



# THE LAST COWBOY

Что может подвигнуть молодого американца стать ковбоем? Американский фотограф Адам Яхиль, создавший серию «Последний ковбой», с удовольствием рассказал *Public* как стать своим в среде необузданных сыновей прерий.



## English Translation

The Last Cowboy project began in 1989, when I visited an old ranch on the California/Nevada border. I was shooting a story on a famous Rodeo Bull for a newspaper assignment. When I walked into the cook-shed, the building where the cowboys ate, for a cup of coffee, I felt like I had traveled back in time. Everything was spare and minimal. Whitewashed walls, painted wood floors, a grease stained ceiling, a big table with a plastic tablecloth, simple benches to sit on. No pictures or decorations on the walls, no fluff. Nothing there that was not useful or necessary. It reminded me of my favorite photographs by Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange, photographers who documented the dustbowl days and the great depression of the United States, when the banks failed and people were forced out of their homes. The United States government created a program to photograph this era in history, and a few photographers traveled throughout the US and created images of people living on the road, in work camps, in towns and countryside who were very poor, having been forced out of their homes. I felt like I had walked into one of these images.

I was at once impressed on how utilitarian the ranches were. Everything was there for a reason. No excess belongings. No unnecessary possessions or equipment. I could see that the work was done by hand, and muscle. Things were simple and honest and straightforward, with absolutely no modern conveniences.

It was as though I had stepped into a magic portal, and had gone back in to history in a time that no longer existed. But there it was, an antiquated style of live, still existing in an era of space travel, the internet, and self-parking cars.

I am not sure I chose to photograph this subject. I think the subject chose for me to photograph it. When I first saw it, it demanded to be photographed. I had no choice. I was already caught in it's web. And so, what I thought would be a fun and interesting little photo-essay, turned into a project that is almost 20 years old. And though I return less often, I still don't think I'm quite done.

With this project, I want to show the day-to-day life of the cowboy, stripped of its Hollywood veneer. These men put in long hours, earn low pay and perform potentially dangerous tasks on a routine basis. I try and depict them with complete authenticity. In the work that I have produced, It should be obvious that these men don't stay in this business for any outsider-perceived glamour or glory. It's a way of life that they cling to as members of a dwindling group of free spirits.

Nevada is one of the least populated areas in the United States. If you look at a road map of Nevada it almost looks like they forgot finish drawing in the roads. It's a big, almost blank area, the only one like it on a map of the United States. Ranchers and cowboys sometimes live 150 miles from a city like Elko, Nevada and they might come into town once a month or less to visit for a couple of days.

I photograph these ranches from the inside out. When I go out to photograph, I take my truck, cowboy gear, saddle, tent, everything but my horse, because there are numerous horses at the ranches. From before sunrise to nighttime, I watch and listen and wait for the perfect combination of light, form, and content to converge into my camera viewfinder.

Of course I take many photographs, but my goal is to shoot one image each day, that I would hang in a museum or gallery. Sometimes days go by and I am left empty handed, with a number of "almost"



pictures, but not what I need. Other days, pictures seem to unfold in big numbers. It's a question of patience and concentration. I want that "perfect" image, where like a painting, there is nothing in the pictures that doesn't belong there.

I am also obsessed with light, and each photograph must have the right quality of light for the subject matter. I love what I can create in the darkroom, if I shoot the perfect negative. Unfortunately, this is not always the case as my subject matter is always moving, changing, and rearranging itself in a matter of seconds.

When I am shooting, I try and clear my mind of any expectations or pre-conceived expectations. I like to think of my mind as an unexposed sheet of film, waiting to get stuck by light. I watch, I look, and I react. When I feel something is right, I take the picture without thinking. If I think too much, and analyze too much, it ruins the magic moment. The photograph goes from my eyes, to my heart, and to my shutter finger. I like to think my pictures are from the heart, not the brain.

I try and capture the essence of what life is like, living in big, open country where you can go miles and miles without seeing another human. I like the space and the quiet. I like to study the relationship between man and nature, whether it is the land, the horses, or the cattle. The days unfold in a completely different way than they do in the modern world. The cowboys spend most of their time in the desert, far from the ranch headquarters. The land is so vast, and the distances so great between one point and another, that they have to set up camp where the cattle are, round them up, brand them, and move to a different location when their work is done.

They live in "Cowboy Teepees", small triangular-shaped tents that they set up for a few days at a time, as they move from place to place. There is always a "Cook Tent", a much larger tent, where they can all gather for meals. The cook makes huge meals for breakfast and dinner, as the cowboys often are too far away to eat lunch. Their work, from riding horses, to branding cattle, is very physical work. Most of the cowboys are pretty lean and fit. It is very hard work, and demands much strength, stamina, patience and good humor.

