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## Enchanting Sunsets

- **Hispano Literary Giants**
- **Cowboy Sculptor**

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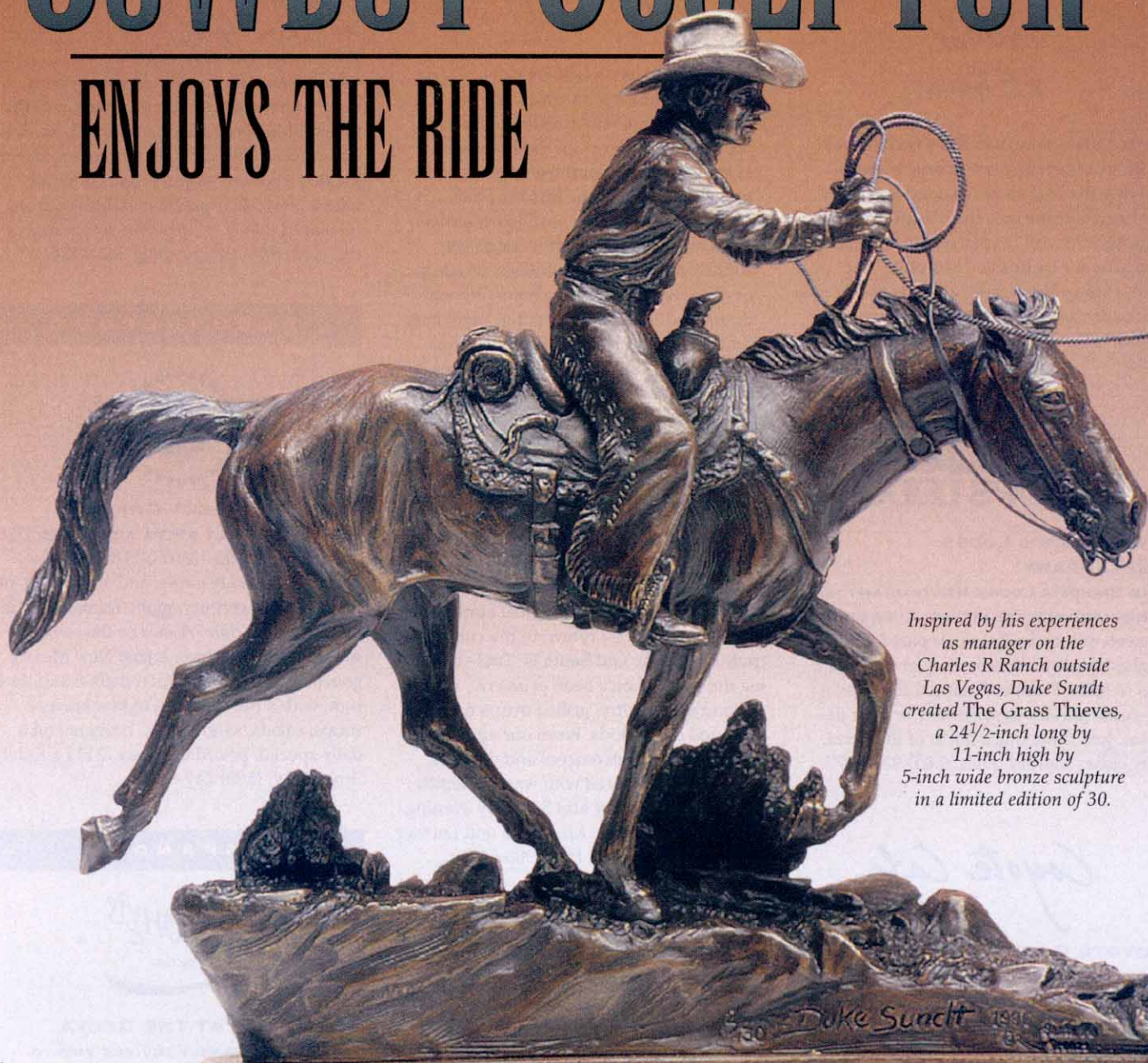




STORY BY SHARON VANDER MEER

# COWBOY SCULPTOR

## ENJOYS THE RIDE



*Inspired by his experiences as manager on the Charles R Ranch outside Las Vegas, Duke Sundt created The Grass Thieves, a 24½-inch long by 11-inch high by 5-inch wide bronze sculpture in a limited edition of 30.*



**G**rass Thieves, a bronze sculpture by cowboy artist Duke Sundt, depicts a mounted ranch hand racing across the horizon, lariat snaking out to lasso a wild-eyed cow caught—once again—stealing lunch off the wrong grazing land. The inspiration for the piece is a rash of recent evictions of cattle from the Charles R Ranch near Las Vegas that accidentally strayed onto the property.

