Kurt Markus

PHOTOGRAPHING AN EVOLVING WEST

By William C. Reynolds

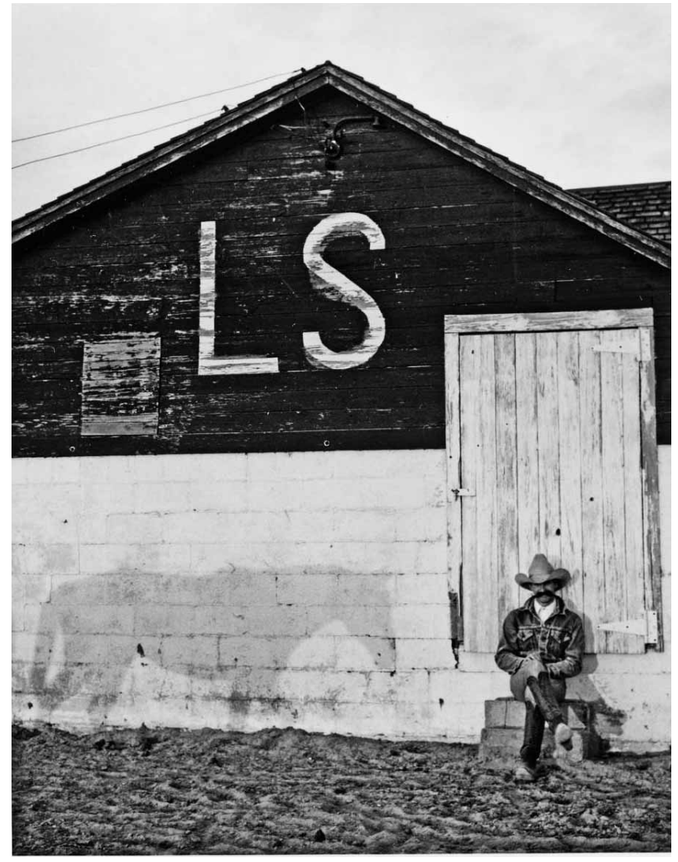
MONTANA SEEMS TO BREED A UNIQUELY appreciative citizen—appreciative in that they know they have been born into a special place. The license plates are right: It is Big Sky country. And with that big sky come the grand views of both land and life, a life that for many is tied to that land, the animals, and the seasons.

For photographer and writer Kurt Markus, his native Montana has been a great source of emotions and inspirations. His work takes him literally all over the world, but the pull to come back is always there—both creatively as well as the fact that he lives just 11 miles from where he was born. Kalispell, Montana, is world headquarters for Markus' Wild Horse Island Press, a launch point for a staggering body of work created over the last 30-plus years.

A model of versatility, Markus has exhibited his photography in galleries all over the world. His advertising work has included campaigns for the likes of Calvin Klein, Sony, Armani, Nike, Levi's, Wrangler, and BMW. His album art includes recording artists Jewel and Tori Amos. His editorial work runs the gamut—he has photographed for fashion, culture, and lifestyle magazines such as *Vanity Fair*, *GQ*, French and British *Vogue*, and *Sport & Style*. He has made numerous contributions to travel journals such as *Travel + Leisure*, *Outside*, and *Condé Nast Traveler*. His portrait work has included such diverse subjects as Robert Redford, Olympic skater Michelle Kwan, Annette Bening, Mariel Hemingway, Gary Sinise, Salma Hayek, Tommy Lee Jones, and Steven Spielberg.

No matter the subject or circumstance his assignments seem to place before him, Kurt Markus maintains a consistent intent in the work he does: to help the viewer see a little deeper and learn a little more. It is this intensified sense of realism that makes his images so distinctive. He has spent the last 30 years honing a highly developed but organic aesthetic, which he seems to seamlessly apply to whatever he is photographing.

