



# Raising the Bar

— ○ —  
THE A BAR RANCH SADDLES  
THE BEST REMUDA.

*Story by Richard Chamberlain*

**I**t was a hobby that got out of hand. Mike Armitage made his living with cattle and fueled his passion with horses, upgrading his stock sire by sire, mare by mare, crop by crop, until what started as a sideline became a standard. AQHA is recognizing the Armitage family's A Bar Ranch with the 2020 Best Remuda Award.

"A great ranch horse is one that has cow sense, physical ability and the mind to want to work with its rider," says Karen McCuiston, director of AQHA member programs, which includes the Best Remuda program. "For more than 35 years, A Bar Ranch has been producing these great ranch horses, and we are proud to recognize the ranch as a Best Remuda winner."

"It's what we do," is the matter-of-fact explanation by Mike's wife, Martha, who with sons Merritt, 33, and Turner, 28, runs the multi-faceted outfit based at Claremore, Oklahoma. "Our primary motivation for maintaining a remuda is simple necessity. Managing and marketing livestock properly requires continual movement of cattle from one pasture to the next, to the pens, to the trucks, to wherever they have to be. Our horses are tools in our day-to-day ranching operation. Our horses are not barn raised. They're livestock, a tool for the trade."

American Quarter Horses are the Armitages' chosen tool. The family operates a cow-calf operation on their headquarters ranch of about 7,500 acres at Claremore and other deeded and leased properties comprising more than 30,000 acres in Oklahoma and Texas. In addition to the horse and cow-calf segments, the operation also includes divisions for livestock marketing and agritourism.





Unfortunately, the family is taking the next step forward without Mike. An AQHA life member who was serving on the AQHA Ranching Council and was president-elect of the Oklahoma Cattlemen's Association, the 67-year-old stockman in March lost his years-long battle with cancer. He left his family an indelible legacy.

"Turner and Merritt developed their horsemanship skills at a very young age," Martha says. "Their dad always wanted to put them on horses that would protect them but that they also could learn from. So they rode some good geldings, big movers. Merritt would be on 'Big Brown,' who didn't like cows, so Merritt would get after him and make him work. Turner had 'Deuce,' a young horse that he worked doctoring yearlings. They spent many miles gathering and moving cattle on those horses."

The brothers watched and learned. Both now spend time at desks pushing paper but even more time in the saddle pushing cattle alongside the operation's other cowboys. At the A Bar, the cowboys ride their own strings of five horses. They're the kind of horses that Mike wanted to ride.

"Dad had an eye for horses and worked hard to develop it," Turner says. "Dad and Mom both grew up horseback, but when Dad got out of college and was working for pure-bred cattle operations, that was when he really learned horses, developed his eye and his ability to handle cattle horseback quietly and correctly. When we were growing up, Merritt and I sat many hours holding herd in the corner of a pasture while Dad was sorting pairs—and I mean, all day long. He knew what a horse was supposed to be, and what it was supposed to do, and he knew what he wanted. Dad was always looking down the middle of the road, rather than specializing, with Mom behind him and keeping us straight. Merritt and I want to carry it on."

### Family Time

"Mike always said his only culture was agriculture," Martha says, with a quiet laugh.

*Above: The saddle belonging to A Bar patriarch Mike Armitage carries the Best Remuda ranch's brand on the back of the cantle. Mike died in March, after a years-long battle with cancer.*

—○—  
“A great ranch horse  
is one that has cow sense,  
physical ability and the  
mind to want to work  
with its rider.”  
—○—



—○—

The brothers watched and learned. Both now spend time at desks pushing paper but even more time in the saddle pushing cattle alongside the operation's other cowboys.

—○—

Born August 20, 1952, in Shawnee, Oklahoma, Michael Lee Armitage grew up working through high school on his family farm at Meeker, where the 7-year-old boy and his younger brother Mark partnered with their Aunt Nan on their first cows.

While in high school, Mike competed at the state level in basketball and track. He earned a degree in agriculture economics at Oklahoma State University, where he was also on the livestock judging team. After college, Mike went to work as ranch manager for McGuirk Herefords at Claremore, while cultivating his skills in the livestock industry through service in the Hereford and Limousin associations, livestock publications, auctions and livestock marketing.

On January 12, 1985, Mike married OSU alumna Martha Lou Nunnallee, who grew up riding horses and working cattle on her family's V Bar Ranch in Craig County, Oklahoma, about 7 miles southeast of Edna, Kansas.

Mike and Martha's marriage was a union of two people in love, on the same page, with the same dreams and goals. Through their 35-year partnership, they were able to buy in time and piece by piece—the McGuirk Ranch, which had been part of the Rucker Ranch. That's where Will Rogers worked as a teenager after Frank and Dora Rucker established it in the early 1880s on the original Cherokee Indian Allotment. Mike and Martha purchased the land from the estate of Leroy McGuirk, who brought wrestling hall of famer Andre the Giant to the United States.

