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Exclusive Family Interview

Ronald Reagan
His Love of the West



A color photograph of Ronald Reagan, dressed in western-style clothing. He is wearing a light-colored, short-sleeved button-down shirt, a red bandana with a white floral pattern around his neck, light-colored trousers, and a brown leather belt with a large, ornate silver buckle. He is holding a brown leather saddle with a white fur lining over his left shoulder and a coiled rope with a yellow and red pattern over his right shoulder. The background is dark and out of focus, suggesting an outdoor setting with trees. The name "Ronald Reagan" is written across the center of the image in a large, white, serif font.

Ronald Reagan

VOLUMES HAVE BEEN WRITTEN about Ronald Reagan's rise from poverty to his legendary achievements as an actor, statesman and president. However to truly comprehend the character of the man, one must read between the lines of those publications. Were all of the invisible words put to text, they would read like a Western novel, because Ronald Reagan lived his life by the code of the West. Our 40th president was truly a man who revered the values established by our pioneering forefathers, and it was that old-fashioned standard from which his greatness grew.

"Mr. Reagan loves the simple things in life," said Dennis LeBlanc, Reagan's personal aid and family friend. "Some people may have thought that his affection for basic values was all an act for the press, but it wasn't. That was the real Ronald Reagan."

When Reagan wasn't making movies, governing California or ruling the free world, he could be

THIS 40TH U.S. PRESIDENT REVERED THE VALUES ESTABLISHED BY AMERICA'S FOREFATHERS, AND IT WAS THAT OLD-FASHIONED STANDARD FROM WHICH HIS GREATNESS GREW.

By Terry Wilson

Man of the West

found astride a horse or fixing a fence at his ranch.

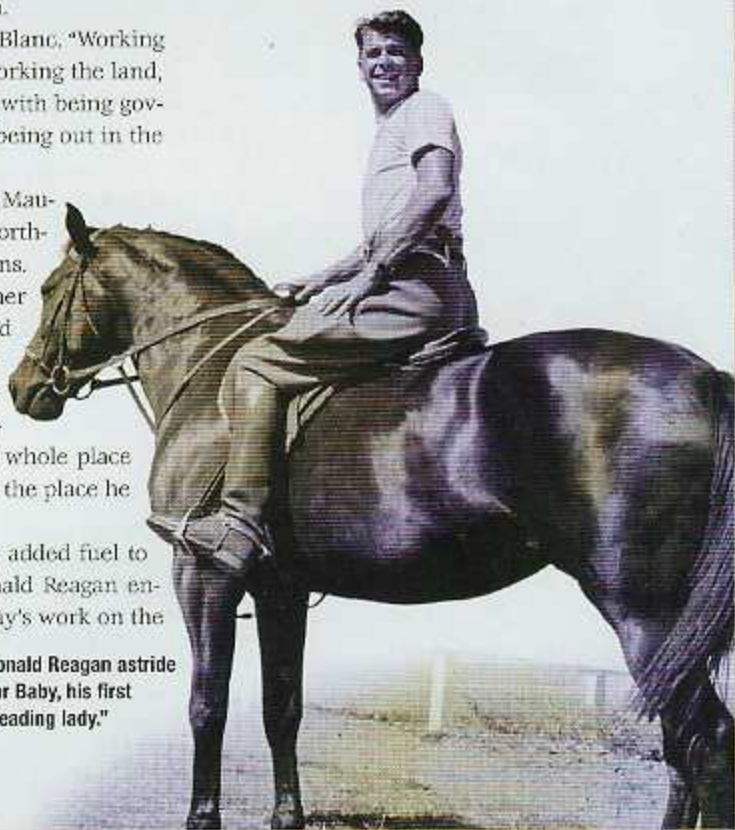
"Mr. Reagan loves to build things," explained LeBlanc. "Working at the ranch was his way to relax. When he was working the land, he could escape all the trappings that went along with being governor and president. He just thoroughly enjoyed being out in the open."

"We had three ranches," Mr. Reagan's daughter, Maureen, told *Cowboys & Country*. "They were in Northridge, Malibu Canyon and the Santa Ynez Mountains. That's the ranch most people associate my father with. The house itself was part of a 150-year-old Spanish land grant that sat on about 600 acres. For years the ranch had only been used as a summer pasture, and the Adobe house was sort of a flop-house for whoever was up there at the time. The whole place needed a lot of help. But the first time my dad saw the place he said, 'Oh, I want it!'"

The fact that the ranch was a fixer-upper only added fuel to his passion for the place. There was nothing Ronald Reagan enjoyed more than getting his hands dirty, doing a day's work on the land. Of course, as commander-in-chief he knew how to delegate chores as well.

"I remember the first thing Dad and Nancy had me do was to scrub down the stone fire-

Ronald Reagan astride Tar Baby, his first "leading lady."





Reagan Ranch Acquired by Young America's Foundation

Ronald Reagan's 688-acre Rancho del Cielo, in the Santa Ynez Mountains, was acquired last spring by the Young America's Foundation, which will use it to teach future generations of young people about Reagan's legacy.

