

East Coast Cowboy

Looking for John Wayne in all the Wrong Places

By Open Range Magazine writer Jackson Braun



Inside Billy Martin's Western Wear in New York City Photo © Open Range Magazine Writer / Photographer Richard Beaven

I was riding down Third Avenue in a yellow taxi, eyes pressed against the backseat window, scanning the sidewalk for cowboys. The brisk September air, funneled through the city's concrete maze of skyscrapers, moaned. Pedestrians hustled to destinations. I saw no horses. No wide-brimmed hats. No spurs. The Upper East Side of Manhattan isn't the best place to find cowboys, but I had to start somewhere.

Finally, a gaudy Native American headdress, radiating with large, crisp feathers appeared beyond a storefront window. Billy Martin's Western Wear is the most renowned vendor of "western-inspired" apparel in New York City. If there were any cowboys living in The City, I would surely find them shopping at Billy Martin's.

"Do any actual cowboys ever come here?" I asked the woman behind the counter.

"We mostly get New Yorkers and European tourists," she answered. "Cowboy clothes are like a Chanel suit, they never go out of style."

I left store. I don't personally know any ranchers or wranglers, but I know that real cowboys, even on the east coast, don't think of themselves as ambassadors of Parisian fashion.

I rang up Pinegrove Ranch and Resort, waiting for a cowboy to pick up the phone. A man finally does, his voice mechanical, professional.

"Pinegrove Ranch and Resort, this is David O'Halloran." Owner O'Halloran then dispensed with a litany no doubt shared many times before.

"No problem, I love to share information about Pinegrove. I'm the owner... We're not just a ranch, we're a resort with a Western-Theme package... Exactly. We offer the cattle drive without the seven days of pure torture.... Alright. I hope you come visit Pinegrove."

I hung up, decidedly against ever visiting Pinegrove. It all seemed wrong, the result of some distorted fantasy. If I was going to find any real cowboys, I had to find out if cowboys had ever lived in the Northeast.

Deep Hollow Ranch is in Montauk, Long Island, and is best known





Phil Trowbridge Ghent, NY. Photo by Richard Beaven.

as the East Stop on the train. Deep Hollow is owned by Diane and Gardner “Rusty” Leaver, two people determined to maintain the Ranch’s rich history.

The ranch offers a “Living History Tour,” which takes visitors, pulled by horse-drawn wagons, on an informative excursion across ranch property. The program attracts large school groups that come to educate students on the northeast’s cowboy past.

“There’s a lot to be said about a place where people can live traditions,” Rusty revealed.

Deep Hollow Ranch feels authentic, and Rusty and Diane Leaver feel like real cowboys. Still, as I finished my conversation with Rusty, I didn’t experience the swell of satisfaction I had anticipated. My search wasn’t over. Something was off.

A week ago, still misguidedly searching for a Hollywood Cowboy, I went to the Columbia County Fair in Chatham, New York. As I wandered through a barn full of sheep, pigs and dairy cows, I asked the



Phil Trowbridge feeding the herd at Ghent, NY. Photo by Richard Beaven.



Phil Trowbridge at work checking the herd in Ghent, NY. Photo by Richard Beaven.

farmhands if there were any cowboys around I could talk to. Are you a cowboy? Do you know any Cowboys? While I didn’t realize it at the time, one response would prove to be profound.

“We don’t have any Hollywood cowboys. The closest thing we got is Phil Trowbridge.”

Trowbridge Angus Farm is located in Ghent, New York, about 130 miles north of The City. Although Phil Trowbridge’s farm is structurally different from the conventional western cattle ranch, he doesn’t think of himself as any less of a rancher.

Of course, there are some practical differences. “We drive tractors instead of horses,” he laughed.

Onboard the tractor, Trowbridge and I circle a small pasture in search of a missing newborn calf. Unfound, we begin our second loop.

Rolling past cows and calves, Trowbridge slams on the brakes. I ask him if he’s found the missing newborn.

“No, but check this out,” he says, signaling

toward a cow and another calf a few feet away. “See anything funny about those two?” he asks.

The cow has hundreds of flies stuck to her nostrils. The calf lies in the grass, its long limbs and black body folded together in a moist, compact mass.

“That calf is wet,” I say.

“She was born an hour ago. But she’s black. Notice that? And her mom’s brown—probably a red-angus cross,” says Trowbridge.

He’s right. The cow is reddish-brown and her calf is solid black.

“That’s because she’s not the real mom,” Trowbridge explains. “She’s just the incubator, the surrogate mom. We can’t breed her because she’s a cross, but she’s a great mother. So we inseminate an egg and use her as the recipient.”

“What defines a good mother cow?” I ask.

Trowbridge stands up, leaving the tractor running, and walks over to the calf. As he does, the “mother” cow steps toward him, ominously. “She will do anything to protect her baby,” says Trowbridge, nudging the calf with his foot until it wobbles into a standing position.

“Healthy calf,” Trowbridge mutters as he jumps



Phil Trowbridge paying meticulous attention to the cleanliness of the feed stations at a Ghent, NY site. Photo by Richard Beaven.



Phil Trowbridge addresses the crowd pre-auction at Trowbridge Angus headquarters, Ghent, NY. Photo by Robert Busa.

back into the tractor.

The fact that Trowbridge uses a full spectrum of techniques to study and breed cattle— from scientific machinery to clairvoyant comprehension— reveals that, for him, ranching is more than a profession.

“A lot of people can’t wait for a week off work so they can go vacation on some beach. Well, my vacation isn’t a beach. It’s riding a horse through a field filled with cattle,” he chuckles.

Trowbridge’s passion for cattle is contagious. Many of his neighbors now own between 20-25 Angus cattle, all descended from Trowbridge Farm bulls. One neighbor pours concrete foundations, while another works as a prison guard at the local jail. Every day both neighbors come home to a house, a yard and some cattle.

“They have cattle because it’s what they want to see every day when they get home,” explains Trowbridge. “I’m just lucky that I never have to leave mine.”

The sun has already begun its descent, subtly dipping behind the Catskills. In September, each day is noticeably shorter than the last. I look at Trowbridge, wondering how long we’re going to be out here, searching. I didn’t come to Ghent to spend the night chasing lost calves on a tractor. But it’s obvious Trowbridge doesn’t care about why I’m here. Me, my interview, my article, my pathetic search for a sexy cowboy, mean nothing to him. Not when he’s missing a calf. He would spend hours driving in circles looking for one single baby cow. At this moment nothing else matters. Finding his calf is the only thing that will

make him happy. It’s his purpose. He’s driving in a circle because he has to.

Finally, I spot a tiny black snout poking out from behind an oak tree about thirty yards away. I point. He drives. We sigh.

“I feel better,” Trowbridge says, turning to look at me. “That’s one of the only things in life that bothers me.”

We sit quietly as the tractor wheels tattoo the mud behind us. Trowbridge looks at the setting sun then down at the calf a few feet in front of us. Then he slowly turns the steering wheel and the tractor starts moving again. We can go home. Trowbridge has found his calf - and I’ve found my cowboy.



Phil Trowbridge closing things up after the early morning visit to one of his Trowbridge Angus properties. Photo by Richard Beaven.