The cowboys wake up at 3:00 in the morning, eat breakfast, saddle their horses, and leave camp as the sun is about to rise. In the desert, it is cool in the morning hours and the days become hot and dry before long.

I remember my first experience shooting like it was yesterday. I arrived at a Nevada cow camp (the temporary camp where the cowboys live and work for a few days before moving to a new location), late one starry night without any warning. The cow boss, the man in charge, stuck his head out of his tent and grunted that breakfast would be served at 4:30 a.m. That was the end of the conversation for that night. Before dawn, I woke up in the cold, dark desert air, pulled on my clothes and boots, and wandered into the cook tent.

I remember standing there totally uncomfortably for awhile, not knowing what to do, and trying to figure out which chair to sit in. The cow boss, sensing my discomfort, finally pointed to the end of the line of metal chairs and said, "Sit over there. That's where the new guy sits." The cow boss barely spoke another



word to me for the next ten days. "From then on, I knew to serve myself last during meals, keep my eyes open, and my mouth shut. But on the last day, just as I was preparing to leave, the cow boss rode over to me, grunted a goodbye, then added, "If you ever want to do some more shooting, like the YP Ranch up the road, and you need a reference, just ask me." That reference from Bill Maupin, the cow boss, paved my way to ranch after ranch. I have always been grateful to that man.

Nowadays, going to Nevada is like going to a second home. I know most everybody, and they either know me or know of me. I get to a camp. And we all catch up with who is doing what, and where. It's like having a second family.

My camera equipment is fairly simple. I like to travel as light as I can. Too much equipment takes my concentration on the subject away. It can also get heavy and make me physically tired, and physically tired equals fewer great pictures.

I strongly believe that "less is more".

I use a couple Mamiya 6 bodies. This camera has three lenses, a 50mm, and 75mm, and a 150mm. I use the 50mm the most followed by the 150, and only occasionally, the 75mm. I also use yellow and orange filters to bring out the skies which are so very important to me. I have a hand-held light meter on my belt. That's pretty much it. It's too bad that the Mamiya 6 is no longer available, at least in the US market.

Years ago I began using Leica rangefinder cameras, which I really love. The Mamiya is like a giant Leica, as it is a rangefinder camera, fairly compact, light, and sturdy. The Mamiya, being a rangefinder camera with a leaf shutter, permits me to shoot in very low-light situations, not having to worry about the vibrations that occur in single-lens reflex cameras. And I shoot mostly T-max 400 film. This combination works well for me, especially as my subjects start their day in total darkness. Nothing in the world is as frustrating as having to wait for the light to become strong enough to shoot!

I also like the square format very much. I can't say why, but it is a very comfortable format for me. It is also one more decision I have to make, whether to shoot horizontal or vertical. It's the "Less is more" lesson again. I want to be able to "feel" the image before it actually unfolds, and capture it automatically. I don't want to feel something, then look in my camera bag and think "18? 24? 35? 55? 75? 105? 135? 180? By that time the feeling is gone and there is no picture.

This project has been shot entirely on 6x6 film. I own a number of cameras, from 4x5, Hasselblad, Nikon film, and Nikon Digital. They all have their advantages and disadvantages. No one is superior to the other. Every subject matter seems to dictate the approach I take. In this case, it was 6x6 negative film. I still have a darkroom, and I still love to print. I have been experimenting with taking digital files, having traditional B&W negatives made of them, and printing them by hand. I love printing by hand, each print is a little different, no two are the same. On the same subject, it is amazing what one can accomplish with digital files and Photoshop. It's great to have new technologies. One thing that I always tell people: It is the image, the artist's eye that holds the fascination for me. Technical considerations follow. It's important to have something to say, and you have to be able to express your ideas. Nothing is worse than the thousands of people who like to talk but have nothing to say. Your heart, your eye, and your sensitivity to the outside



world are what are most important.

This project has been an interesting process. The key to the success of this project, I believe, is that I created these images for myself, as personal work, and not to please anybody else. Somehow over the years, people took notice, first there were articles, then a few shows, then galleries, then museums. I never imagined that I would become a known entity. Had I tried to become an artist from the beginning, I'm sure I would not have been. Too much temptation to please others. Too much market pressure. Art photography becomes Commercial photography. Instead, I decide to do my commercial work for a living, and shoot the cowboys for my own personal enjoyment. And it took on a life of it's own, and carried me along with it. I know that photography is different things for different people. We all use similar tools for different ends. For me, my photography needs to be personal, and it needs to document something that will not be around forever. I have always been interested in cultures that are hidden away somewhere, unaffected by time as much as they can be. My hope is that I may leave behind a photographic record of a life that is quickly disappearing for my children and for their children.