"Mike and I met in Stillwater, where he was working for the Oklahoma Limousin Association at the time," Martha says. "He was also running cattle on the McGuirk Ranch, which he was leasing and had worked on out of college. Mike was with McGuirk Herefords until their dispersal in 1978."





*The A Bar has a spring calving operation at Claremore, Oklahoma, and a fall calving operation at Ferris, Texas. The commercial cow herd has 3,500-4,000 head of Angus and Brangus mother cows topped by purchased Angus bulls.*



*Family togetherness is what Mike appreciated. Son Turner says Mike was always patient with horses and people. "He always said the next generation is an investment in the people you surround yourself with now."*



---

“Mike really liked the cattle business, but he always had a good horse—*always*,” Martha says. “He did *everything* horseback.”

---

He then managed Brush Creek Herefords in Kansas for a couple of years.

Mike left the Limousin association in 1990, and he and Martha began leasing the McGuirk place. They moved to the headquarters ranch in 1991, stabling their horses in the barn built in 1926 and living in the house dating to 1906, the year before Oklahoma gained statehood. Both sons grew up there and now make the A Bar their home, Turner with wife Sarah, and Merritt with wife Michelle and their children, Maysa, 1, and Myles, 3. Through a previous marriage, Mike also has son Kevin, who lives with wife Tana in Linn, Texas. Grandson Cole lives in Norman, Oklahoma.

Through it all, there was one constant.

“Mike really liked the cattle business, but he always had a good horse—*always*,” Martha says. “He did *everything* horseback.”

### Shelf Life

Ranch hands on the A Bar spend a lot of time in the saddle. The ranch has a spring calving operation at Claremore and a fall calving operation at Ferris, Texas, maintaining a commercial cow herd of 3,500-4,000 head, primarily of Angus and Brangus mother cows topped by purchased Angus bulls.

“We also breed replacement heifers and buy, sell and market a lot of females,” Turner says. “Everything we do is commercial cow-calf, primarily Angus and Brangus. But it’s whatever is selling. We’re kinda like Walmart: If Dr Pepper is selling today, that’s what we’re stocking on our shelves.”

They found room on the shelf for their marketing agency, Armitage Livestock, which annually sells more than 10,000 bred females, both through private treaty and auctions such as the fall and spring cow sales at the headquarters ranch in September and May.

The A Bar’s main cattle production sale is The Fall Gatherin’ at El Reno, Oklahoma, where 1,500-2,500 bred cows and heifers go through the ring, and the ranch remarkets the bulls used that year. The cattle are followed by the



ranch's horse production sale, where stock from weaned colts to 2-year-olds started under saddle go to new owners.

There are generally about 40-50 weaned babies and 20 or so started 2-year-olds at the A Bar's November sale. There is also a summer sale in June.

"We always have a handful of broke geldings, and there's always a high demand for those," Turner says. "We have a lot of young horses and riding fillies that have been used on the ranch. So with this auction, which we call the Cowhorse Classic Sale, we have the A Bar Ranch Futurity for A Bar Ranch-bred horses, where we pay \$20,000 in cash to competitors who are riding 4- and 5-year-old horses just coming into their prime."

The futurity consists of four events: trail, halter, cow horse, and cut and capture. The contestants have the option of consigning their horses to the sale immediately following the futurity.

"The futurity was Dad's vision, an opportunity to add value to our program and, more importantly, see horses used for their intended purpose," Turner says.

### Horse Effort

The performance-horse program is an integral part of A Bar Ranch, which maintains a broodmare band of 100 or so head. Virtually all are pasture bred, with a focus on strong modern mare families with conformation, athletic ability and cow sense.

"A Bar Ranch horses are used on ranches, and in rodeos and ranch rodeos, 4-H and AQHA shows, and some have even done jumping, cart driving, all sorts of stuff," Martha says. "We use very modern genetics, but our goal with our broodmare band is to retain females that keep us in the middle of the road. We want to avoid specialization."

What they are trying to produce, says Turner, is "about a 15-hand horse with cow sense, that is quiet but keen around cattle, with good withers, big solid feet that hold shoes, and the durability and heart to go all day and get the job done. We want a sweet disposition that anybody can get along with, but with the mind and keenness to handle the environment and work at the same time."

The A Bar horses come from a solid foundation.

"We've been blessed in that we didn't start from scratch on the broodmare band," Turner says. "In 2001, Dad was

*The performance-horse program is an integral part of A Bar Ranch, which maintains a broodmare band of 100 mares that are pasture bred, with a focus on conformation, athletic ability and cow sense.*

—○—

"We credit a lot of our success to good cowboys," says Turner, noting that ranch manager Mark Hockensmith has bunked at the A Bar for 25 years.

—○—

able to purchase a very substantial broodmare band from the Gilbert Ranch at Clayton, New Mexico, and that same year, we were able to purchase some of the Mullendore Cross Bell Ranch broodmare band, which were from the Marion Flynt lineage, and with them were some real nice daughters of Ima Son O Sugar, a full brother in blood to Freckles Playboy."

