

# If Horses Had Heroes

By  
DARRELL  
DODDS

**DR. ROBERT M. MILLER, DVM**  
2011 Western Horseman Award Honoree

**On Saturday, March 10, 2012**, the Western Horseman Award will be presented to renowned veterinarian and equine-behaviorist Dr. Robert M. Miller at Road To The Horse, the World Championship of Colt Starting competition, in Murfreesboro, Tennessee.

**The Western Horseman Award** was founded in 2005 with the sole purpose of recognizing outstanding individuals who have made significant contributions to the Western stock horse industry. In selecting candidates for the award, the magazine looks for men and women who embody values the magazine embraces: impeccable Western horsemanship, a commitment to education, authenticity, ethics, and a passion for the Western way of life.

**For more than 50 years**, Miller has contributed to the public's knowledge and understanding of the horse and the horse-human relationship through a series of magazine articles, scientific papers, books and videos. Best known for "imprint training," a scientifically based system of training newborn foals, Miller has traveled to every continent, giving lectures to colleges, animal group conventions, horse organizations and breed associations.

**Our past honorees** include some of the most influential horsemen and industry leaders of our time. Past recipients of the Western Horseman Award include clinician Ray Hunt (2005), cutting horse trainer Buster Welch (2006), ranch manager and documentary photographer Bob Moorhouse (2007), rancher and horseman Craig Haythorn (2008), rancher and musician Ian Tyson (2009), and trainer, author, clinician and judge Jack Brainard (2010).

**In years to come**, the Western Horseman Award will continue this tradition of recognizing deserving individuals whose vision and contributions have advanced the Western horse industry.

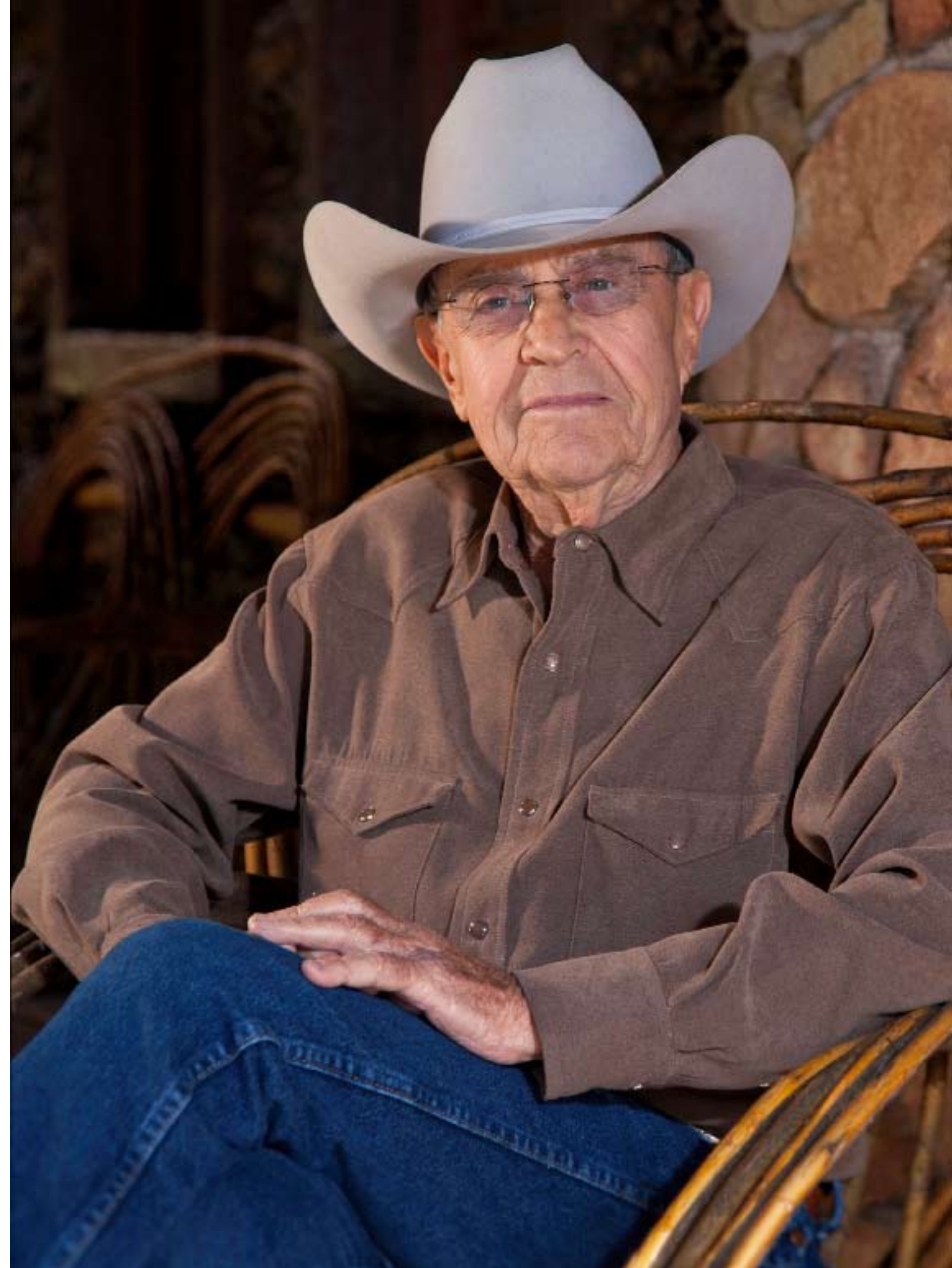
*The wide acceptance of imprint training, considered by many to be one of the greatest advances in horse training in the 20th century, has made Dr. Robert Miller an international tour de force on behalf of the Natural Horsemanship movement. Since his seminal work on the subject was first made public, he's conducted hundreds of lectures on every continent, and written numerous books, magazine articles and scientific papers covering all facets of equine learning and behavior. As a result, many thousands of equines have benefited from his knowledge and his desire to share it with anyone who will listen. Here's how it all began.*

