



The Reata: The Gritty World of Rawhide

Are you cowboy enough?

by Gwynn Turnbull Weaver

The years come and go, as do the fads. We watch different practices quickly gain favor and then we watch them fall from favor equally as fast. The world of the cowboy is no different. Though steeped in tradition, it still experiences the same waves of interest and the rush to innovation that all worlds endure. But, as in all worlds, there are also those tools and practices that are oddly immune to the fleeting whims of the market and the media. These are the things whose mere existence require in us a purity of spirit and a dedication to mastery of our craft. They are the unfailing barometers of truth and authenticity. The reata (or riata) rests comfortably in its respected place, and all that know it and use it well enjoy an equally comfortable position.

ITS CONSTITUTION

It is but a rope, braided most commonly from four strands of rawhide. It comes from the humblest of beginnings, pulled from the back of the oldest, thinnest cow. Oddly, it is the old thin cow that has the most to offer. Her hide is more uniform in thickness, denser in its composition and tempered with the glue of age. It is transparent, and could be candled much like fine bone china. Hers is far superior to the hide on a younger beef animal. The beef hide actually appears thicker, but its thickness has no density and its fibers are weak and woody, more apt to pull apart under stress. This point, that the poorest-looking animal will make the grandest rope, is but one of the many ironies that mark the reata and its use.

NO SHORTCUTS

The making of a reata has not changed substantially in several hundred years. An animal must be skinned, its hide stretched out to dry naturally. There are many quick fixes for taking the hair off: liming, soaking, bagging, boiling, burying and the like. They all remove the hair easily, but the effect on the hide and its oil content means that all of these “shortcuts” result in a poorer-quality rope. Manually scrapping the hair from the hide still remains the best way. As agonizing as the job is, it removes the hair from the hide while still retaining the hide’s best qualities.

Strings are then cut and split from the hide, dampened to reach the desired flexibility, then slowly braided into a 60- to 80+ foot rope. There is no machine capable of braiding the reata. And though there are modern tools such as draw gauges, string cutters, and splitters available for the preparation of the strings for braiding, the actual braiding process requires a certain level of dedication. Herein lies the first

hurdle, one of many built into the very nature of the beast.

Later the use of the reata will require a level of dedication and endurance. The building of one offers its user a glimpse into the requirements that will later be visited upon him. Patience, consistency, and desire count for a great deal in the world of rawhide.

It is true that enough money will buy you one. But it will not fix it when it breaks, it will not retrieve the lost steer, it will not mend a cowboy’s dignity. If you do not have what it takes to make at least one reata in your lifetime, then chances are good that you do not have what it takes to use one with style and competence, and consistency.

THE FEEL OF IT

Many articles are written on the reata as a work of art, studying the number of strings used, their colors or the intricacies of the braiding process, and much has been said about the famous makers, the “collectability” of different reatas and how best to display them on the wall. This article is a simple study of its use.

The new reata is much like the little calf it once was so many years ago, springy and awkward. When breaking in a reata, a cowboy can choose between simply using the rope enough until it wears smoother and pulls down into its rightful shape, or pulling it through a rounder or a series of holes, decreasing in size with each pull. Both processes take some time. Once it has reached the desired shape and flexibility, the buckaroo can begin to enjoy his rope.

The feeling of the reata is hard to describe. Perhaps the most universal comment about the feel of using one has to do with its energy. The cowboy has stated, “Short of being God, it’s the only way we can take something dead and bring it back to life.”

It is most notably heavier than the manmade material used in modern ropes, but its weight is not leaden. The weight comes from the inside of it, its very core. This is another irony of the reata, since the majority of good “using” reatas have no core. Cores mean that the strings must be smaller to retain the desired diameter. Smaller strings around a core mean a potentially weaker rope. Artificial cores wear against the inside of the reata, change its feel and shorten the life of the rope. How can it feel as though the weight of a good reata comes from its very center when it has no center? That is all part of its mystery.

The feeling and weight of the reata allows for one of its premier uses: It can be thrown very far and with accuracy, being less apt to be influenced by the breeze. Once it reaches its destination, its buoyancy and “life” help to keep the rope from falling “dead” into the ground. The ground is the killer of most loops, its mass dissipating the energy of a throw. It can pull life out of a rope much like the grounding of an electrical current. The reata’s ability to bounce and spring while still being supple enough to carry on through helps to keep the shot “alive” and more likely to produce results.

