

THE OUTLAW

He was a tall fellow, extremely muscular and very black. Sauntering along the fence rail, he kicked up a little dirt, keeping one half-closed, dark brown eye on the gathering of men who were watching. Staring. He knew that some people thought he was a killer, but he was mostly an outlaw, and had been from an early age up in Canada.

It was true that he distrusted everyone he met, however there was one person with whom he was gentle and calm. She was my cousin, Cleta Elliott, and she claimed he was quite a sweetheart who never gave her a moment's trouble. But there was one other person who said the same thing; my father, who met him once and reported that "he was peaceful and loved children." Maybe it was just his terrible reputation that followed him across the country? Maybe, all he craved was a little admiration and respect?

Cleta lived on the family ranch with her husband, Verne. He was a Colorado cattleman and rancher, who provided rodeo stock for performances all over the United States and Canada and every cowboy on the rodeo circuit knew them. The Elliotts were also well-known for introducing the dangerous sport of Brahma bull riding. Born in 1890 in Platteville, Colorado, Verne competed in local rodeos as a young man. Never one to brag about his own fame or accomplishments, those who knew him said he was rather a quiet man with old-school manners. Early photos show him in baggy pants and muddy boots; his shirtsleeves rolled back, a well-worn Stetson on his head. Many cowboys liked to wear flashy outfits, and perhaps Verne did too, but for interviews and photographs he looks every bit the businessman, wearing a vested suit, a high collar, tie, and gold pocket watch, along with his cowboy hat. Verne was fearless, once riding a wild buffalo named Tornado at top speed, hollering and waving his hat at the crowd. But what he really loved were the bucking broncos and he rode many, all over the country. One notorious horse named Steamboat was evidently a particular challenge, not only for Verne, but for every rider who tried to beat the thrilling buckler. Old Steamboat was known for snorting so loudly during competitions that he sounded like a giant steamboat chugging up the Mississippi River, which is how he got his rodeo name. (Allen True, the artist who is noted for painting the murals in both the Wyoming and Colorado Capitol buildings, was commissioned to design the Wyoming logo featuring Steamboat. His bucking horse and rider image appears on the state quarter, on state license plates, and as the logo for the University of Wyoming.)

Verne's career ended in 1917, when he was violently bucked off his final horse at Cheyenne Frontier Days. He was injured and must have decided his backbone had taken enough punishment, because he retired from active competition. He and a cowboy friend, Ivan Jack, hired on as organizers and assistants to the promoters with Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. Seeking a new career, Verne was instrumental in successfully staging several early rodeos. He went on to produce shows around the world, including those at the Calgary Stampede, Cheyenne Frontier Days, and the Fort Worth Rodeo. Crowds weren't just loving the sport of rodeos in the wild west ... Verne introduced rodeo to the enthusiastic audiences in Madison Square Garden in 1922, and Soldier Field in Chicago. Verne and his long-time partner, Eddie McCarty, produced the first National Western Stock Show in Denver in 1931.

Because of his growing reputation and experience, various rodeo stockmen constantly called upon him to evaluate one horse or another, hoping to find a buckler with star potential. According to an interview some years later, Verne said he received calls from all over the country asking him to "look at Uncle John's plow horse that nobody can ride" or "come see about Joe's cousin Suzy's mustang that took to pitching and there ain't a man alive who can top him!" Verne claimed that getting messages like that were not at all unusual. He always tried to take a look, but unfortunately most were dead ends. Finding a good, tough, mean, fighting bronco who could perform was difficult.

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Always keeping an eye out for rodeo horses that showed lots of spirit, Verne liked the ones who bucked with murderous intent, and demanded respect from the cowboys who rode them. Like the most famous broncos, showing off a bit to the audience by prancing around the performance arena was a plus! Even today, the same attributes apply to a buckler who waits patiently in the chute until it swings wide open with a cowboy clinging to his back, then charges forward like a fiery lightning bolt, angry at the world.

On a steamy afternoon in 1928, Verne was leaning on the rail at the Fort Worth Rodeo Arena eyeing a huge, coal-black horse. This massive animal was part Thoroughbred and part Percheron; thirteen hundred pounds of power and attitude. The word around the barns was that no rider had ever lasted the required ten seconds in any rodeo competition, ever. (There was a persistent rumor that a cowboy in Alberta had a clean ride on this horse, but there was never proof.) Four well-known cowboys had all bet Verne they could ride this buckler and not “get dusted.” All four rose to the challenge, immediately hit the dirt, and lost their money. Each man told how this black demon had flipped his long mane, leapt straight up in the air, and violently twisted until they were slammed to the arena floor within a few seconds.

