

## **Jack Stevens: A Little Family History**

*Written by Marjorie Parker, 2003*

Jack was born in 1934 in Thornberry, Texas (near Wichita Falls) the last of 14 kids. For some time, his parents lived by Holiday Creek in a 16-by-16-foot tent. "I only have little snatches of memory of my early life in the tent," he said, "But one thing I do remember is Pappa's music." Both his parents were musicians, his pappa a fiddler. His older brother Johnny "played everything." Jack played guitar. He related, "They'd play of a night, outside the tent, and you'd see the glow of cigarettes in the darkness as neighbors would come pull up a chair or blanket and listen to them."

The family members who lived in the tent were Johnny, J.C., Audrey, Bob and Jack. "Mom took in two grandkids, Bill and Lois, to raise and all of us lived in the tent," Jack said. Jack was about seven years old when Pearl Harbor was attacked. "J.C., Johnny, Marvin, Bill and Marvin's son went into the army. The girls left home. Marvin was the oldest, and, because of the age difference, Jack never knew him. "Before the war was over, Dad built a 2-room house there on the creek."

"Mom was old when she had me," Jack said, "And people had advised her to have an abortion with me. When Mom died, I was about seven years old." Jack didn't know his exact age, because he had never celebrated a birthday and didn't know the date of it. "It was just me and Bob at home. Bob was an epileptic. Only, we didn't know to call it epilepsy then; we didn't know Bob's fits had a name. Before she died, I remember Mom wondering out loud, 'Who will take care of my babies?' After Mom died, Dad moved to town and remarried. My stepmother didn't want us around. I figured it was because of Bob's fits. So, Bob (about 11) and I (about 8) moved back to the creek to the two-room house. We had some supplies and my horse."

The boys lived alone, with once-a-month visits from their father to bring them a few supplies and see how they were faring. "But Dad didn't support us. We were always hungry. I guess Dad thought we could get by, since we could hunt and fish."

"Bob was a great fisherman and he loved it. But I just wanted to be horseback," Jack related. "We'd trap badger and possum and 'coon. We'd get 25-50 cents per skin. The badgers were the best. That's how we bought flour and stuff to cook with, but we were always needy. We ate crawdad tails and perch."

"Bob was three years older. He had to quit school, but he could spell. I'd take cooled coal from the cooking fire and draw on the smooth bark of a split pecan tree, and I'd get Bob to write 'horse' or whatever I'd drawn under it. Even now, I still write letters with my sculptures to explain what they are. I'd draw on anything I could find – in the dirt, on a tree or anything. It was always animals, mainly horses, but I also liked to draw plows. When I wasn't trapping, fishing or cooking, I drew; I couldn't quit. My talent didn't mean much to me. It was just something I did."

"When I finally did start school, the teacher put me right by the blackboard. And there was brand new white chalk in the holder, so I drew on the blackboard with it. I drew the best horse I'd ever drawn, awe-struck at the smooth surface of the board and the gliding chalk. When the teacher saw what I had done, she took two rulers and cracked me over the hand for drawing. It made a terrible noise. I was terrified of the teacher after that."

"I didn't know anything about school. Our desks were joined by ironwork that had pomegranates on them. I was fascinated with it. How did they make pomegranates on iron? I carried green grass in my pocket to school so I could smell it all day. I wanted to be with the horses, and the smell of the grass reminded me of them. I learned to read right off the bat, but that's the only thing I learned. I could make the stories out because I loved stories."

After the ruler whacking incident, Jack was "deathly afraid" of teachers until he reached the fifth grade and had Mrs. Westmoreland at Carrigan school. "Mrs. Westmoreland got brown paper and hung it on the wall and gave me colored chalk and let me draw. I did a big cowboy and horse. Many years later, after I married, there was a sidewalk art show and Mrs. Westmoreland was there. We re-acquainted. After that, she brought some retired teachers out to my place, and she brought those brown papers I had drawn on!"