"My vocabulary changed," he says, "both as a writer and as a photographer when I first saw a picture made by Edward Weston. His photograph [of a pepper] was at once wonderful as well as rather liberating. I realized one could take pictures of anything, if it was done with purpose. It's all in the seeing and emotion and commitment. It really was quite freeing for me. And frankly, I ultimately had found it in subjects I had grown up around—the cowboys and stockmen, as well as the land they worked on."



PREVIOUS SPREAD: *Jared Faro, Triangle Ranch, Hyannis, Nebraska* (1987). OPPOSITE: *ZX Ranch, Paisley, Oregon* (1981). ABOVE: *R. W. Hampton, LS Ranch, Texas* (1983).

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THERE ARE VERY FEW COW camps and bunkhouses around the West that don't have some evidence of the "Markus West." He has published three classic books on cowboys and stockmen. The first, *After Barbed Wire*, published in 1985, was sort of a positive follow up to *Before Barbed Wire*, a book of the great L.A. Huffman's turn-of-the-century photographs published in the mid-1950s. In *Before Barbed Wire*, Huffman exclaimed that the West was gone—fenced off with barbed wire and with the wire, a chapter closed.

Markus begged to differ. In his introduction to *After Barbed Wire* he wrote, "The West is proving to be more durable than most of us imagined, but then most of us never imagined cowboys, especially chinked-up buckaroos packing 80 feet of twisted rawhide and shot-filled quirts. Nothing I am able to recall in my 18 Montana years was preparation for cowboy culture, so I can only guess what the retired military agents must have felt when they left the blacktop for the back country West and encountered Charlie Russell placemats and jinglebobs. It's no wonder developers lost heart and their ambition to colonize the way-out West; they'd run up solid against cowboys and a special kind of logic called common sense."

The book became an instant classic and created a broad appetite in Western types for what Markus had accomplished—the graceful depiction of cowboys committed to everyday tasks. There was a sophistication or civility in the presence his subjects exuded. These were not dusty day workers but individuals with elegantly specific competencies who used those skills in almost effortless ease—no matter how bad things got. That quiet confidence is sometimes overlooked, but the images tell us to pay attention—that it's the subtle things that pay off.

Montana writer William Kittredge has often celebrated the subtle skills of those who work and help us navigate ever more complicated daily lives. "Westerners should revere hay-camp cooks and schoolteachers and florists and buckaroos and barbers and haberdashers," he says. "They did the endless work, they took care, they were the people who invented our civilization, theirs was a tradition of civility."

For Kurt Markus, the people of the West became important subjects, a subtext for the rest of America. But the cowboys weren't his only interest in his photographic career, as his first inclination was to leave Montana for the "real" world of journalistic photography and reporting.

"Don't get me wrong," he says, "I love where I grew up, but I knew I had to leave—in order to come back."

One thing that had been foremost in his mind was that when he really started taking the cowboy world to heart,

he needed to be a better photographer so that skill could be brought to the subject. "I didn't want to be a cliché photographer of cowboys, not for the obvious reason but for the reason that I didn't want the work to be dismissed as superficial. I wanted viewers to feel and see the greater story that wasn't just sitting on the surface. If I were just labeled as a cowboy photographer, it would be easy to pigeonhole my work, and that's something I didn't want."

