



Living a Cowboy Legacy in a Modern World

By Sue Hancock Jones

Jim Ainsworth has twice been named one of the 100 most influential accountants in America, but he has spent a lifetime wanting to be a cowman and a cowboy. Some men are lifelong cowboys and others are “wannabe” cowboys, but Ainsworth hit a point in life when he determined to be a “gonnabe” cowboy.

Today Ainsworth is a cowboy author with a mailing list of nearly 2,000 followers waiting for his next book, but it hasn't always been that way. Living his legacy in a modern world took time.

Jim was 53 in 1998 when he took what he calls a sabbatical from the financial world and crossed the Brazos River on horseback beside a covered wagon to duplicate the 1918 pioneer journey of his grandparents. He credits the 325-mile trip with changing his life.

In the eyes of most people, Jim's life didn't need changing. He was a Certified Public Accountant, a Certified Financial Planner and a Chartered Life Underwriter. He owned his own firm and taught accountants and stockbrokers how to progress from pushing numbers and picking stocks to become financial planners. Jim authored four financial books and sold more than 15,000 copies nationwide of *How to Become a Successful Financial Consultant*. Featured in Forbes and Dow Jones Investment Advisor, Jim became a nationally sought-after speaker and trainer and co-founder of a broker-dealer.

Contrary to the trajectory of his life, Jim never intended to become an accountant or a financial advisor. As a boy, he only had two ambitions: be a professional baseball player or a cowboy. Even though he was athletic, he saw that half the best players were better than him and all of them were bigger, so he tenaciously hung on to the cowboy dream even though he grew up on a farm in Klondike, Texas.

His house on the farm had no running water, and he bathed in a #2 washtub. Although he had always had a horse since the age of 9, he had to ride bareback because his family couldn't afford a saddle. He was one of six children, but only three lived past the age of 2. He recalls being told the story of his mother in the hospital having and losing conjoined twins and his father in the next room expected to die any minute. His father was ill for years, and Jim watched him shrink from 170 pounds to 95 pounds. Jim was 26 when his father died and 28 when his brother was killed in a plane crash. Lack and loss came early to Jim.

He was in the ninth grade when his family moved to the Texas Panhandle. Jim went to high school in Adrian, a small town south of Channing and only a half-mile from the entrance to the historic Matador Ranch. Cowboys, ranch land, horses and cattle were plentiful in every direction. Jim considered himself one step closer to his dream.

When he was about to be a senior, his family moved back to Klondike, and Jim left the Panhandle unwillingly as if somehow leaving was the same as abandoning his cowboy dream. He graduated in 1962 from Cooper High School in Cooper, Texas, the county seat of the second smallest county in Texas.

Even though East Texas State College in Commerce was only eight miles from his family's front door, Jim assumed he would never go to college. No one in his family had ever been to college. How could he add college expenses to the family's burden of medical bills and lost income caused by the drought?

His father had another plan. “Take the chance I never had,” he told Jim. “You make the grades, keep out of trouble, do your part, and money won’t ever be mentioned again.”

Jim got a job as a drugstore delivery boy and soda jerk in Commerce and enrolled in what he still refers to as “old ET” (now Texas A&M University at Commerce). A high school aptitude test revealed a possible career in accounting, a prospect that Jim resolutely vowed to avoid. “I wanted to own a ranch, and I wanted to be a cowman and a cowboy,” he said.

After taking a few agriculture courses and discovering that “the ag department just didn’t fit me,” Jim reluctantly took an accounting course and discovered he had an aptitude for numbers. He graduated with a dual major in accounting and finance.

“I worked as an accountant at an oil company, a defense contractor, a downtown Dallas bank, a cabinet manufacturer and a construction firm,” Jim said. “I didn’t like any of those jobs. I still wanted to be a cowboy.

“I believe the deaths of my father and brother were absolutely turning points. You don’t want to make someone’s death into a positive thing, but it was in a way. God said, ‘I’m going to help you deal with this. Here’s what you need to do and what you’ve been wanting to do for years, now do it.’”

Jim left Dallas and moved back home. He started exploring his options and decided to open a Western wear store called “The Branding Iron.” At least he’d be around saddles, tack and cowboys.