**I**F THERE'S ANYONE WHO COULD BE GIVEN CREDIT for planting the seed that would later grow into Bob Miller's vocation, as well as his avocation, it might be a Mexican "bronc stomper" by the name of Henry Acevedo. Although Acevedo's lessons in so-called traditional horse breaking were intended to teach young Miller how to be a cowboy, they had the opposite effect, triggering a lifelong passion for finding a better way to communicate with horses.

Shortly after coming home from Europe at the end of World War II, Miller was eager to return to civilian life in Tucson, Arizona, and pursue the career he put on hold while serving as part of the U.S. Army's occupation of Germany. Before settling in, however, an Army buddy suggested they travel west and see the Pacific Ocean.

While on the coast, they landed jobs on the famed Irvine Ranch in Southern California, a sprawling 100,000-acre operation with hundreds of employees. Growing up in the Arizona desert, Miller enjoyed the ranch's rolling grassland but he didn't care much for being a horse wrangler, a job at the bottom of the ranch's pecking order. That fall, he returned to Tucson and the University of Arizona to study animal husbandry.

"My goal at the time was to buy a small farm," says Miller. "When I was in Germany, and especially France, I noticed that even in very hard times, the farmers always had food to eat and to barter. My dad and everyone else of his generation were convinced a severe depression





**Top:** In the early 1950s, Miller gained first-hand experience starting young horses using the principles of Natural Horsemanship, decades before the term was coined. **Above:** While cowboying in Colorado, Miller began drawing cartoons based on real-life experiences. His cartoons have appeared in numerous magazines and books for more than 60 years.

would follow the war, and since I always liked animals and being outdoors, farming seemed like a viable option.”

When his freshman year ended and summer came around, Miller got a job on a small family ranch near the Mexican border, fixing fence and doing other odd jobs. But what really caught his attention was a pen of six young horses.

“The ranch’s owner had hired Henry Acevedo to start the colts and get them ready for ranch work,” says Miller. “One morning while Henry was beginning to work with the horses, I asked him if he would show me how he did it.”

Acevedo was an old-time cowboy who used traditional, albeit crude, methods, typical of the time and place. He agreed to show Miller how he broke horses and selected a laid-back 3-year-old colt for the demonstration.

“Once Henry got a rope on him, he ear’ed him down, got a big bozal on him, attached a 30-foot rope, then spooked him out and sat back on the rope, jerking the colt around, three times to the left and three times to the right.

“‘His nose will be sore tomorrow,’ Henry said. ‘He should turn around pretty good.’”

The following day, Henry caught the colt, tied up a hind leg, blindfolded him, got him saddled, then Miller stepped on.

“The colt was too terrified to move, let alone buck,” says Miller.

“The next day, Henry told me to take the colt out for a few days while I was fixing fence. I rode the colt 12 hours a day for the next three days while doing my work. Well, I love animals, and by the end of the third day, I was getting pretty attached.