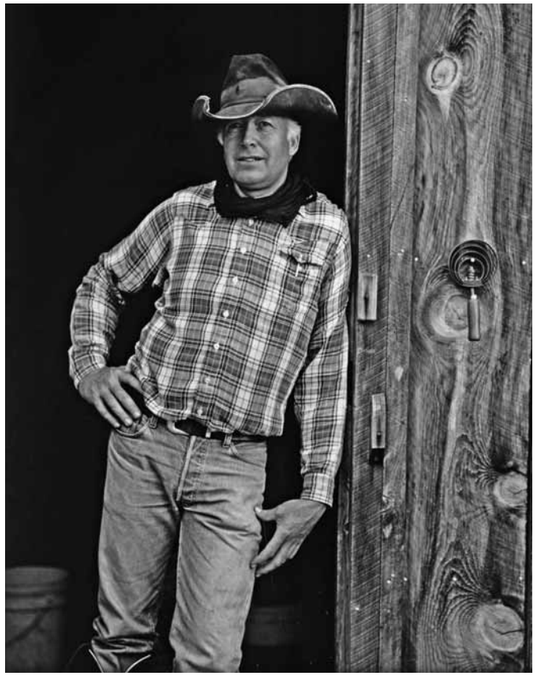
Given the body of his work, pigeonholing seems pretty far away. His attraction to the West and its people as subjects seems more about an admiration for his subject's commitment to a life many wish to dismiss as dying. Markus wishes to differ. "I was not born to ranching," he says, "I was born a daydreamer, and I know of no slot for one of those on any ranch. My consolation is a simple-heartedness I would not exchange. The greenest cowboy alive has my respect, and I have no problem whatsoever photographing people who are possessed with the determination to be what I cannot. The awful truth is I love all of cowboying, even when everything has gone wrong and it's not looking to get any better. Sometimes I especially like it that way."

HIS SECOND WESTERN TOME, *BUCKAROO,* published in 1987, celebrates the Great Basin region that includes parts of Nevada, Oregon, Idaho, and Washington. Some of this part of the West is so out-there that some of it isn't even mapped. The cowboys that inhabit the Great Basin have a unique style: flat brimmed hats, cuffs, and slick-fork saddles. They are throwbacks to the old ways of the vaquero—hence the Americanized "buckaroo."

"In buckaroo country there is a *Californio* tradition of *mañana* horsemanship, the movement of a young horse from snaffle to hackamore, to two-rein, to bridle, which, if all goes smoothly, takes years," Markus says. "There is no room for shortcuts in the system because omissions will show up later."

This style of training is time intensive—a requisite not popular in some corners of today's world. But in buckaroo country it is appreciated because the end result—a fine bridle horse—is justified. The approach is not always transferable to other aspects of life, though. One fellow in a Nevada cow camp explained it this way to Markus: "The world has moved too far to understand anyone retreating into the past."

The images in *Buckaroo* show a studied, patient approach to stock handling—a quiet pace where slow is fast. There's plenty of space out here and the stock and its care are paramount. The fewer the buck-offs the better. Markus feels as a photographer that those moments don't truly depict what the cowboy does. "The bucking horse rides, and the wrecks with ropes are flame-outs in space; *poof!* They happen, usually at a distance seen by wide-angled lenses of Instamatics that dramatize nothing and rinky-dink everything," he says.



OPPOSITE: *Maggie Creek Ranch, Carlin, Nevada* (1983).
TOP: *Brian Thomas, Oro Ranch, Prescott, Arizona* (1986).
ABOVE: *Bob Douglas, Sheridan, Wyoming* (1981).

How I Do It

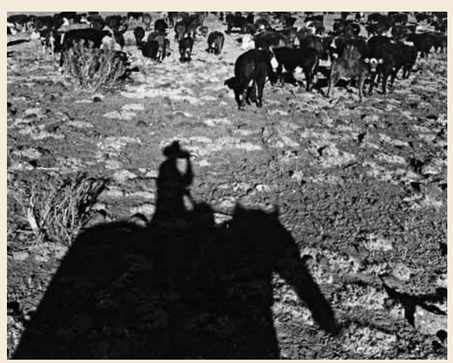
I had been using medium- and large-format cameras before I started photographing cowboys and had gotten used to the rich tones a bigger black-and-white negative produced. So I shopped for a medium-format camera that could be carried horseback in a saddlebag, and I found it in a Plaubel Makina 67. I had also gotten a Pentax 67, with 90mm and 135mm lenses, which I used when I wasn't horseback. For portraits around barns, bunkhouses, camps, and wagons, I started using my Deardorff, and later a Linhof Master Technika 45, almost always fitted with Schneider 210mm.

