



Val Geissler

Ben Masters, the cowboy who launched *Unbranded*, enlisted a few of his friends

Good judgement comes from experience. Experience comes from bad judgment. And sometimes that bad judgement can be pretty horrific!" - Val Geissler, cowboy poet, horse trainer, Unbranded mentor and support crew.

I first met Val on a pack trip into Hawk's Rest three years before the Unbranded ride began. Hawk's Rest is a mountain sitting above the confluence of the Yellowstone and Thorofare rivers deep in Wyoming's Teton Wilderness. At 31 miles from the nearest trailhead, Hawk's Rest is the furthest location from a road anywhere in the lower 48. Grizzlies roam, wolves howl, cutthroat prowl the banks of rivers, beavers work feverishly, eagles soar, and the largest elk migration in the world passes through the Thorofare, hence its name. It's a wild place, as wild as exist today, and visiting is like stepping back in time, seeing the world unmarred by the footprint of man, and realizing your insignificance.

At the base of Hawk's Rest, nestled into the pines above a beautiful meadow overlooking the Yellowstone river, sits a tiny Forest Service cabin. Val and Cindy Geissler are caretakers of the cabin, volunteers for the Forest Service, and live there for three months a year in case of backcountry emergencies, to take care of trail crews, and to assist the public in case someone gets lost. If entering the cabin below Hawk's Rest makes you feel as if you're stepping back into time, meeting Val is verification.

A well-worn cowboy hat, sitting atop gray hairs that haven't been combed in decades, provides shade for a face deeply wrinkled by 70 years of hard work in the sun and wind. Below bushy eyebrows are two bright blue eyes that have seen sights that will never be seen again. Val's eyes are always dancing, surveying his surroundings, and when he makes eye contact, which he always does, you can't help but feel his kindness and love for life. Within five minutes of meeting Val, there is a 90% chance that he calls you pard, has sang you a song, poured you a cup of coffee, and has stolen the heart of every female within listening distance! He's the most fascinating man I've ever met.

Val Geissler was born in San Francisco and raised in rural Northern California where a strong buckaroo culture exists today. Val's carried many titles over his life: army officer, horse trainer, horse trader, horse breeder, mustanger, rancher, bronc-rider, archaeologist, roper, cowboy entertainer, poet, packer, loan shark, destroyer of invasive species, hunting guide, camp cook, outfitter, and he's broken more hearts on the Western Landscape than John Wayne! Val has sang for presidents, visited every state, and has roamed across the country in search of new adventures, better horses, and folks to entertain.

When I first approached Val about the sanity of my idea to adopt a whole string of wild horses, train them, and ride them across to the country to inspire wild horse adoptions he replied, "Well son, there ain't nothing we can't do and damn little we won't try." The "we" in his statement indicated there was no way he would be left out of such an adventure. When I asked him if he could bring down a few well trained mustangs for the cameramen he said absolutely.

So in February of 2013, Val loaded up Bear, his old truck, with his horses Smokey, Luke, Tuf, Ford, and JR to drive from Cody, WY to South Texas to help us prepare for the Unbranded ride. Val spent a full month helping us train and accustom the horses to tarps, lifting feet, carrying weight, and another million scary stimuli to green horses. Although he did indeed teach our horses, he was really there to teach us. We learned how to tie a horse