

A True Conversion to the Wild West

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NETHER STOWEY, England — The lean cowhand, slim-hipped as Gary Cooper in his frontier pants and burnished boots, saunters down the main street of this picture-book Somerset village at high noon, his tall hat brushing the timber beams of the local restaurant-cum-tea shoppe. Sometimes, he says, he forgets he is no longer in the Long Branch saloon and neglects to remove his hat indoors, but no one pays much mind.

"I guess I'm an exhibitionist. It gives people something to talk about," he says. He is the Reverend Peter Birkett,

MARY BLUME

lately rector of nearby Holford. Meanwhile back at the ranch he is known as Pete.

Many grown men dream of being cowboys. Peter Birkett did it, not by visiting a dude ranch but by taking early retirement and signing on, in his sixties, as a ranch hand in three hundred miles of wilderness in Chilcotin, British Columbia, then moving on to Paso Robles in California. He plans to celebrate his 80th birthday next year with a terrific barbecue at the Long Branch saloon in Clinton, California, population 200, and perhaps to find his final home on the range.

"As a cowboy song puts it, I hope to ride the starry ranges on a pinto horse with wings," he said, laughing. "There's nothing more wonderful than soaring through the clouds on a horse. A cow pony."

Birkett used to stag hunt in the Quantock Hills of Somerset, hating the ghastly finale. Now he rides out alone on his western saddle with its leather-covered pig snout stirrups. "Riding some English horses is like maneuvering a battleship after a cow pony," he says.

When his wife died in 1968, Birkett began thinking more and more of the Wild West and went to British Columbia in 1971; "I was a complete imposter, I hadn't a clue," he says. There was no electricity or running water, he ate a lot of moose — "the rancher's wife was a jolly good cook, she could disguise it" — chased the grizzly, rounded up strays on freezing winter nights, lived in the bunkhouse and did not mention his other life.

"If people know you're a priest they start acting unnaturally, but of course they did get to know." He was often lonely and was at first given a hard time by the rancher's wife. "She was determined I shouldn't get ideas above my station. I used to say to myself, don't be a pompous old idiot, you're just a ranch hand." After some months the tenderfoot got the accolade from Bernie, the rancher, himself.

"Well, one thing's for sure. Preaching hasn't made you into a lily, Pete," Bernie said.

Last year, Birkett left Dodington Hall, a grand house with a minstrel's gallery, unloaded most of his possessions and moved into a nearby cottage in Nether Stowey with his chaps and boots in the entrance and a picture of his late horse, Buckshot, on the chimneypiece.

In the living room there are two finely tooled western saddles and only a few reminders of the past: a pair of church candlesticks ("I didn't pinch them but I wouldn't be above it"), an old tapestry flanked by two gilded angels from whose toes pairs of castanets depend, and a wing-back chair on which he sits sideways, his legs slung over the arm. On a low table lie copies of the Parish News. He still takes the occasional church service but no longer gives sermons.

"I know what I want to say is pretty outrageous and it



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Birkett in Somerset: "I out-California everyone."

serves no useful purpose to upset people. Also, I think it's extremely hypocritical because I never practice what I preach."

He finds today's Anglican Church more interested in what he calls churchianity than Christianity. "I don't think Our Lord would have any time for this monolithic Church of England, well-endowed, which seems to me to be chiefly an organization for the preservation of crumbling buildings," he says.

He finds his village filling with city folk who ignore the locals. Cowboys and ranchers are friendlier, he says, and it is clear that he finds them gentler, more courteous and elegant than the people he meets when he returns to the so-called civilized world.

"People in England don't understand. They just think I'm childish," he says.

In Nether Stowey he doesn't drink rye whiskey or Bud from the bottle although he made burritos when the county's Lord Lieutenant came to dine. His favorite room in the snug cottage is what he calls the bunkhouse, where he lies and listens to cowboy records, some of which make him cry.

The bunkhouse is filled with photographs, pairs of chaps in several styles, more saddles and handsome hand-made spurs with jinglebobs (the bits of metal that make them go jingle, jangle, jingle). "The first time I wore these to the Long Branch feeling very proud, they hitched up behind me and I fell flat on my face. You can imagine how delighted everyone was."

Much of his gear is in the California style, which his Chilcotin friends jeer at but which he admires because it comes from the elegant Spanish vaquero tradition. "Like converts to a religion, I out-California everyone," he says. By contrast he finds the Texas style too rough and ready.

Many of the bunkhouse photographs are of wide open spaces. "There is room to breathe," Birkett says. "The wonderful wide skylines and the silence that you could cut into chunks." There is a picture of Birkett captioned "The Bad Man of Chilcotin" and one of rows of leathery smiling faces labeled, "So much friendship, so much laughter."

Birkett read cowboy stories in Boy's Own and his first exposure to open spaces was in World War II, when he served in the North African desert as an RAF chaplain. After El Alamein a friend told him more about the west and how to order chaps. They arrived one leg at a time.

He isn't sure he should ever have been a priest. "I remember as soon as I put on a dog collar, I felt trapped. I burned mine ceremoniously when I retired."

When he was an active vicar he never allowed his passion for the Wild West to interfere with his work. "The only trouble was when I called on someone and left my horse at the gate and it ate the best lilac bush when I was indoors."

But in England he felt he was preaching to a ball of cotton wool. "People always feel they have to say something after the service. The stock thing as they're leaving is, 'It's so uplifting, Father.' I used to think, for Pete's sake, say it's bloody awful." His best memories as a priest are of a Christmas midnight mass in Chilcotin attended by five people and a cat which closed with a tape recording of his church bells in England.

At the end, Bernie, the rancher, shook his hand and said, "Pete, we've never had a Christmas like this before."

Even in British Columbia the land is shrinking and in California Birkett has seen cattle rounded up by hands on motorbikes. He wishes he had gone west sooner: Had he been born there he could be a cowboy and not just a ranch hand.

"To be a good roper you have to start when you can just walk. I have a friend who could throw a rope in a figure of eight and catch the steer's head in the top loop and the two front feet in the bottom one."

"In England people haven't a clue. They just think of the cowboy as a rough rider guy and they don't realize the finesse and magnificent horsemanship. It makes me rather cross."

The night before, Birkett had been on a three-hour ride in the Quantocks on a rather nice little mare that doesn't belong to him. "I hadn't been very kindly treated and we're trying to get her to relax a bit. Last night she was just fine, but it took us a week to catch her. I always hope," Birkett said, "that I don't look as frightened as I feel."