In school, Jack didn't get all the way through her class, because "I was literally afraid of people." He explains the reason was partly due to "When you are the last of 14 kids, no one pays much attention to you. I never celebrated a birthday until I got in the army!"

Because of his fear, he was often truant. "And Dad would come to the creek to get me and scare me back to school. He took me to the police station once. Pappa left me there at the station and I was scared to death. The policeman stood over me and I looked at his feet and played with my fingers. Cal Farleys' Boys Ranch was starting up at Tascosa, and Dad said, 'You can go to Boys Ranch, jail or school.'

I pretended to go back to school but I left, hitch-hiked to Olney, and found my mother's brother. He couldn't keep me but a neighbor of his, Mr. Rue, fixed up his attic for me to stay in. Mrs. Rue fixed three meals a day. I hadn't had that since mom died. I plowed for Mr. Rue. I was about 10 years old at the time."

"After Mr. and Mrs. Rue took me in, I went back and got my horse. I told Bob about those meals, and he wanted to come too. But, because of his epilepsy, I was afraid they wouldn't let us both stay there, so I left him there at the creek with our dog who always stood by him."

Jack had watched over Bob when they lived together on the creek. "I had to stay close to Bob all the time in case he had a fit. Back when we were a family, my parents had taken Bob to a faith healer. They thought the faith-healer had healed Bob and they'd brag about the healing. But I knew better. I was still having to get his tongue out of his throat. It was such a disappointment. I hated God for a long time. But really, I was hating me. There was such pressure on me. When I left Bob, I prayed that God would give Bob a home as good as mine. But two weeks after I left him, Bob drowned. Lots of times he'd fish all night long on the creek and he must have had a fit there. I almost didn't get over it. I became bitter that God didn't answer my prayer. Much later, I realized that God had given Bob the best home ever!"

"When Bob drowned, Poppa wanted me to come back up here to Wichita Falls. So, I moved up here at about age 11 or 12 and got a job packing groceries at the EZ Grocery Store on 5<sup>th</sup> street, where Greene's Furniture is now. EZ grocery was across the street from a service station and behind that was a hole in the wall – a café owned by Mr. A.A. Moser. I'd eat there. He's the one who found out about my love for horses and told me about a ranch east of town that needed help, the C.H. McClelland Ranch."

"I rode 20 miles out there to ask about it. He took one look at me and said he needed a tractor driver, but it was too dry to plow. So, I carried groceries until it rained. And rain was still dripping off the saddle house door when I went knocking on it to ask for a job driving that tractor. Then he said it was too wet! He didn't need me, and I was heartbroken. They had a silver round-topped barn and I fell in love with the place. It had a big canyon. I turned my horse around and went back to the store. He wanted me to trade my horse, but I wouldn't."

"Then Mr. McClelland talked to another ranch owner named Dub about me. When it dried up some, I went back for the third time and Mr. McClelland said I could get \$3 a day pay working for Dub and I could live with Dub for \$1.25 a day. While Dub was showing me his barn, a school bus drove up and his daughter got off. I was shaking in my boots about that school bus! I was wanting to run but I'd shaken hands on the deal, so I stayed."

"They took me right in. I felt right at home. They papered my room with cowboys and horses. I was too little to haul hay, so Dub decided I could help another way. Those 75 quarter horse mares had 50-60 colts that they would sell at weaning time. The ones that didn't sell would be working horses. They gave me the leftover colts –about 1-½ years old. I was only about 70 pounds. I didn't know anything about breaking horses."

"I started riding them. In two weeks, I had them where anyone could ride them. I was easy with horses. I could pretty well talk them out of bucking. They'd come to me. I just fooled with them. I think they thought I was one of them! I'd saddle two colts at a time. They'd buck once in a while. I'd ride them on smooth ground, then rough ground." Later in life, Jack said, "I forgot my age when I decided to try to break one more horse." The result? Eight broken ribs, a cracked pelvis and broken a collar bone.

