AMERICA'S HORSE

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READ ABOUT THREE
HALL OF FAMERS'
EXPERIENCES WITH BIG
DREAMS AND HARD WORK

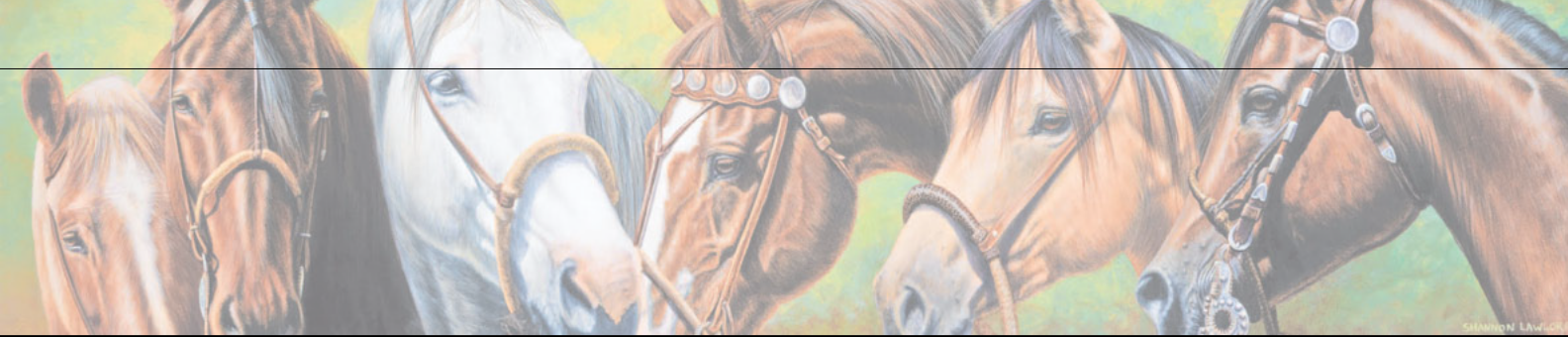# Ways *of the* West

Western artist Shannon Lawlor

finds inspiration in her background and her back yard.

By Holly Clanahan

PICTURE SHANNON LAWLOR IN KINDERGARTEN, DOODLING ON her school work.

"Every page has a crayon mark, and it's got ears and a tail of some sort on it," she says. "The desire has always been there."

If her life were a scrapbook, you'd find subsequent pages of her riding and showing the horses her parents always kept on the outskirts of the Manitoba town she grew up in. Then her working in a feedlot and as a vet assistant, as well as studying and working with a natural horsemanship clinician. Then in 2005, things came full circle when Shannon stepped out as a full-time Western artist, painting the vaqueros she admires, as well as Texas cowboys and other embodiments of the West.

"I feel like my whole life was leading up to this," she says. "It is a solid background for what I'm doing now."

Now, from her studio in Nanton, Alberta, Shannon works with acrylics, graphite and oil to portray subject matter she is infinitely familiar with.

She takes inspiration from her own background riding colts and watching them gradually transform into the finely tuned bridle horses the vaquero culture is famous for; from the rope artistry of a Mexican charro, who reminded her of the passage of knowledge from Spain to Mexico and north to the vaqueros of California; and from a trip to Texas to experience a different kind of skill set.

"I'm intrigued by many different types of horsemanship that I see because of the knowledge gathered in regard to the horses," she says. And of the vaqueros, Shannon says, "I am so appreciative of all the gear and the ability and the depth of the history. I felt compelled to paint and put it out there for the rest of the world. But I appreciate all disciplines of good horsemanship, and those cowboys in West Texas … the geldings they ride are some of the best you'll ever see."

For the past dozen or so years, Shannon has taken art lessons with Calgary wildlife artist David Kitler, honing her technical skills and understanding of color. She credits him with encouraging her to think outside the box – challenges that have resulted in interesting mixed-media pieces and "studies" that combine portraits with bits of handwriting, detailing the subject's history

The true bridle horse or reined cowhorse is considered the epitome of the Western Horse, as seen in this study of a very fine steed that is 'straight up in the bridle' This mare was part of the Gang Ranch cavvy from the Chilcotin region in central British Columbia, Canada. She is seen here packing a traditional California style spade bit along with a fine silver mounted browband on the headstall. Along with the old style leather string holding the bosal in place.

Shannon Lawlor

Bridle Horse Study - August 2010

or even Shannon's impressions the day she chose to paint that subject matter. She has completed paintings of every stage of a bridle horse in the making – the snaffle, hackamore, two-rein and the ultimate straight up in the bridle.

"As an artist, I have to try different things like this," she says of the experiments. But although she may test different waters with her techniques or presentations, she always holds true to the thing she knows: the horse.

"You can't unlearn that," Shannon says of her horsemanship, "and you really can't teach that to somebody who wants to put that into their paintings, let's say, unless they've had the experience themselves. People in the know in the horse industry, know that I know."

But Shannon, busy with studio work and travel to art shows in both the United States and Canada (including the upcoming Calgary Stampede), doesn't feel she has the spare time to keep a horse of her own. So how does she keep her feet touching the waters of the horse world?

"I have the best of both worlds," she explains, smiling.

Western singer Ian Tyson (see Page 24 for a story on Ian, including photos taken by Shannon) is her neighbor. He and other friends often "just call me up and ask me if I want to go gather cattle or ride. I guess because I've done a lot of riding, they know I'm capable. They throw me on whatever horse they have, and I'm ready to go. I don't own any at the moment, but I have access to them."

Shannon started the last two Quarter Horse colts that Ian raised, and this spring, she was excited to go help another friend start a colt under saddle.

"It's my joy," she says of working with young horses. "Again, I don't have to have one; I can just go and help one of my friends." ◘

Visit www.shannonlawlor.com *to learn more.*

"WORTH THEIR SALT"

SHANNON LAWLOR