Now in Fort Worth, several other tough, experienced riders lined up for a go, confident they could win the prize money. With wagers of more than \$2,500 on the line and a grandstand full of roaring, raucous spectators, the black horse burst from the chute like a furious cyclone, spinning with a vengeance. Three spectacular leaps were all it took until each poor cowboy hit the dirt, visibly dazed but unhurt.

His name was Midnight. Some called him The Devil, Killer, The Black Terror, The Satan Horse, and worse. Everyone called him The Outlaw. According to his growing reputation, Midnight was not only powerful but he was mean and distrusted everyone he met; a bad horse with an evil bent. Many cowboys tried to avoid pulling his number on rodeo day because they felt it wasn't fair to not only lose their entrance fees but be cheated out of the prize money. No cowboy could win riding this bronco. Insisting that no man was his master, Midnight turned out to be a champion; the greatest and most legendary bucking bronco in western history.

A deal was struck, Verne paid \$250 for what he thought might be a very overrated horse, and became the owner of a bronco who was becoming more than a little famous. As they toured the country, Verne noticed something unusual about Midnight. Even though he was known to be extremely temperamental and refused to be saddle-broke, he frequently seemed to have a little fun in his own way! Professional rodeo clowns and the “pick-up guys” who protected the fallen cowboys never had to worry about Midnight hurting the riders when they were down. After he threw his rider, Midnight would dance a little for the audience and pause for a look back at his adversary spread-eagled in the sand, as if saying, “there's no hard feelings, pal, it's just the rodeo and we'll meet again.” Then he would trot toward the exit gate, prancing like a show horse, taking his bow.

One widely circulated story in the newspapers at the time told of a kid in Nebraska who was thrown and knocked unconscious. While the crowd screamed in fear, not knowing what this crazy horse might do, Midnight simply stopped bucking, trotted over to the downed cowboy, nuzzled him a little and stepped over him, then slowly walked out of the arena. Still the Champion. A gentleman with great respect for his adversary.

It was on to numerous rodeos, all over North America; the Calgary Stampedes, Cheyenne Frontier Days,

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Pendleton Round-ups, Texas Rodeos, The National Western Stock Shows in Denver, and later, even Europe. There were other famous bucking broncos in the 1920's and 30's, including Powder River Gray, Invalid, Crying Squaw, Satan, Tumbleweed, Hell's Angel, and Broken Box, to name a few, but Midnight was always the star of the show.

Another coal black horse resembled Midnight, who was also foaled in Canada but slightly smaller. A stablemate of Midnight, his original name was Tumbling Mustard and cowboys would say "he sure ain't Midnight, but about five minutes away." So, the name Five Minutes to Midnight stuck. But Midnight was the horse who appeared in movie newsreels, comic books, newspaper articles, the Believe It or Not column, and even a few children's books. One author wrote a highly fictionalized story about a successful cowboy who beat Midnight. It's unknown if the book was widely sold, but many rodeo fans felt he wrongly invoked Midnight's name just to sell an untrue story!

During his lifetime, Midnight bucked all over the world, including the Brussels World Fair, but his career was relatively short-lived. After his last Cheyenne Frontier Days Rodeo, he retired at the age of eighteen to his pasture on the Elliott Ranch. However, he did perform in a month-long rodeo show at the White City Stadium in London in 1934, thrilling his western-loving, British fans. Verne and Creta eventually accumulated more than \$250,000 worth of rodeo stock (about 500 horses and cattle) and several other notorious horses including Black Powder.

Midnight died of old age two years later and was buried under an engraved marble marker on the Elliott's ranch. According to his obituary published in the Denver Post, "*The world's champion bucking horse was buried today, and he will never feel the weight of a saddle or an erstwhile rider ever again. He has lived out his life happily munching grass and snoozing in the sun. On November 5, 1936, a challenger he couldn't beat finally won, as death climbed aboard and rode him to a standstill.*"

Cowboys from all over collected funds for his monument and soon the Elliotts received a fitting epitaph for their horse penned by a Colorado admirer, Senator Chris Cusack:

Under this sod lies a great bucking hoss, There never lived a cowboy he couldn't toss.

