

Joe Beeler, Cowboy Artist

1931–2006

by William C. Reynolds

On April 26, my friend Joe Beeler left us. He was doing what he loved—roping at a friend's branding, dragging calves to the fire—and while sitting in the saddle, he quietly slipped away. It is a loss that seems to grow rather than diminish, leaving a hole in humanity that will fill over time with the legacy of his art and character. Joe was more than a friend, more than an incredible Western scholar and artist. He was an inspiration. He was the embodiment of something great and kind—a life born to the West that would help give the life of the cowboy and the Indian new meaning to new generations through his art and enthusiasm. To quote Joe's friend Canadian singer-songwriter Ian Tyson, "Joe's was an epic life."

Joe Beeler was born to Jack and Lena Beeler in the Osage country of the Missouri-Oklahoma Borderlands on Christmas Day 1931 during the backsliding times of the Great Depression. Jack Beeler worked at whatever and whenever he could, but he also made time to take Joe and his younger brother, Ted, to hunt and fish and teach them the ways of nature. Joe loved it. Part Cherokee and all cowboy, Joe developed a knack for drawing the cowboys, Indians, and horses that were such a part of his world.

After high school Joe left the Borderlands and knocked around the West, working on ranches as far west as Arizona before finally coming back to Oklahoma for a try at college to further work at his art. There, at a critical time in his early artistic life, he found an important teacher in Alexandre Hogue, who encouraged him to follow his passion. Joe never forgot his teacher's guidance and kindness. After a stint in the military during the Korean War, Joe returned to his art, even more dedicated.

While working, he met the love of his life: a beautiful young woman named Sharon McPhearson, who would change his life forever. As Joe Beeler's close friend and biographer Don Hedgpeth wrote, "When Charlie Russell married Nancy Cooper in 1896, Montana lost a good cowboy, but the West gained a God. When Joe Beeler married Sharon McPhearson in 1956, nothing was lost; everything was gained. In this extraordinary union, Joe would flourish as both a cowboy and an artist, always with Sharon by his

side, and the contemporary West would be the luckier for it."

The comparison to Russell is appropriate as Joe Beeler is considered by many to be the Charlie Russell of contemporary Western art—not only for his ability as an artist but for his kindness, good humor, and competency as a human being. Joe was a man who had tremendous command of his subject and was always glad to share. His smile was contagious and his sense of humor unrelenting. His excitement was infectious and constant, and even when he was horseback, one eye was always looking for the next subject, the next patch of light, the next great moment to capture. As Will Rogers told it, Charlie Russell would have been worth knowing whether he picked up a paintbrush or not. The same could be said for Joe Beeler.

And like Russell, Beeler was driven. After a successful show at the Thomas Gilcrease Museum in 1960, he, along with fellow artists and friends George Phippen, Charlie Dye, and John Hampton, founded the Cowboy Artists of America in 1965. Over the years, Beeler received numerous awards. The CAA presented him with gold and silver awards in sculpture, silver in drawing, and an Artist's Choice Award. In 1994 he was named Arizona History Maker by the Arizona Historic League. In 1998 Canada's Cowboy Festival presented Joe with the Living Legends Award in art.

But above all the awards and acclaim, Joe Beeler valued the love of his family and friends. He could count among his friends people from all walks of life. But it was the true Westerners, people who simply loved Western life, who he loved being with and who in turn loved him.

One of Joe's great friends and mentors was fellow Western artist Joe DeYong, the only protégé of Charlie Russell. DeYong was Beeler's link to Russell, and he encouraged him to trust his talent, saying, "You have what it takes and will make the grade. While the first few years are bound to be rough spots, you will come out on top." DeYong was right.

Ian Tyson wrote that when God called Charlie Russell to his home "up yonder" he was to be in charge of sunsets because no one could paint them quite like Charlie. Well, Charlie can rest a little now as he just got some very talented help.



PHOTOGRAPHY: COURTESY KURT AND MARIA MARKUS

Joe Beeler, photographed by Kurt Markus in the Beeler studio, Sedona, Arizona, in April 1986.