



“High Noon”
Roundup
and
Branding





STORY AND PHOTOS BY ALYN ROBERT BRERETON

The classic Western film, High Noon, was released in black and white and starred Gary Cooper and Grace Kelly. It was shot in the wide-open cattle country of Warnerville, California. Then and now, no town of significant population is found for miles around.

Warnerville consists of rolling hills with wild grasses green in winter and brown in summer. It's just cattle country with a few local ranches spread throughout the area. An old, seldom used narrow-gauge railroad runs through the area from Oakdale, the "Cowboy Capital of the World," to the 49er gold-rush town of Jamestown. As a crow flies, Jamestown lies approximately 25 miles to the northeast. In days past, the railroad was used for transporting lumber and other cargo from the pine forested Sierra Nevada in the east to the flatlands in the west.



The railway was used in the High Noon film for backdrop and the all important train depot scenes in the Hollywood make-believe settlement of Hadleyville, New Mexico Territory. The depot is where the "bad guys" were gathering for a shootout with the newly married town marshal Will Kane, played by Cooper. His new bride, Amy Fowler, was portrayed by Kelly.

My childhood near Warnerville

Warnerville is land that I know well. I was born in Turlock, but grew up 25 miles east near the western edge of Turlock Lake. The lake is seven or so miles south of Warnerville. The location lies within the rural community of Roberts Ferry. The lake also is a couple of miles south of the Tuolumne River.

My parents moved to our home in the summer of 1947, a year before my birth. My older brother, Bill, was one year old at the time. This is where Bill and I, along with my two younger brothers, were raised during our formative years. Our closest neighbors were miles away. My three brothers and I often roamed the surrounding rolling, grass-filled fields for miles around, where coyotes by the dozens resided and wandered and often howled.

Exposed to farm labor from my earliest days, I was responsible for tending to chores around the property and working for neighbors as a paid farm/ranch hand in order to earn money for school that began each fall. I attended the Roberts Ferry Elementary School located three miles away. The first mile traveling west was along a narrow, pothole-filled road named

Davis. The next two miles along Lake and Roberts Ferry roads led to the school located just north across the old Roberts Ferry Bridge that spanned the Tuolumne River. The bridge has since washed out and been replaced by a new covered structure that remains standing today. Davis Road ran three miles from my home in the opposite direction southeast to an old-time cattle ranch established back in the early 1900s. This is where Davis Road ends.

Following elementary school, between my sophomore and junior years while attending Hughson High School, I worked for a local cattle rancher on land that bordered Warnerville. I worked to earn funds to purchase my first motor vehicle, a prized 1957 Chevy sedan. If lucky, my parents would occasionally allow me to drive to school in Hughson 20 miles away.

My wife's family, Ketcham, were early settlers of the Roberts Ferry area from the 1860s onward. Roberts Ferry was named after my wife's great great uncle, John Roberts, who ran a ferry that crossed the Tuolumne River prior to the first bridge being built. John and his wife, Ann Ketcham, also owned and ran a hotel that catered to passengers traveling from Stockton to the gold fields in Mariposa during the gold rush.

We both attended the old two-room Roberts Ferry Elementary School house that no longer stands. It was torn down and replaced by the present school building constructed in the late 1960s. My wife's father also attended the old school, as did his

four children, including my wife, Kris. The land on which the old school sat, and where the new school stands, was originally sold for \$10 by my wife's family back in the early 1900s. Its location was chosen to accommodate local ranchers' children from miles around, taking in students from two more distant schools that were to be shut down.

Yocuts were original inhabitants

Once upon a time, the Warnerville and Roberts Ferry lands belonged to the Yokut Indians where they lived and roamed, mostly residing along the Stanislaus River to the north and the Tuolumne River to the south. These two rivers are about 16 miles apart, and both rivers flow from the snow-packed Sierra in the east to the San Joaquin River in the west. The San Joaquin flows north and west, ultimately emptying into San Francisco Bay.

It was during these old days when the Yokuts traveled between these rivers to spear and feast on salmon as the fish that swam upstream each fall to the headwaters of their hatching, long before California's large, modern dams were designed or constructed. This was all prior to white settlers from the East coming to settle and ranch in the West around the mid 1800s.

Even though the time of free-roaming Yokut people are now long past, in the Warnerville and Roberts Ferry environs today, cattle ranching traditions and conventions continue to survive and thrive and proudly live on.

Roundup and Branding

In cattle country each spring, ranchers round up livestock for branding, a necessity from old days until now. Branding each year's animals identifies ownership. Female calves are kept for breeding, while male calves are castrated and raised for beef.

What follows is a brief pictorial story that depicts the life of one such rancher named Joe. During the roundup, Joe is assisted by his wife Cathy, his crew, and his fellow ranchers who are willing, even eager, to lend a helping hand. It took place during branding season early one morning last spring from early dawn until high noon, when work was done and lunch was at hand. Lunch was served cowboy style on an old wooden platform where food was placed and cowhands gathered while eating and discussing the morning's activities.

Joe is a highly skilled California cowboy from his earliest days. In the 1970s, as a PRCA (Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association) member and participant, he performed in three consecutive National Finals rodeos as a team roper and header. Today, he is a successful rancher and a well respected horse breeder. Even now he continues to halter break each year's young foals.

I met Joe by chance a week before the roundup and branding. Being a photographer with an interest in shooting images that remind me of my childhood, my wife and I were out for a drive in the Warnerville area when we came across Joe, his wife, and his crew working cattle. Of course, with camera in hand, we stopped the car, and I quickly jumped out and began photographing from a distance.



After arriving home and viewing the images I had shot, I made out Joe's name and phone number on an ear tag attached to one of his cows. A few days later, I gave him a call to seek his permission to use several images I had shot for public viewing. He invited me to join him and his crew on the day of the roundup and branding.

What follows are images of everyday cowhands as they preform their roles required during livestock roundup and branding. It's hard work, but remains a calling for those rugged individuals like Joe, his crew, and his fellow ranchers as they continue to seek and follow a life that remains free, active, honest, and true. It is a life fit for only a spirited few.

I wish to express my sincere gratitude to Joe and his crew for allowing me free access to photograph the morning's activities at my discretion. S_M



Alyn Robert Brereton enjoys photographing scenes of traditional cowboy culture in the American West, the environment where he was raised. Most of his images are shot at area rodeos in Central California. Visit his website at brerdog.com or contact him at alynbrereton@comcast.net.