His name was Midnight, his coat black as coal, if there is a hoss heaven, please God rest his soul. - A Cowboy

Fans all over the world mourned Midnight's death, and honored him at rodeos with a moment of silence. In 1981 Midnight was the first horse to be inducted into the Canadian Professional Hall of Fame. His gravesite became just as famous as he was, until 1995, when the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City had Midnight's remains exhumed and interred in the garden, along with Verne Elliott's other famous bucking horse, Five Minutes to Midnight. Buried among them on "The Trail of Great Bucking Horses" are other illustrious rodeo animals, including "Steamboat, the Symbol of Wyoming," and the legendary Tornado, the enormous rodeo bull owned by cowboy Jim Shoulders. A sculpture of Buffalo Bill astride his favorite horse, Brigham, rises over thirty-three feet tall and presides over all these gravesites (which William F. Cody would have loved!) There is also a bronze sculpture of Midnight in the Exhibition Hall in Fort Worth, Texas.

The biggest change in bronc and bull riding today is the required helmet that cowboys now wear to protect their heads from injury, although they still have their share of broken bones, concussions and very stiff bodies after a rodeo.

Also different is the time requirement for a complete ride which has been reduced to eight seconds. Traditionally, cowboys hold on to a bucking bronco for dear life with only one hand on the reins, and the other held high over their

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heads for a full eight seconds. A professional cowboy would never “pull leather” (grasp the saddle horn.) Midnight would be proud of all the new rodeo riders and all the buckers who have come after him, dedicated to “giving ‘em a good ride.”

Verne Elliott was a Colorado pioneer whose contributions to the growth of the sport of rodeo are immeasurable. He initiated indoor rodeos and designed and installed the first bucking chutes, still in use today. He produced exciting rodeos, including the first National Western Stock Show in Denver, still one of the largest and most celebrated of modern rodeos. He mentored many famous and not-quite-famous cowboys and cowgirls through the years. Verne was honored by the Navajo Nation, and initiated into the Navajo Indian Tribe of Arizona in 1936. He died in 1962 at the age of eighty-one and was inducted into the Pro Rodeo Hall of Fame in Colorado Springs in 1990.

Verne and Creta Smith Elliott are both buried in a cemetery near Platteville, Colorado. The inscription on Verne’s tomb reads: “*Acalthe Binantai, Mr. Head Cowboy*”. Creta’s reads: “*A kind and loving wife who worked diligently beside her husband in his many years of rodeo life. A trouper who will never be forgotten in the annals of the rodeo world.*”

EPILOGUE

Remember I mentioned that my father had met Midnight? He is now 95 years old and tells me that Uncle Verne always gave him tickets to the Stock Show when he was a child. Evidently my grandmother outfitted her little western dude from head to toe and took him out to the rodeos, but he wasn’t impressed. He thought “the whole cowboy thing was a little boring!” He visited the Elliotts at the ranch shortly after the great horse was retired, watching all the horses contentedly grazing in the pasture. Then, Dad and his younger brother were lifted onto the back of a very tall, black horse and allowed to ride around the corral. He says, “his was called Midnight ... and he really liked kids. He was very friendly and we weren’t at all afraid!” It was only many years later that he realized just how famous his Uncle Verne’s big, genteel horse actually was!

Verne Elliott once described Midnight as a killer horse nobody could love, let alone ride. In truth, Midnight was actually halter broke and very easy-going when not expected to perform. Reportedly, even the young sons of rodeo hands could lead him into the bucking chutes for the riders. But, two small boys in my family managed to do what no cowboy had ever done before; ride the inimitable Midnight for more than ten seconds. And, they didn’t even get dusted!

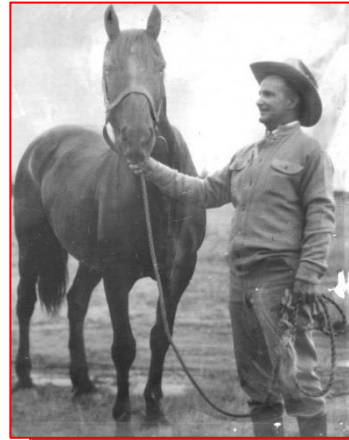
My sister Lynne and I, fourth-generation Coloradans, are cowgirls at heart, and we ride whenever we have the chance. Sometimes when I’m in the saddle (*not* at rodeos and *never* pulling leather!) I think about Midnight, leaping, kicking, bucking his heart out, and so determined to win. I like to remember him as a proud warrior, a horse who fought for his independence, yet respected the rodeo way of life. He is a “relative” to admire and a brave animal whose illustrious legend lives on today. Not many folks can claim to be related to an outlaw, but I kind of like that idea!