"On the east side, where the smooth ground was, was a tank. There were bleached bones from an old bull there. I had half that old bull put together. I didn't know why I was doing it. But later, when I went broke in ranching and went into art, I saw that artists didn't have any accuracy with animal anatomy. I knew all about where all the joints

were, from putting all those bones together. It was like an anatomy class.” Then Jack added with a laugh, “When I rodeoed, I was always on the underside of the bull looking up – so I saw anatomy that way, too!”

“Mr. McClellan would take me with him when the neighbors worked cattle. I could tell he liked me. I was only about 13 then. Vic Schwartz, a champ saddle bronc rider, would come sometimes. Real cowboys would be there, and they’d shake hands with me like I was a grown man. We’d flank calves together. Later I got to go to cuttings with them and ropings in Ft. Worth and Houston. I got the rodeo bug going with them. They treated me like I was one of them. At age 15, I had the big head, because I could ride almost anything (including some bulls I’d ridden at Dub’s). And I thought I was plumb educated. I thought rodeoing was my life. I asked Dub if I could quit and begin rodeoing. He said the only privilege a working man has is that he can quit anytime he wants.”

Jack noted that all he learned watching and participating went into his artwork. “The art crowd might not go for it – it’s too realistic – but cowboys like it,” he explained. In December of 1974, at the Cowboy Hall of Fame, Jack was invited along with only 30 other sculptors from around the world. “We could take three pieces of our sculptures. So, I took “Draggin’ Calves,” “Mother’s Defense,” and “Indian Sculpture.” I didn’t win any prizes, but I sold two sculptures, and I was the only one who sold two.”

“So, about age 16, I bought a twilight blue GMC pickup, ’51 model with a deluxe cab and windows in the corner and entered into rodeoing. I had three events: bare backs, saddle broncs, bull riding. When I left Dub’s, his daughter Jackie was 11 – just an aggravating little girl. When rodeo season was over, I’d work on different ranches. I’d work in a line camp, cook in the dugout on an old wood stove. We’d warm our feet by setting a-fire a Yucca plant. I’d get back early from work and draw the rest of the evening on different things I had seen. My eagle sculpture was one of the things I created from what I saw,” he said, pointing to the sculpture. “Little eaglets were in the nest and wouldn’t jump out. It was a big nest. The adults would tear up the nest, strip it and leave only old hard sticks behind. One of the eaglets just fell off and started flying. But if eagles’ wings get out of timing, they start to fall. If that happened, the parent eagle would get under it ‘til it got right, then the parent would fly out again. I did a sculpture on that. Then I found a scripture in Deuteronomy that said, “I found him in a desert land as an eagle stirreth up her nest...” The Hebrew word means stripped the nest. God allowed things to get rough on the Jews, so they’d be willing to follow Moses out.”

“I painted things I saw. On the U Lazy S ranch, I painted ranch scenes. I did drawings while I worked – cowboys would hang the drawings in the saddle house. Your reputation on ranches spreads, so I never had trouble getting a job. I worked in New Mexico too. At one of the camps, deer would come up and I’d draw them. Everything I’d draw was in my mind. All the ranches had special meaning.”

“When I was 17 or 18, that winter a fellow cowboy who was 21, Darrell, was riding a fast horse. One of the calves turned back and Darrell shot after him to rope him. The horse tripped and threw Darrell off in front of him – smashed his head. He died that night.” No matter what the dangers might be, “I thought there was no horse I couldn’t ride.”

“But I realized that since I never finished school that I didn’t know nothin’! So, I’d call Dub back sometimes and ask him questions. Some of the boys I roped with won a rodeo scholarship to Sul Ross. But I didn’t have a high school education. I thought, ‘Woe is me!’ Then I met a bareback rider who was in the army, and he was at every rodeo I was at. He told me the army would help me with a GED. Then I could get a scholarship. But I had to join the army for three years. If I were drafted, it was only a two-year stint. I waited to get drafted – and never got drafted. I turned 19, then 20. I was bemoaning my troubles. I finally volunteered for the draft. I hadn’t registered when I was 18. I didn’t know I was a draft dodger! Instead of shooting me, they took me,” he smiled.