By this time he had taken and passed the CPA exam, so he opened his CPA firm in a little office in the back of the store. Eventually he built a new building to house the store, renamed the store “Chute One” and attached the CPA firm to the side of the store. When the firm dramatically out earned the store, he sold the store, which is exactly what an accountant would do.

Jim spent the next few decades tied to schedules, desks and telephones. His clients were often surprised and even shocked to see their financial planner in jeans and boots in a cowboy office.

“I can’t explain my love for all things cowboy,” Jim said. “I am not now nor have I ever laid claim to being a real cowboy, but that doesn’t stop me from loving the history, the lifestyles and the stories of cowboys and ranches. And it is definitely in my DNA, passed down for three generations.”

Jim keeps a picture on his office wall of his cowboy great-grandfather with his holster and gun hanging from his waist and a large bandana tied around his neck. William Lev Ainsworth was born in 1840 and died sleeping on the ground beside a covered wagon. He’s buried in an abandoned cemetery on a peninsula of Lake Leon near Ranger, Texas.

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Jim Ainsworth teamed up with a wagon crew of family and friends for a 325-mile covered wagon trip retracing the 1918 pioneer journey of his grandparents. Some duplications—like watering the horses in downtown Dallas—had to be avoided, but he found ways to involve his entire family in the adventure. Riders in this 1998 photo are Hadley Shaffer, Marion Shepherd Ainsworth, Jerald Thomas, Jim Ainsworth, Jordan “Gordy” Brown and wagon driver Charles Horchem.

Lev’s son, Hiram Griffin Ainsworth (1879–1962), was an engineer for the Texas and Pacific Railroad until he decided to work for himself as a farmer and rancher. Because conditions were harsh and rainfall was sparse around Baird and Ranger in Central West Texas, Hiram was attracted to stories of ample rainfall, fertile black soil and large oak trees in Northeast Texas. Unlike those who had gone west before him, Hiram went east with his wife and five children in a covered wagon with two horses and a colt tied alongside.

The story of that west-to-east journey across the Brazos River was not lost on grandson Jim Ainsworth and his double cousin and best friend Marion Ainsworth. Two weeks after Jim decided to take a sabbatical from schedules, desks and telephones, Marion called and said, “Let’s go out there and do what our granddaddy did.”

“Do you have a wagon?” Jim said.

“No.”

“Do you even have a horse? And I do, by the way.”

“No, but I’ll get one.”

“Marion thought I would just laugh at him,” Jim said, “but I said ‘Let’s do it.’” So Marion got a horse and started training it for the 325-mile trip.

When they told their old friend Charles Horchem about the trip, Charles immediately signed on to the crew, which was fortunate since Charles was a top-notch chuck wagon cook with a fine Studebaker circa 1890s covered wagon resembling Hiram’s wagon. Then they worked out an agreement to borrow two matched white mules.

Since departure would be June 5 and the school year would be over, Charles brought along assistant cook Jordan “Gordy” Brown, a 16-year-old football player at Highland Park High School in Dallas. Longtime friend Jerald Thomas joined the crew, and Jim eventually made sure that every Ainsworth family member regardless of age got a chance to participate.

They dressed as close as possible to the period they hoped to recreate, including not shaving and growing beards. Jerald had to be told to get rid of his sleeveless shirt, and Gordy was told to forget the t-shirt. What they couldn’t forget were the two



biscuits lying in the wilted folds of wax paper inside a glass home canning jar.

At the time of the trip, the biscuits had been in the jar for 82 years since Jim's father crossed the Brazos as a small boy in Hiram's wagon. Today the biscuits are 103 years old and still in the same unopened glass jar. The biscuits had been given to his father, Teadon, by a favorite aunt when Hiram's wagon left for Northeast Texas. Her last words to 7-year-old Teadon were, "Don't forget me." For the rest of his life, Teadon left the jar unopened because the biscuits reminded him of the favorite aunt he left behind. Several years after the covered wagon journey, Jim published a memoir about the trip and entitled it *Biscuits Across the Brazos*.