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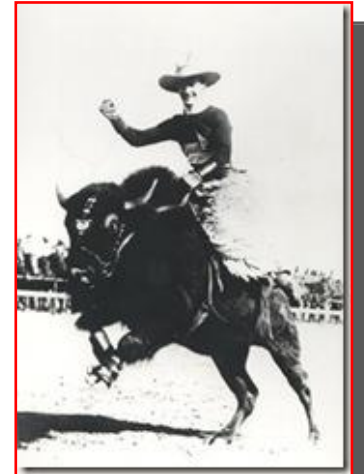
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“Midnight, world famous bucking bronc, loses another rider”
The Denver Post



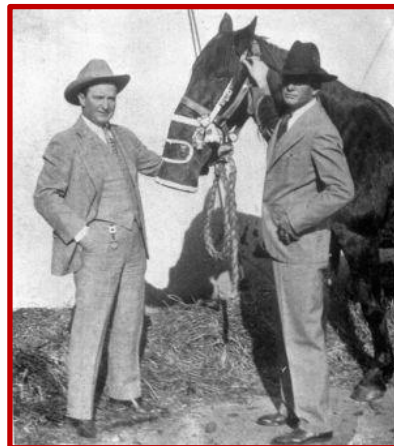
Midnight and Verne Elliott



TORNADO and Verne



Steamboat
Cheyenne Frontier Days Rodeo



*Verne, Ed McCarty,
and Midnight*



Wyoming
State Quarter



Clayton Danks, from Nebraska, is believed to be the inspiration for the iconic logo of a cowboy on the “Bucking Horse and Rider.”

At the Cheyenne Frontier Days Rodeo in 1909, Danks rode Steamboat.

Foaled on the Tyrrell ranch in Wyoming (near Chugwater) Steamboat had an illustrious rodeo career and a huge fan-following. When he died, he was the only horse honored with a gravesite on the Frontier Park grounds in Cheyenne. In 1975, Steamboat was inducted into the National Cowboy Hall of Fame in Oklahoma City. He was also inducted into the Pro Rodeo Hall of Fame in Colorado Springs in 1979.

Allen True, the renowned artist (noted for painting the murals in both the Wyoming and Colorado Capitol buildings,) was commissioned to design a logo featuring a bucking bronco and rider. Steamboat was reportedly his muse and model.

Today, True's image appears on the state quarter, on state license plates, and as the logo for the University of Wyoming.

Fun Twists and Turns in Research—the Quest

Some years ago, I started wondering about a famous bucking bronco named Midnight. Evidently there was a family connection with this horse, and I remembered my Dad mentioning him, as well as an uncle who told me about visiting Midnight at the Elliott ranch when he was a child. He had sent me a newspaper clipping from the Denver Post (c. 1950) which featured Midnight in the Believe It or Not column. I sort of filed it away and added it to my “someday-to-do list.”

My father, who is 95 years old, once said he visited a big, black horse named Midnight at a ranch near Johnstown owned by “Uncle Verne and Aunt Cleta.” He was always given tickets to the National Western Stock Show in Denver, and he remembered that his mom dressed him up like a little cowboy (which he disliked) and took him to the rodeos that he thought were boring. (To this day, he has never ridden a horse or wanted to attend another Stock Show.) My elderly uncle told me there was also another rodeo star named Five Minutes to Midnight, but I knew nothing about him, either, so this was one of those puzzles that frequently pique my curiosity.

Last year we visited dear friends in Oklahoma City (Betty White, and Frank and Liz Muskrat) and they took us to the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum. This is *the* premier museum for all things western, one of the most fabulous museums in the country. We wandered outside to a sculpture garden dedicated to various famous rodeo animals. Immediately, we spotted an engraved headstone for ... Midnight! A headstone nearby was for Five Minutes to Midnight. There were tributes to several other horses, and even a happy treat when we spotted Buffalo Bill Cody's sculpture, because we kind of claim him as ours, here in Colorado.

We returned home and I told Kathy Donahue, my friend in Idaho Springs, about our trip. Shortly afterwards she appeared on my doorstep with an original copy of a Scholastic Reader children's book, called Midnight, Champion Bucking Horse. It was published in 1957 and cost 35 cents. Also, Cleta's name had become “Creta.” Kathy had been sorting out her bookcase, found this little book, and encouraged me to find out more, suspecting there was some sort of fun story here! At least here were some clues? A few weeks later Liz visited us, with an article in hand from the OKC 405 Magazine about, of course, Midnight! Another clue? Wondering about this guy was starting to keep me up at night. I was learning a lot about him, but almost nothing about my relatives who supposedly owned him.