“The next morning, Henry asked, ‘How is ol’ pintado doing?’ and I said, ‘Fine. I can get him to turn left, but when I try to turn ‘im right, he just bends his neck. He won’t move his feet.’ ‘We can fix,’ said Henry.”

Henry laid the colt down, then went to work rasping his forefeet down to the quick. Miller had heard of that being done before and thought it must be an acceptable way to get a young horse to work off their hind end.

“When Henry finished with the feet,” Miller recalls, “he grabbed a large rock and began pounding on the right side of the colt’s neck. He pounded several times and I thought, ‘Well, he’s the expert, he must know what he is doing,’ but I could see the pain and the fear in that colt’s eyes. When he rolled the colt over to work on the left side of his neck, I said, ‘Oh no, Henry. That side is fine. He’ll be OK.’ Disgusted with me and the colt, Henry threw the rock down and asked, ‘Kid, do you want to learn or not?’”

#### ANOTHER SEED IS PLANTED

“Well, I thought a lot about that experience,” says Miller. “One day I ran into a cutting horse trainer who was very well known in Arizona at the time, and I told him what happened. To my surprise, he said, ‘Yeah, sometimes, if you have a horse that won’t turn, you have to do that.’ I recounted the story to another fellow I knew that had a reputation for being a pretty good horse breaker and he agreed. That was a common technique for dealing with a horse that wouldn’t turn.”

Convinced there must be a better way to start colts, Miller began looking for more-reliable information and eventually found two books in the city library, both written at the end of the 19th century. There was nothing more current because by the late 1940s, the horse population had declined dramatically and writing and publishing new books on horsemanship didn’t make economic sense.



**Dr. Robert and Debbie Miller met while students at Colorado State University in 1956 and have been riding and life partners ever since.**

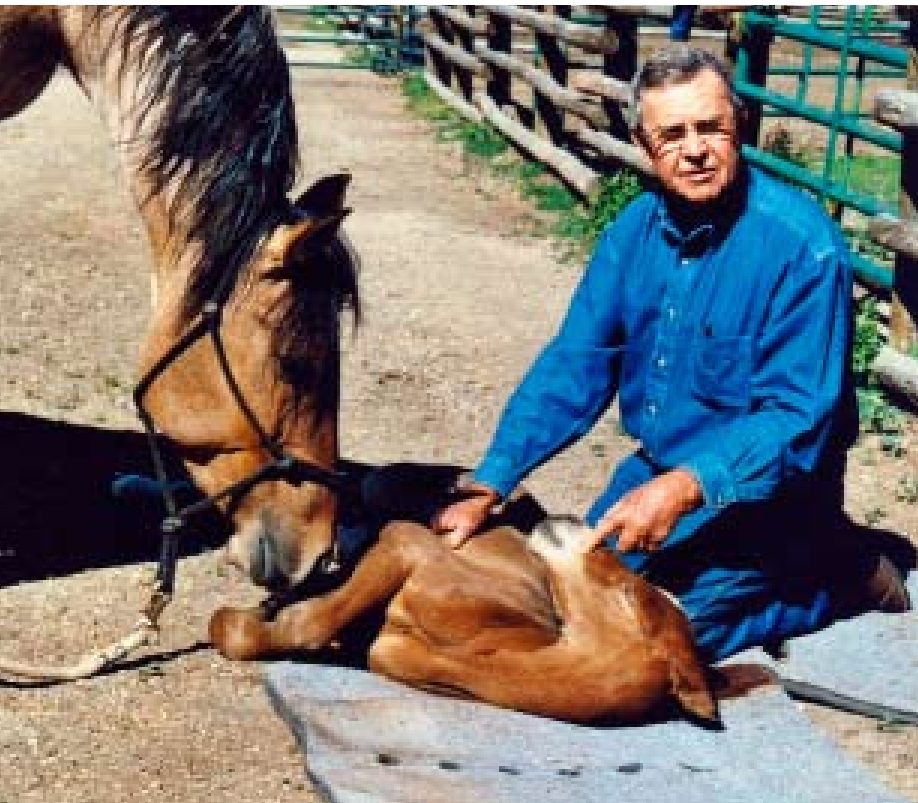
Still, *The Complete Horse Tamer* by John Rarey, and *Illustrated Horse-Breaking* by Horace Hayes contained the kind of information that Miller was looking for. By studying the principles in these two books, Miller realized that there were better methods for working and communicating with horses.