The ranch will also be the focal point of the Ronald Reagan Leadership Development Program, which fosters the virtues of individual freedom, limited government, patriotism and traditional values in young leaders.

Rancho del Cielo served as the Western White House and was where President Reagan retreated to "recharge his batteries" and ponder many decisions.

"We are tremendously excited to be able to share President Reagan's vision, principles and ideas with America's future leaders at one of the places he loves most," said Young America's president Ron Robinson. "We are committed to preserving and protecting both the Reagan legacy and the ranch itself, which will be maintained just as it was when President and Mrs. Reagan lived here."

Founded in 1969, Young America's Foundation provides lectures, conferences and publications nationwide aimed at educating and inspiring high school and college-age students.



place," Maureen recalled with a laugh. "He said, 'Well, you're tall. Here's a long-handled broom. So go at it!'"

Ronald Reagan is sometimes compared to Abraham Lincoln, and for good reason. Although "Dutch" Reagan didn't have a beard, and "Honest" Abe never traveled aboard Air Force One, they were both men of common stock who rose to uncommon greatness. Another similarity between the two presidents was the fact that both men knew how to use an ax and build a fence.

"The only heat at the ranch came from our two fireplaces," Maureen explained. "So when Dad said he spent a lot of time chopping wood, he wasn't kidding.

"Then there was his fence. Dad decided that he wanted to use telephone poles to make a fence for the ranch. So he called the telephone company and said, 'I was wondering what you do with your old telephone poles.' The guy replied, 'We sell them. In fact, we've got several hundred of them in Fresno right now!' Dad asked, 'Well, what does a guy do if he wants all of 'em?' The guy said, 'Just give me your name!' Then Dad said, 'I'm Ronald Reagan!' 'Yeah and I'm the queen of England,' the guy snipped back, thinking it was a practical joke. Dad said, 'No, really. I'm Ronald Reagan, and I want them all.'"

It took some convincing, but when the disbelieving telephone company employee realized the call wasn't a prank, he snapped to attention, and the president got his telephone poles. After they were unloaded, Mr. Reagan went right to work designing the layout of the fence. Once that was done, he began hand-notching and setting the poles himself.

"Dad was very proud of his fence," said Maureen. "In fact, a senator from Ohio wanted to know how Dad constructed the fence because he, too, was doing one. Dad not only wrote out a detailed how-to plan for him, but also drew a picture of how to properly notch the poles. Dad had a plan for everything he did."

Creating a plan to accomplish a specific goal was a task that Ronald Reagan used throughout his personal and political life. In the mid-'30s while working as a sports announcer at WHO radio in Des Moines, Iowa, he wanted to pursue his love of horseback riding. To accomplish that, he created a plan.

"When Dad was a sports announcer in Des Moines, he wanted to ride horses, and the only place you could ride horses was at Fort Des Moines," Maureen explained. "And the only way you could ride horses at Fort Des Moines was to join the U.S. Cavalry. That was his plan. And because he was a college grad, they put him in an officer's training program. That's how he became a reserve officer in the United States Cavalry before World War II."

As an actor, Ronald Reagan would call upon his skills as an equestrian for movies like *Santa Fe Trail*, *The Last Outpost* and *Cattle Queen of Montana*. In the film *Sergeant Murphy*, his days in the Cavalry were brought full circle.

"Playing the part of a cavalryman, surrounded by army personnel, was reminiscent of my last few years at Fort Des Moines," Mr. Reagan said. "It was a lot of fun, and I especially enjoyed shooting on location instead of being in a Hollywood sound stage."

Although his Cavalry days were but a mere footnote in the pages of history to Mr. Reagan, the memories of his time in the saddle, leading a troop of men on horseback, remained very vivid to him.

"Dad is a man who is very comfortable in his own skin," says Maureen Reagan. "He doesn't feel the need to show off for anybody. While this is a trait of the Old West, it's also a quality from his generation."



"One day we were riding through the forest at Camp David, and Dad started to reminisce about his days in the Calvary," Maureen recalled. "He told us what it was like to use Calvary maneuvers when troops were spread out in the woods. He said everything was done with hand signals."

Maureen went on to say that the former horse soldier was almost aglow as he relived the sights and sounds of his time with the 11th Cavalry. With the days of troopers on horseback belonging to another era, Mr. Reagan recalled an experience that few living individuals will ever know of first-hand.

"Dad said it was the most incredible feeling," Maureen noted. "He said, 'All of a sudden the horses would be walking, then they'd be trotting, then cantering, then galloping until they reached a full run. There wasn't a sound except for the breathing of the horses and the creaking of leather. He was truly in his element then.'"

Although Mr. Reagan would don the occasional cowboy hat, mostly for a photo opportunity, he truly disliked wearing any kind of chapeau, Western or otherwise.