Although the original 1918 journey began in Baird, the recreated journey began near Baird at Lev's grave in the Eastland County abandoned cemetery. The temperature unexpectedly plunged to the 40s that night as the wind off Lake Leon resulted in Jim closing every opening in his bedroll to make it through the night. "Has anyone ever frozen to death in this part of Texas in June?" Charles asked.

"I had a little notebook in my pocket where I had traced the route trying to stay on dirt roads and back roads," Jim said. Despite their efforts to recreate the 1918 trip as accurately as possible, everyone knew they couldn't water their horses in downtown Dallas as Hiram had done. Some concessions had to be made to modernity, and one of those concessions was a truck and trailer for emergencies.

The group took turns riding ahead to beg for a place to put a covered wagon, two white mules, five saddle horses, three older men and a boy. Jim found himself explaining why he looked so disheveled and unkempt. "I'd have to ride up to people's houses and say I hadn't shaved in weeks and knew I looked terrible," Jim said. "A young girl came to the door one time and said, 'Momma, there's a man at the door with a gun!'" She had mistaken the knife on his belt for a holstered gun.

Despite never knowing where they would spend the night, they met amazing people on the trail, including an experimental chef who worked with a major restaurant chain. The chef cooked a gourmet meal for the wagon crew inside his mother's huge barn complete with living quarters and a commercial kitchen with walk-in coolers and an ice machine.

While they would sometimes sleep inside barns in bad weather, most nights were spent under the stars. "I continued to be pleasantly surprised at how easy it was to arise at the crack of dawn," Jim said. "When you are looking straight up at the sky, you just come alive at dawn."

But sometimes it wasn't dawn Jim was seeing. One night he heard a rustling beside his bedroll and woke up looking in the face of a curious Longhorn with his nose about three inches from Jim's face. As the steer relieved himself beside Jim's bedroll, Jim looked toward Marion. A buffalo was standing over Marion's cot. In their search for a place to spend the night, they had found a welcoming spot on the ranch of a well-

known breeder of champion cutting horses. As it turned out, the ranch livestock also included Longhorns and buffalo.

Jim noticed more than nature on his journey. Broken beer bottles and trash in the brush sometimes made it hard to find a good place to hobble horses. And then there was the night Jim was bathing in the Brazos River and a car careened to a skidding stop beside the water. It was a woman chasing a pickup that had just splashed across the river at full speed carrying the woman's husband and another woman. Hiram never would have seen those concessions to modernity.

At a pace of 3 miles per hour, the trip across the Brazos to Northeast Texas lasted for 14 days before the motley crew arrived at the downtown square in Commerce. Jim's mind wandered to the many Western movies he had seen where silver screen heroes took even longer journeys with nothing but saddlebags. In the morning they drank coffee from a cup poured from a coffeepot and ate breakfast from a skillet. "Where did those things come from?" he thought. "Would Marion and I have been able to make the trip without a wagon?"

Still hungry for different experiences that weren't tied to schedules, desks and telephones, Jim spent five years traveling the team roping circuit as an amateur and worked roundups on big ranches. The boy who never had a saddle won four saddles and three buckles, enough for his seven grandchildren.

Working beside real cowboys and writing about his trip across the Brazos inspired Jim to continue writing until his journey as a writer and publisher resulted in nine novels (all including at least one horse and based on real events), one story collection, one memoir, four business books and several hundred newspaper and magazine articles.

Jim started his own publishing company in 2002 and called it "Season of Harvest," a title that came from an unattributed quote he saw during his financial planning business: "For the unprepared, old age can be the winter of life. For the prepared, it can be the season of harvest." After finding there was not enough time to write and publish, he turned to other publishers.

Jim's wife, Jan, has an explanation for his prolific writing in this season of harvest. "Jim's writing is about letting his family know his stories," she said. "His writing is his legacy to his grandchildren and great-grandchildren."

Jim and Jan live on the Bar Nun Ranch, which is small for a Texas ranch but a beautiful fulfillment of Hiram's dream—ample rainfall, fertile soil and large oak trees. At Bar Nun Ranch near Campbell, Texas, Jim's cowboy DNA finally found a home in a modern world. ★



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Jim and Jan Ainsworth