Interestingly enough, in the latter part of the 19th century Hayes wrote one paragraph in a chapter titled “Theory of Horse Control,” on the desirability of early training: “As those instincts of the horse which are opposed to obedience to man, increase in strength with age, it is a great advantage to begin the education of a horse as early as possible.”

There is little doubt those words left an impression on Miller, one that would manifest itself in the years to come.

“When I returned to college that fall,” says Miller, “I discovered I had an aptitude for science, especially biology. One of my professors was a veterinarian who often reminisced about his years as a practicing vet, and his stories intrigued me.

“One day a light came on and I thought, ‘I like animals. I’m pretty good in science. I’ll be a vet.’ Once I made that decision, it became clear that I needed to improve my grades if I was going to be accepted. During my senior year I got straight A’s, enough to get a high B average overall.”



“Even with my average up, Colorado A&M (now Colorado State University) turned me down the first time I applied to vet school. I was right there in the middle of the post-war GI Bill rush. The first year I applied, there were 3,000 qualified applicants, and of course they gave favor to Colorado residents.”

Determined to go to Colorado A&M, Miller moved to Denver to establish Colorado residency, and found a job with the city and county veterinarian. Every year, Miller submitted another application and every year he was denied admission. Finally, on his fifth attempt, Miller’s tenacity paid off and he entered vet school in 1952.

“Once I was admitted, vet school was pretty easy for me to get through,” says Miller. “The first two years were all basic sciences, and becoming a vet was still a means to an end. It was going to help me get my farm.”

#### BASIC TRAINING

While most of the other vet students got summer jobs with area veterinarians, Miller preferred working on Colorado ranches, starting colts, taking dudes on trail rides, or doing

whatever had to be done.

“One of my fellow students told me about a job at the UT Bar Ranch, up near the Wyoming border. It was primarily a cattle outfit, but they also had a dude operation. They had a bunch of horses they wanted broke to ride, and he thought I might be interested. I was. When I got there, I found a mixture of 3-, 4- and 5-year-old colts that had never been handled other than being roped, branded and castrated without the benefit of anesthesia. They had a round pen, like all ranches did, and I was put to work starting colts.

“Well, I didn’t know much about breaking horses, but from my previous experience on other ranches and the knowledge I’d gained from reading, I wanted to give it a try, but I wanted to approach the task differently than everyone else.

“First, I insisted on working alone, because I didn’t want anyone to watch. Breaking horses was a macho thing back then, especially Out West. I had no interest in riding bucking horses or using conventional methods; my goal was to remove the horse’s fear and to get them under saddle with the least amount of stress.”

On the first day, Miller ran one of the colts into the round pen, and as could be expected the colt was terrified. He slammed into the fence, flipped over backward, and tried to jump out. Once the colt settled down a bit, Miller sat outside the round pen with his back to the horse, slowly rolled a cigarette, and let the horse think about his situation for a few minutes.

“When I finished my cigarette, the colt was as far from me as possible, but he was standing still. He still had fear in his eyes, but it was beginning to be replaced by curiosity. Then I let him out of the round pen and got another one and repeated the process.

“On the second day, I’d run them in the pen again. The hysteria was gone, but they were still scared. I’d roll a cigarette, sit on the inside of the round pen this time, and just wait for them. Before long, curiosity got the better of them and they’d be standing facing me with their ears pricked forward, studying me. That was lesson number two.

“The third day, I’d bring them back into the round pen, but this time I’d rope them. As soon as they felt that rope, they started to go but they didn’t go long, maybe six or eight laps. When they stopped, they were either facing me or standing lateral to me, and then I’d put pressure on the rope and keep it on. They would pull back, against the side of the corral, and that would just make their situation worse. Finally, they would put a foot out toward me, then I’d give them slack. Within five minutes, they would be facing me everywhere I went in the round pen.

“The tough part was getting the rope off. This was the longest lesson and the most dangerous. When I’d begin to walk up the rope, I could see that they were ready to explode, then I’d back away. Each time I could get a little closer, a little closer, and, finally, they’d smell my hand, touching it with the hairs on their nose. Before long, I was able to gently rub their face, then their neck.”

The next day, Miller roped them again, then slowly walked back and forth, getting the colts to face him. Then he’d slowly walk up to them and begin rubbing, first just the neck, then their shoulder, and over the course of a half hour or more, he’d be able to rub over their entire body.

