good condition for having been made about 1842, and it may be that the barrels unscrew for loading because there are tool or teeth marks on the muzzle ends. Some day that mystery will be solved. Does any reader have any information on this last gun? The serial number is sixty-seven, and it has Belgian proof marks. The long-barrel Colt Buntline shown with the older pistols is a modern twelve inch Buntline made recently. That one is a keeper!

You can start out with a trunk full of "trading stock" and end up with something different. Don't pass up pieces or accessories, or holsters either! It took me three passes one month to buy an entire "Peacemaker" that I really wanted. The little old lady was a sharper talker than I was, and sold me the holster first, then the grips, and finally, the gun! I decided she really wanted some one to talk to, and so she strung out the deal over three visits. We are good friends now, and I shoot coyotes for her when they bother the stock too much.

You can collect guns for a hobby, too. Get out and look. They are right under your nose. Pass the word around—buy them, clean them up, trade them off, and start all over again. It is lots of fun and you will be learning more about the true West every day. You may even find Pancho Villa's personal pistol. I have bought it three different times, from three different cowhands! Good luck, fellow gun collectors!