"Dad hated to wear hats, but he loved jumping horses," Maureen said. "Since it was mandatory for riders to wear a hat during jumps, he would put it on the back of his head so it would fall off after the first hurdle. It was OK for a rider to lose his hat, but they had to start with one on."

"Another thing a lot of people don't know about Ronald Reagan was the fact that he always rode with an English saddle," said Dennis LeBlanc. "This goes back to his days in the Calvary. Of course there were a few times when he used a Western saddle, but when he mounted up for his own pleasure, it was with an English saddle and English riding clothes."

Ronald Reagan went through three generations of riding horses. His first horse was a black mare named Tar Baby. This was the mount he rode in most of his movies. In his autobiography, Mr. Reagan referred to Tar Baby as his first leading lady.

"Dad was madly in love with that horse," Maureen said. "Tar Baby's foal was Nancy D. She died about the time Dad went to Sacramento. Her son was Little Man. Dad used to joke, 'When you've outlived three generations of riding horses, you know you've been here too long!'"

LeBlanc recounted a story that exemplifies the true grit of Ronald Reagan. A thoroughbred named Bracing was dying of cancer and had to be put down. Mr. Reagan was heartbroken. The mare was one of his favorites, and was the only one of his horses to win a race at Santa Anita. The once-mighty animal was withering in pain and the former Calvary officer knew what had to be done.

"Ray Jackin, the ranch foreman, told me he handed Mr. Reagan a .30-30 rifle and marked a spot on the horse's head where the president should shoot," recalled LeBlanc. "Jackin said Reagan's eyes started to swell, and his finger froze on the trigger."



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Both men stood silently for a minute or so, then Ray took the rifle from Mr. Reagan's hands and fired. The horse fell dead; the president cried.

"There were good times and there were sad times at the ranch," Maureen recalled. "I still laugh when I open the scrapbook and look at some of our old photos. One of my favorites is a picture of us having a watermelon-eating and seed-spitting contest. Of course, Dad won. He could eat the fastest and spit the farthest."

The ranch was Mr. Reagan's Xanadu, a place where he could escape the pressures of the Oval Office—a fact not overlooked by the powers that groomed the president's image.

"The people in Washington always tried to plan press conferences around Dad's trip to the ranch, because prior to going to the ranch, his color improved as did his disposition," Maureen said. "He could deal with anything, even Sam Donaldson, if he was going to the ranch."

In the mid-'70s this writer met Mr. Reagan at the home of Alfred and Betsy Bloomingdale (of Bloomingdale's department stores). I found him to be one of the most personable individuals you would ever want to meet. I had just spent a week on horseback in the rain forest of Costa Rica. It was my first venture in a saddle, and I was still unable to sit comfortably on a chair. Mr. Reagan's sense of humor was not lost on my derriere's dilemma. After a few good-natured yuks at my expense, he offered some advice for my next trek on the back of a horse.

It was a most memorable experience. Here sat Ronald Reagan, talking to me like we'd known each other for years. The image of the most powerful man in the world departing advice on how to avoid getting my butt bruised while riding a horse still brings a smile to my face. Mr. Reagan was genuinely a nice guy who had his ego completely in check. It was this personality trait that led others to go the extra mile for him, in and out of office. This included the Secret Service.

"Dad took possession of the ranch just before he left the governor's office," said

Maureen. "In fact, the last weekend he was governor, all the security guys from Sacramento, at their own expense, came to the ranch. They wanted to help Dad work on the house. That's how much they thought of my father. It was a wonderful tribute to him."

"I think *Cowboys & Country* is to be congratulated for doing a story on this perspective of Ronald Reagan," said Roger Hedgecock, former mayor of San Diego, California, and now a radio talk-show host.

"A lot of people pick up on the foreign-policy issues and his actor years, but they forget that throughout his life, his actions can be attributed to the fact that he was a man of the West. He was always friendly and would give anyone the shirt off his back. It didn't matter if he was talking to an adversary or an ally, he always had the same smile and the same handshake.

"I personally saw this characteristic over the course of 18 years. He was honest and direct. Ronald Reagan never had a hidden agenda; you knew exactly where he was coming from at all times. And if you couldn't come to an agreement with him, it wasn't the end of the world. He wasn't going to use the powers of



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Maureen Reagan

the office to come after you. He would simply tell an Irish joke then go on to the next thing. I believe that all of the qualities which are the foundation of Ronald Reagan's character can be attributed to the ideals of Western culture."

"Dad is a man who is very comfortable in his own skin," Maureen said. "He doesn't feel the need to show off for anybody. While this is a trait of the Old West, it's also a quality from his generation. He comes from a time when even if you didn't start out in poverty, you stood a good chance of ending up in it as a result of the Depression. Dad's generation basically saved the world by knowing what to do with bailing wire and chewing gum. It's that generation. And I have not seen it since." ♦

The Reagan family urges readers to support the Alzheimer's Foundation, 919 Michigan Ave., Suite 100, Chicago, IL 60611, (1-800) 272-3900.