During the next three or four days, Miller continued working with the colts until he had them under saddle.

“Once they got use to me being on their back, I’d take them outside and begin to introduce them to cattle, riding drag and all the time playing with the rope,” says Miller. “By the second week, they were ready and willing to accept more training. Their fear was totally gone.”

#### THE PERFECT PRACTICE

Following graduation in 1956, Miller married Debby Ephraim, whom he’d met at a college rodeo just a few months earlier. Colorado A&M had the national championship rodeo team that year, and Debby was their top barrel racer.

“I called her for a coffee date after the rodeo and discovered we had many things in common, especially our love for travel, skiing and horses,” says Miller.

With their academic careers behind them, Bob and Debby started looking for a place to settle down and establish a practice.

“I was particularly fond of the ranching country around Nogales, but I’d told another young veterinarian in Tucson of my plans, and by the time I graduated, he’d moved his practice there,” Miller recalls. “I did find work assisting several veterinarians in Arizona, and that kept me busy, but it wasn’t what Debby and I wanted, so we started looking for other opportunities in Southern California.”

Eventually, Bob and Debby settled in Thousand Oaks, a small, remote community of 1,250 people one hour south of Los Angeles. In the mid-1950s, the zoning laws in Thousand Oaks were lax, allowing numerous wild-animal farms supported by the movie industry to headquarter there. When the word got out that there was a guy in town who would see monkeys, lions, elephants, birds, horses, goats—anything you’ve got—it wasn’t long before Miller’s practice had all the clients he could handle.

“In the 1960s, I believe we had one of the most diverse vet clinics in the country,” says Miller. “I’ve stated many times that I believe I am the only veterinarian that’s treated a hummingbird and a whale in the same day, and I’ve never had that disputed.”

During that same time, the horse industry was exploding in California, and world-class breeding farms and training facilities

were moving to the area. Just to keep up with the rapidly expanding clientele, Miller added a veterinarian to his practice on an average of every 24 months.

“I always enjoyed the mixed practice, but as we kept expanding it became clear that we needed one vet who could concentrate on the field practice while the others handled the clinic. Since I was the horseman of the group and most of our field patients were horses, that fell to me.”

Early in Miller’s practice, he observed that foals he was forced to handle at birth due to obstetrical emergencies behaved differently than did previously unhandled foals. They seemed less fearful, gentler and easier to handle; in fact, they seemed to recognize him days, weeks or months later. While this phenomenon had been cited in literature, specific details on how to maximize the benefits or explain scientifically why neonatal foal handling had this effect were lacking.



The Millers have always been fond of mules. In the 1980s, Debby showed Jordass Jean to many Western and English titles before the mule was inducted into the Bishop Mule Days Hall of Fame. Here, they pose with Scooter, the last mule they imprinted and raised. Miller still rides Scooter today.

As cited in *The Revolution in Horsemanship*, co-authored by Miller and Rick Lamb, Miller decided to experiment “with a foal of his own, a Quarter Horse filly. Rather than minimizing postpartum handling, he maximized it, handling the foal for two hours while the mare bonded with her, licking her or standing nearby. The next day, Miller knew he had made a great discovery. The foal was strikingly friendly, allowing handling of her entire body, and was calm and unafraid.”

Within a week, the filly was leading, backing, turning, and accepting of clippers and other stimuli used during the imprint-training session. After repeated success with more of his foals, Miller began recommending the procedure to clientele, and demonstrating it to them. Even though there were a few veterinarians, breeders and trainers who immediately saw the benefit of Miller’s research, it would take more than two decades before the significance of his ritualized approach to imprint training took hold.

“Today, it is easy to think that we humans have always had a desire to become better, more knowledgeable horsemen,” says



Top: Miller imprint trains a newborn foal to flex its head and neck laterally while the mare bonds with it. Above: Nancy Nunke, an equine behavior specialist and foremost authority on breeding and training zebras, was an early adopter of imprint training.

Miller, “but people forget that this is a recent phenomenon. That is the reason I decided to retire from a successful practice that I loved when I was 60 years old. I wanted to spend the rest of my life educating people about this incredible revolution, not only in horsemanship but in how it has the potential to make us kinder, more tolerant human beings.”

#### PURSUING THE GAME CHANGERS

In the early 1970s, equine clinicians were few and far between, and the ones who were active were usually promoting competitive disciplines more than they were general horsemanship or knowledge of equine behavior. One exception was Linda Tellington-Jones, the originator of Tellington TTouch Training, a method of improving a horse’s behavior through a combination of massage and ground exercises.