“I had to come back to Wichita Falls to register, then went to California for processing, Kentucky for training, a troop train to NY, then went to Germany. I was bitter with God because my plans were ruined – there were no rodeos in Germany! Why am I in the army, I wondered? But God was directing my path. I was in the armored infantry in Germany and was the truck driver. Being raised on a ranch, I could back a trailer anywhere. The cooks wanted me to bring the kitchen truck and back it into the forest where no one could see it. I could do it when no one else could.”

“I went to Berlin to walk the border, the barbed wire fence before the wall was built. I’d go to Italy and Hungary to haul refugees out and I saw beautiful things – only I didn’t know what they were until later. Like the Sistine Chapel. I wrote home that I’d seen a hay barn with paintings all over the ceiling. I saw marble sculptures – but I’d

never heard of the *Pieta* by Michelangelo. It was the *Pieta* that I got to handle! There was so much outdoor sculpture that I'd just stop the truck and go all over it with my hands."

"My name, Jack, is short for Jacob which means 'deceiver'. We weren't supposed to be on the streets of Germany without our uniforms. So, when I was off duty, I'd carry a box like I was making a delivery so I could see all the stuff and not look like I was doing anything wrong."

"When I finally came back to the States to see Dub, Jackie was 19. Boy, did she look good to me! She'd finished high school and told me the names of all the things I'd seen. Dub was crippled in his feet in a wreck before I came back from Germany. He had no ankles. He was in a wheelchair. I was crazy about Dub. His wife was killed in a pickup wreck about five years before he died."

"Dub wanted to go to the sale barn owned by Neal Collier. And when I got out there, they hired me to take a load of cattle to Fort Worth. I thought I'd be finished, but I got work in Fort Worth to take a load of hogs to Oklahoma City. It was a year and a half before I could catch Neal Collier to tell him I wanted to quit! I wanted to be around Jackie, and I never got a chance to see her. Whenever the Colliers called about a load of cattle, they wanted us to come running. They called me to go to Duncan, Oklahoma, so I asked Jackie to go with me. My truck ran out of gas. She didn't like that!"

"That's how we courted – we knew each other so well from growing up together, then going on trips together. After we married, I drove a truck awhile, then worked for Ben Whittaker in Henrietta."

"Jackie didn't like ranch jobs. She didn't like riding, either. She talked me into going to town, where I worked for a brick layer for awhile. All I ever wanted was a horse, but I'd do anything to make Jackie happy. I didn't want to drive a truck, but I did, when the bricklayers went under. Then I got a job offer for a ranch. I said, 'I can't. I've gotta be a town boy.' But they said I could run 10 cows. I told Jackie's parents about it, but not her. They came out to supper and brought it up to Jackie. This was about '59 or '60."

"We moved out to the river and put a new two-bedroom Powell house. We stayed there, and I worked for them and got quite a few cows together. Then I started tending a relative's cows and ran some more of mine there."

"Then the ranch sold, so I didn't have a job. We went to Valley View, bought a lot and a Powell house for \$5,000. I was building saddles, selling artwork so I could buy feed. I helped wrench rods out of oil wells for grocery money. I'd build fences and tend cattle on places I had leased. We finally started a family. I had 1100 acres of wheat and 300 cows. Then the bottom fell out."

When things got really difficult, Jack was troubled and felt empty. "I didn't trust God, and I didn't trust preachers after the botched healing of Bob. So, when they wanted to send a church bus to pick up our boys, I said, 'No, I'm going to take them.' I trapped myself! So, I started going with Jackie to church."

"As a child, I had made a commitment to God at a revival, because I didn't want to go to hell. At that service, they told me I was a child of the King, so I had expected great things. But the mosquitoes still bit on the creek. And if Bob didn't catch crawdads, we still went hungry. And Bob's healing didn't work. I was bitter at God. How could you be a child of the King and be in a fix like that? Our dog Rover wouldn't even sleep with me! Bob was a believer, though, and he talked to me. But nothing was working right in my life. Men would do fancy religious stuff, then I'd see them at work cussing. Nothing had changed in their lives. It was then I turned against God. But He winked at my sin for a season."