A shop in Bozeman, Montana, made custom cases for the two 35mm cameras I would carry over the swells of my Earl Twist saddle, in which I carried Pentax LX bodies, one with a winder and a 35mm–70mm zoom and the other with an 80mm–200mm zoom. These were my color cameras; I shot either Kodachrome 25 or 64 transparencies, all exposed in the Pentax LC auto-exposure mode.

Chas Weldon made special chaps for me, with large pockets for carrying extra film. I ordered my bedroll and range teepee from Doug Estes at Sheridan Tent & Awning in Sheridan, Wyoming; Doug later made a portable studio tent I used at rodeos. I bought a used Ford Econoline van with a stripped interior that was perfect for carrying all the cameras I began using and the personal horseback gear; I had enough room in the back to roll out my bed and sleep whenever I wanted.

All this evolved over several years. I learned how to load film horseback, at a trot or lope, in driving snow. I learned that some horses, no matter how gentle, had never been "Velcro broke," and I took care to slowly peel my camera cases and pockets open. I learned how to be ready, to stay out of the way, to keep my mouth closed and let my knowledge accumulate. I learned how to drink and laugh and live, more often than not, to excess. I learned to accept my photographs as my own, whatever they contained or lacked. It was a lot to learn.

— *Kurt Markus*



Self-Portrait, Oro Ranch, Arizona (1981)

Being there is enough. For Markus, there's plenty to see. "The cowboy West has drama, light, a rare purity. And when the sun comes up, cowboys ride out into it," he says.

Markus' passion for the West has been enhanced by inspirational figures who have contributed to his work. "I've had a number of people looking over my shoulders and they aren't all dead guys," he says, laughing.

While the influence of fellow Montanans such as artist Charles M. Russell is felt in his work, Markus credits contemporaries such as photographer Bruce Weber as a major force. "Bruce has always been supportive and has helped me incredibly. I also am influenced by the work of [photographer] Paul Strand. He really hit stride when he was 60 years old. I'm going to be 60 pretty soon and for me, it's encouraging."

HIS THIRD BOOK OF COWBOY IMAGERY IS simply called *Cowpuncher*. It won the 2000 Wrangler Award for Best Western Art Book from the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum. As in his first two books, in *Cowpuncher* Markus celebrates the cowboy at work, this time in the Southwest. There is great style in both movement and presence in the black-and-white images presented. Of this work, Markus says in his introduction, "Cowboys have worked the style angle well and long and have now, after these years, got it down good. So well, it seems, that you'd think they invented a code. A code for all to abide and enforce and pass along and give the appearance of orderliness. But out there, lurking in the sage and mesquite, are deviants who won't be classed by other cowboys, and particularly not by clerks publishing definitive studies fixing cowboy character once and for all. Cowboys are as different as the stars in the sky."

For Markus, the joy of producing these books was the benefit of time. He was on his own, not under the severe time constraints imposed by assignment work such as his still photography for movies and television (*Monte Walsh, Into the West*).

"Sometimes you feel like you're the lowest of the low and the leash can be jerked at any time," he says of such work. "You're always in the way or in somebody's line of sight. But sometimes it's wonderful. Simon Wincer [*Lonesome Dove, Monte Walsh, Comanche Moon*], for example, as a director knows what can be possible with cowboys and horses together, so it really depends. I guess the draw for me is the constant changing nature of shooting subjects in the West. The people, the land, the work, while tied to seemingly repetitive cycles, are always changing. The picture, always fresh. I learned to appreciate that as I grew up in a Montana town I thought had no consequence, and growing up, I wanted out. I went on my own circle, never appreciating the nature of circles and how they bring you back."

To learn more about Kurt Markus' books, writing, and photography, visit www.wildhorseislandpress.com.