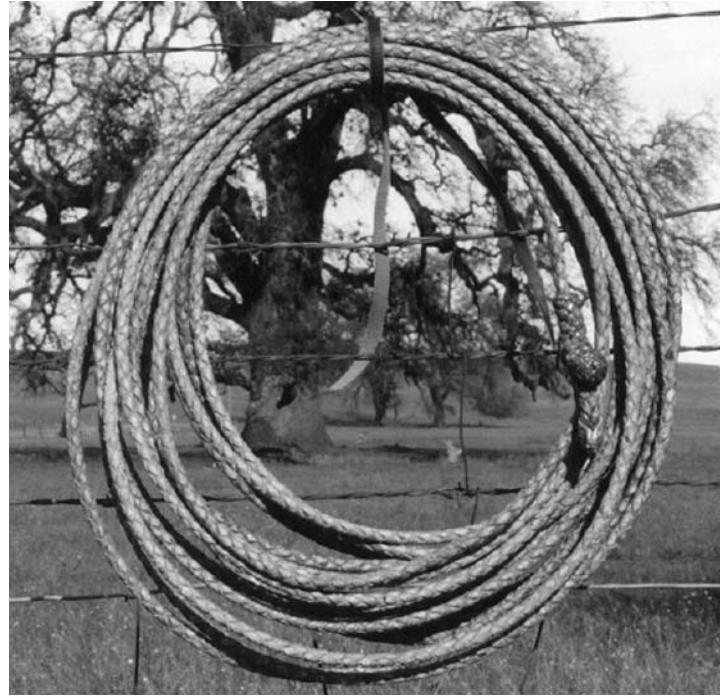
THE BREAK

Any conversation about the reata will eventually lead to a discussion about breaking one. Reatas will break. This we know. But too often, however, this has become “the signature cry of the unhandy.” It is the easy out for those who refuse to admit they do not know how to use one and do not have the interest or dedication to truly learn about cattle, what they will do in various situations and how they will respond. It’s easy to buy the hat. It’s a bit tougher to form the man beneath it.

The reata is strong enough to handle any class of cattle if used correctly, but it will not tolerate abuse. The men who use them are much the same; willing to do all that is required but only so long as they are respected and appreciated. This point leads us to the built-in “humane element” of the reata. It cannot be used as a tow chain. Interestingly enough, horses and cattle do not benefit from the “tow chain” approach.

Reatas are typically long, again 60 to 80 feet or more. The length is not only used to throw far but allows the buckaroo ample room to run rope. A large dally horn creates the surface area needed to provide friction. The amount of friction can be controlled by the number of turns a cowboy takes around it. The rope can be run very slowly and evenly or quickly if desired. An animal can be softly brought to a halt, turned or pulled gradually ahead all with the aid of running rope. The reata will not take a hard, relentless jerk and so fits nicely with the smooth, deliberate handling of cattle.

Of course, there are times when circumstances beyond a buckaroo’s control result in a broken reata. A single strand may break (thus a reata is “stranded”), or the rope may break



in two. Fortunately, in both instances the reata can be put back together and is ready to use again. Not so with the manmade ropes. The polys and the nylons that may break from wear or become fouled and snap in two are ruined and take their place on the trash heap.

A TURN FOR THE BETTER

The reata comes with its own set of requirements. It requires an understanding of horses, their minds and bodies and what they are capable of. It also demands equal knowledge of the cattle and their tendencies. Neither of these things can be faked or hidden. Some hate the reata. They hate it for the flaws and weaknesses it reveals in them. Others love it for just the same reason, knowing that the true and successful use of the reata requires real ability and with that, honesty.

All fields have their elite. The military has its Green Berets, Rangers, Blue Angels, or Seals. Hollywood has her Oscar winners. Athletics has its Olympic medalists. The cowboy world has its own distinctions. You will know the greatest hands by their silence. They prefer to speak with their actions and abilities. The reata affords them this opportunity. The buckaroos who achieve the highest level of competency often reign only above the craggy draws and endless ocean of sage. In their world of anonymity, the reata offers a humble badge of accomplishment to those determined enough to use it well.

Since the reata cannot be used successfully by those who do not have a deep and sophisticated knowledge of the real world of the cowboy, it stands unchallenged from border to border as a testament to the best of hands; a benchmark for all to measure the true nature of their skill as a cowboy.