Then it was on to the next step.

"In 2012, because of a major drought, Dad had the opportunity to buy a cow herd off the (AQHA Best Remuda-winning) Four Sixes Ranch," he says. "We bought 1,100 head of young mama cows off the ranch at Guthrie, Texas. Dad spent a lot of time there, sorting and shipping cattle. And he spent a lot of time with the cowboys, picking everybody's brain. His thing was to ask each cowboy about the favorite horse they were riding, what's your favorite stud here, and what is the best stud that ever stood at the Four Sixes. And every time it was Cee Bars. That validated the Cee Bar Badger 71 lineage that was purchased in the Mullendore Cross Bell remuda. Descendants continue today with the same strengths and qualities described by the cowboys on the Sixes."

The A Bar has introduced other blood over the years, from sons and daughters of such stallions as Shining Spark and Miss N Cash. The ranch is continually evaluating other stallions, while its current battery is made up of Cowboys Boonlight, Cross Bell 905, Sweet Metallic Lena, Peptos Stylin Cowboy, Little Dulces Rey and Swingin High. The A Bar also has Cowboys Boonshine, one of the first stallions they raised and kept to breed.

"I want something that's going to be sound and solid all day long, that naturally knows where the cattle are, what the cattle are doing and where to be," Merritt says. "Sometimes all it takes with a good horse is a good cowboy that lets him alone to do his job."

It makes the program work.

---

“Mike and I really enjoyed meeting and getting to know these young people, and then to follow them, see what they’ve done and how they’ve furthered their careers,” Martha says.

---

“We credit a lot of our success to good cowboys,” says Turner, noting that ranch manager Mark Hockensmith has bunked at the A Bar for 25 years. “We get together, talk about sires and mares and crosses, cuss and discuss what has worked and what hasn’t, who is riding this horse and what he likes or doesn’t like. It’s a group effort.”

### Swinging Past the Fences

It’s not all work at the A Bar. Sometimes it’s music, which, like riding a horse, is all about rhythm. That’s a lesson the brothers first learned when Santa Claus, in his infinite wisdom, gave Merritt a fiddle instead of the drums he wanted when he was 6. Merritt eventually picked up a guitar and brought along his brother and some friends in a western swing youth band they called Oklahoma Stomp.

“We opened for Asleep At The Wheel, The Texas Playboys, Oak Ridge Boys, John Conlee, did a lot of stuff with Red Steagall,” Merritt says. “We played at the Kennedy Center—we were hot stuff for a few days in Washington, D.C.!”

The brothers now have their own A Bar Bunkhouse Band, but as they have assumed leading roles on the ranch, music has become more of a pastime.

“We call it ranch dance music,” Merritt says. “It’s acoustic western swing in a small setting, like Bob Wills did in the old days on ranches. We’ve played a few openers and have played a lot for western historical societies like the Cowboy Hall (the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum) in Oklahoma City.”

### Hot Irons

The A Bar Ranch is a vertically integrated family operation. Everybody has a job, and at the moment, they are sitting around the kitchen table talking about it.

Merritt manages heifer development at the Choteau

Creek division and oversees the family’s livestock marketing agency, including video marketing and advertising for the horse and cattle sales. His wife, Michelle, is in charge of agritourism at the Rock Creek Ranch, where a limestone stream, hills and wildlife provide scenic riding, fishing and tours for groups from all over the world.

Turner and wife Sarah also live on the ranch. Turner manages the cow-calf operation at the Panther Creek division and oversees the equine program, including breeding decisions, mare management, equine health, sale prep and marketing, in addition to running the futurity. Sarah rides with Turner in the field and works with Martha in the office.

The family togetherness is the kind of thing that Mike appreciated.

“Dad was always patient, with horses and people,” Turner says. “He always said the next generation is an investment in the people you surround yourself with now, whether that’s an intern or an employee who’s going to be here for the next 30 years. We hope to carry on that tradition.”

Investing in the next generation prompted Mike and his family to help create the Oklahoma Cattlemen’s Foundation Internship program, which now in conjunction with AQHA allows college students the opportunity to learn from hands-on work at the A Bar Ranch. The program is open to college juniors and seniors, who can apply by March 1 each year through AQHA, OCA, the A Bar’s Facebook page or the website at [www.abarranch.com](http://www.abarranch.com).

“Mike and I really enjoyed meeting and getting to know these young people, and then to follow them, see what they’ve done and how they’ve furthered their careers,” Martha says.

She pauses and again laughs quietly.

“We have a lot of irons in the fire,” Martha says. “Mike always said our horse operation was a hobby that got out of hand.”

It raised the bar. **U**



*Martha Armitage says the family's primary motivation for maintaining a remuda is simple necessity. Managing and marketing livestock properly requires continual movement of cattle. Their horses are tools in the day-to-day ranching operation.*