As all genealogists understand, there is a moment where a solid decision is made to just sit down and figure it out. I knew I must solve the mystery of my relationship to a horse, *or it would drive me nuts!*

Here is what happened:

- I knew Verne Elliott's name, but had no idea how he was related, as the Elliott name is not anywhere in my family notes or history. I double-checked all my genealogy files. No Elliots.
- Numerous articles online mention Midnight, owned by Verne Elliott, but included nothing about his personal life or any relatives in Colorado or elsewhere.
- Searches for Verne Elliot in the Ancestry program linking my family surnames were unsuccessful. I tried numerous spellings and versions of “Verne” and “Creta” and found nothing. They did not appear on any Census. No records. Nothing.
- I only knew for sure that they had lived in Platteville or Johnstown, CO. Spurred on but not discouraged, I tried to think logically and invoke the many professional genealogists and speakers I have enjoyed at Foothills Genealogy Society in the last few years. I finally went to the Find-A-Grave website, which eventually pointed me to the Mizpah Cemetery, and ... Voila! (Those of you who chase genealogy research and are reading this, well know that special feeling of BINGO!)
- I see that twenty-seven Elliots reside in this Cemetery. There is Verne, who is actually ALVA VERNETTE ELLIOTT and Creta, who is actually LUCRETIA GRETA SMITH. At last, I knew who they were. A little more matching and I had the whole family, including maiden names. More digging was needed, though, because I still didn't know *how* these Elliots were related to me.
- When I eventually opened the 1936 Social Security File for Creta Smith Elliott, there was a BESS BUZBEE, listed on Creta's record. Creta and Verne Elliott. And a BUZBEE?? My maiden name! My family? Bingo ... or not?

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- Back to the 1940 Census, where a Bess E. Buzbee was living with the Elliots, age 71, a widow. I searched every possible record for a Bess Buzbee. Nothing. Since we have so many Elizabeths in our family (including me) and knowing how we love nicknames, I tried Beth, Betsy, and finally Elizabeth and Elisabeth Buzbee. No Bess. Nothing.
- Finally, in the wee hours of the morning, I just gave up and went to bed. After a restless night and three cups of coffee, a tiny little nudge of information slid out of my brain. (My Armenian friend, Elaine, is quite spiritual, and believes that our ancestors visit us from time to time with messages — usually just at the edge of wakefulness.) I now believe her. Because it had happened to me before, and it had clearly just happened again. Possibly my middle name, Elizabeth, had something to do with all this misty thinking? Ha! Still a stretch. Back to the computer.
- My next thought was “Whoa!” My great-grandfather Buzbee had a sister named Elizabeth; also, called “Aunt Sis”, “Lizzie”, and “Liz”, but never “Bess.” I thought she had married someone named SMITH, but I never knew what had happened to her, other than she lived in Denver, and I had never pursued her family ties.
- After only two quick minutes I put it all together, finally making sense of it. Elizabeth “Bess” Buzbee Smith, sister to my great-grandfather, had a daughter, Creta Smith. She married Verne Elliott and they were the owners of the famous horses named Midnight, Five Minutes to Midnight, and several others.

So, Bess is my Great-Great-Aunt, and Creta Elliott is my first cousin, twice removed.
Connection solved.

Finally, I know for sure I am related to a famous horse, The Outlaw!

Additional Note:

Verne and Creta took Midnight to London to perform in the Imperial Rodeo and returned on the ship Majestic. It sailed from Southampton, arriving July 24, 1934. I have their passport details and photos.

An interesting local note: one of the passengers was a Mr. Louis Coors, whose home was Golden, Colorado. He is listed as 73 years old, born in St. Louis.

Oh. No. Another. Puzzle.

Did Verne and Louis know each other or have a connection of some kind?

Did Louis Coors get to meet Midnight onboard the ship?

Very Special Thanks

To my husband, Frank, and to all my friends who encouraged me to solve this family puzzle.

To my Dad, Albert Buzbee, for sharing his memories, and to my mother, Luanne Ault, who regularly prods his and her memories for me to write about.

And especially to my sister, Lynne Buzbee Mahan, who helps me straighten out my thoughts and corrects my punctuation. She is a cowgirl at heart, too. She couldn't refuse when I dragged her to the Pringle Family's Waunita Ranch in Gunnison last summer, to be “cowgirls” and ride the range.

Along the trails we talked about Our Midnight and gave a big nod to **The Outlaw**.

- GBJ
2017