Crossbred Cowboys

Scholars say that people work for four reasons: habit, money, power or pleasure. I would add a fifth reason after conducting an informal survey of my entire family. In my survey I found that 50 percent of people (me) work for pleasure while 50 percent of people (my wife) work for health insurance.

As more and more people are employed by big, impersonal corporations very few people are working at something they love. They are just in it for the paycheck. Meaningful work? Ha! They feel lucky just to have a job. Even if it is one they hate.

I've always measured success a little different than most folks. To me, if you have a job that you love and are passionate about then you are successful, no matter how much money you make or how powerful your title. But these days any man or woman who is making a living doing what they love is both lucky and rare.

Cowboyin' is one of the few occupations where the practitioners feel they are well-paid even if their wages qualify them for food stamps. To work under a big sky without close supervision, while mounted on a good horse and having the opportunity to throw your rope at something every once in awhile is a bigger bonus than the ones Wall Street bankers routinely give themselves.

 I used to think that cowboying was a secure occupation. After all, few people can do it and the pay is terrible. Cowboys work hard for what they don't have. But in the new economy even good cowboying jobs are getting harder to find. And to keep!

Oh sure, you can look through any paper and see help-wanted ads for people to work on ranches. Mostly the owners want caretakers, not cowboys. They want multi-taskers to irrigate permanent pasture, tend the vines, spray for weeds and entertain guests. Occasionally the hired hand may get to take the gooseneck to a corner of the ranch to gather cows, but when he unloads it's a four-wheeler that comes out of the trailer, not a horse.

 Absentee owners ask their "cowboys" to caretake the big house and keep the fences painted white. Their "cowboys" wear rubber irrigating boots instead of the pointy toed variety, and they sit in a tractor seat more than a saddle.

Absentee owners are nothing new to the cattle business. The industry was practically founded on wealthy Scots and Englishmen who couldn't wait to wire their cash west to invest in ranches. (It was the 1800s version of the internet bubble.) Cowboys were cowboys back then. Oh sure, they might be asked to plant a post every now and then, but they didn't have to like it.

 And cowboys have always been expected to shoe their own ponies, feed cows and fix fence, but for the most part their job description was looking at the world through the ears of a good cow pony. Cowboys have always been part-time horse trainers and veterinarians, and most knew how to turn on an arc welder. But they were never asked to take the owner's kids to school.

Part of the allure of the cowboy lifestyle was that the world pretty much left you alone. It was a great job for men and women who preferred cows to people. Those old time hands would have quit in a second if they'd have been asked to prepare a basket lunch for guests or take them bird watching.

 But now is not the best of times to be a cowboy either. It was bad enough for a cowboy to have to feed the hay. Now these crossbred cowboys have to grow it too. The rope in their hands has been replaced with a shovel or a paint brush while their occupation is being outsourced to Argentina and Australia. Sadly, American consumers have fallen out of love with the cowboy and seem quite willing to let their beef be raised by gauchos and grazers.

I suppose recently fired folks may even see a fellow “downsized” worker waiting in the unemployment line wearing boots and a cowboy hat. But I’d venture to guess he’s not a cowboy. Real cowboys aren’t looking for a job. They’re looking for a life.