Miller, who had been increasingly interested in equine behavior from a scientific point of view, was intrigued and went to one of her clinics.

“I watched her work on one of the horses at the clinic and there was a dramatic change in the horse’s attitude and appearance, and I realized that she was on to something,” Miller says. “I went home and tried to duplicate what she had done on a mule that I had bred for racing, and it seemed to make him more relaxed.

“Then I went to see Billy Linfoot, the famous polo player and horseman who was traveling around the state putting on clinics. He’d take a mustang that he had never seen before and would be

riding him in 30 minutes. Linfoot has been given a lot of credit by Pat Parelli, Richard Shrake and Monty Roberts for influencing their careers.

“Then, in the late 1970s, I heard about Ray Hunt and decided to take four days off and attend one of his clinics in Paso Robles,” continues Miller. “I thought his approach was similar to what I was trying to do 30 years earlier, the only difference being he wasn’t trying to hide it. He was taking his horsemanship to the public and making a living out of it.

“After the clinic, I had the opportunity to talk with Ray and asked him who his teacher was. Ray was always generous to give credit to Tom Dorrance, and later I was very fortunate to get to know Tom and his brother Bill. There is no way to overestimate the influence they had on the revolution in horsemanship. They never did make any money out of it, and they didn’t care. They were far more interested in getting the horse a better deal.”

In the early 1980s, Miller was at Bishop Mule Days when he heard a man “yakking away” from the back of a colt, talking to about a dozen people. He was impressed by the man’s knowledge and passion for horses, and told Debby about him. The next day, after the trainer’s demonstration, Miller introduced himself.

“I told him I wanted to submit an article about him and his methods to *Western Horseman*, and he agreed to meet me later. The article, titled “A New Look At Old Methods,” was published as a three-part series in 1983 and helped make Pat Parelli a familiar name in horse circles almost overnight.”

#### RETIREMENT WITH A PURPOSE

Even during the earliest days of his practice, Miller enjoyed writing articles and contributing cartoons to a variety of trade publications, professional journals and special-interest magazines. His relationship with *Western Horseman* began in 1949 when he showed then-publisher Dick Spencer some cartoons he had drawn.

“I was cowboying on a cattle ranch near Sedalia, Colorado, one summer, and in the evenings I’d draw cartoons based on my experiences,” recalls Miller. “One day, my boss told me I ought to take them to *Western Horseman* in Colorado Springs. Spencer, a cartoonist himself, liked what I showed him and bought every one I had.”

Former *Western Horseman* editor Pat Close says Miller’s contributions, first his cartoons, then later his columns and feature articles, were a hit with readers from the very beginning.

“When Dr. Miller started writing the Vet’s Corner column for us in the late 1950s,” says Close, “he covered subjects that the everyday horse owner encountered, such as colic, leg problems and injuries. His writing style made it easy for the layman to understand what he was talking about, and he quickly became one of our most popular freelance writers.”

One subject that continued to fascinate Miller was the ability to train and shape the behavior of newborn foals. His passion for the subject wasn’t well known outside of professional circles, but that changed dramatically when he released a video titled *Imprint Training of the Foal* in 1986. He followed it up with a companion

book, *Imprint Training of the Newborn Foal*, in 1991, published by *Western Horseman*.

The success of those projects, not just monetarily but also in the movement they fostered, encouraged Miller to retire and pursue writing, cartooning and lecturing full time.

“I had seven books in my head that I wanted to write, and I knew I couldn’t while I was practicing. I was turning down speaking engagements and opportunities to travel with Debby, and to meet horsemen in different countries and cultures. I enjoy sharing the knowledge I’ve gained over the years and I wanted the time and freedom to do it.

“If I’ve had one desire in this life, it was to see this revolution in horsemanship take over, not only in the United States, but all over the world,” says Miller. “I didn’t want to be another clinician; there are many good horsemen and -women using television, books, videos, DVDs that teach people better horsemanship. What I wanted to do was become an advocate for the movement and give it a scientific explanation.

“There is nothing mysterious about horses. There is always a reason for what they do. But understanding the reason means understanding the horse, and before we can do that, we must understand ourselves—and that is why this revolution in horsemanship is so powerful.”

**DARRELL DODDS** is the publisher of *Western Horseman*. For more information about Dr. Miller, go to [robertmiller.com](http://robertmiller.com).