He continued, "When Jackie and I started going to church, I'd ask questions to get them to explain why I was a half Christian. But I couldn't understand their theological explanations." Nevertheless, Jack became a deacon in the church. "When I was going broke in the cattle business, I prayed for rain. But I was afraid of prayer – Bob had died when I prayed for a home for him. I didn't get the rain. I was paying a tithe on borrowed money. Going to church, paying tithes, none of it worked to get my prayers answered. So, I quit talking to preachers."

"But then a Preacher named Deerinwater came out and helped me with the cows. I'd never seen a preacher do that! He said, 'Look up this verse – John 15:7. My sons had given me a Concordance', so I looked it up. In it Jesus says, 'If you abide in me and my words abide in you, you shall ask what you will and it will be done for you.' The

Greek 'abide' means 'be a part of', to 'be in it', to 'be alive' in Christ. It didn't say anything about lighting candles or singing 'Bringing in the Sheaves' like Mamaw used to do when she cooked. Something about that verse made me realize, 'That's true.' God's word was not like the people in my life who had lied and disappointed me and who wouldn't take in Bob. I wanted truth! No more lies!"

"Joshua 1:8 promised that if I meditated on God's word day and night, then I'd have good success. But I still went broke! The price had dropped out of the cattle market, and I felt afflicted. I'd taken good care of my cattle. The cattle and tractors were gone, and I still owed \$86,000! So, I thought, 'Uh oh, now the Bible is lying too.' But I later found out it was *spiritual* success the Bible was promising."

"I finally went back to preacher Deerinwater and asked him why I didn't have the Holy Spirit. He said, 'Hogwash!' and told me about Romans 8:9. He told me I wasn't in the flesh but in the Spirit as a believer. I had His Spirit- John 14:26, John 16:13-14. His Spirit was 'the Comforter Who shall teach you all things'. So, I started memorizing scripture and learned a verse a week. I've been doing that since 1970. My artwork had been selling, in fact that was the only income we had. I realized that was a kind of Holy Spirit miracle – a gift from God."

"Jackie and I didn't want to burden God with our problems, since I'd gotten myself into it, but at church I heard Phil 4:6-7 'be careful for nothing, but in *everything* with prayer and thanksgiving make your requests be known to God.' And Phil 4:19 said, 'my God shall supply all your needs....' Psalm 119:67, 71,72 said 'it was good that I've been afflicted, because I seek your statutes...' So, Jackie and I came home that night and prayed. Then I called a real estate friend who said he'd be at my house at 10 the next morning. We had 76 acres, a corral, barn and fences. I'd worked so hard on it and didn't want to lose it. I decided to sell half of it. The next morning at 9 a.m., before the realtor arrived, two men came and said they'd read in the paper we had land to sell. But it wasn't us! In 30 minutes, though, they'd bought 30 acres. We got \$1500 per acre. That paid half my debt."

Fourteen years later, by selling his art, Jack had paid down his debt to \$12,000. "In 1983, I had a week-long show of my art in the bank that I owed the money to, and we sold \$15,000 worth of art! We had \$3,000 left – the most money we'd ever had in our married life! But then I had to pay the IRS for the money I'd made."

"Now, looking back, I see what path God had in store for me – even in my going to Germany – but I'd fought God all the way. The Bible story of the potter and the clay has special meaning for me now. As I make sculptures, I think about how God was sculpting me all through my life and trials – even when I quit having anything to do with Him. My Sculptor's fingerprints are all over me. Once I started living His plan, He has blessed my artwork so much. Today (2003) I have so many orders, I'm nearly 5 years behind! I've made sculptures for colleges, cities, individuals. And if I hadn't gone broke, I'd never had started full time on art."

Jack tells a faith story or Bible lesson with much of his art and even finds Biblical parallels in the purifying process he goes through to get metals ready. His faith, his stories, his Bible teaching and art are well known. He is an inspiration to all who know him, a fine, humble, successful artisan for God.