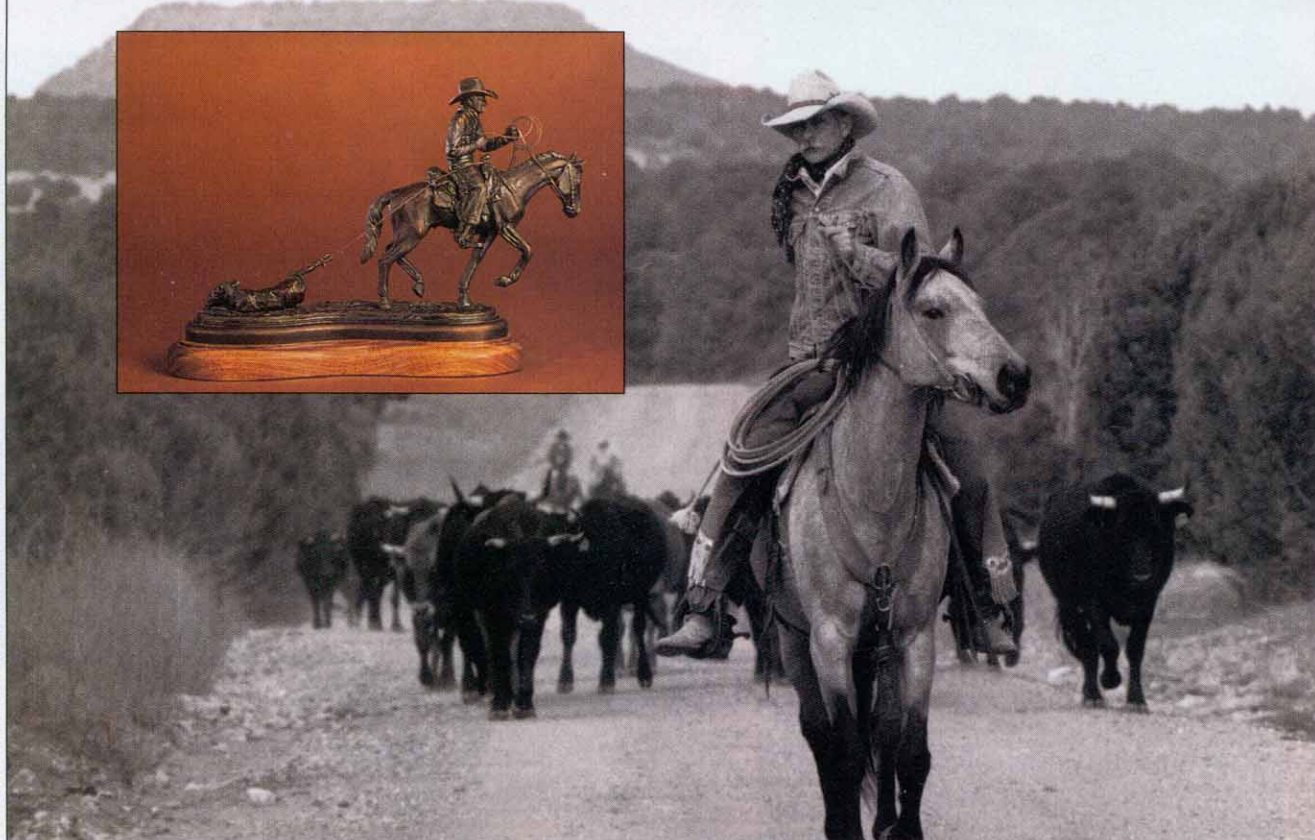
PHOTO BY POLLY MULLEN, COURTESY OF DUKE SUNDT



*Duke Sundt in his studio, giving shape to a new sculpture.*







*Sundt divides his time between his artistry and his duties managing the cattle and occasional film crews that set up shop on the Charles R Ranch. Above, Sundt rides herd over the wild Corrientes at the ranch.*

*Inset is his limited-edition sculpture Spring Branding, measuring 14-inches long by 9 1/2-inches in height.*

Inspiration and Duke's job are interwoven like the reins on a hackmore. His specialty is capturing moments in Western life, expressing motion with fluid lines, attention to detail and respect for his subjects.

Until 1993 Duke was a full-time artist. Now this artist coexists with his more-than-full-time job as a ranch manager at the 10,000-acre Charles R, where his art catapults from his creative energy like a bronc rider leaving his mount after a successful ride.

The Charles R, an occasional film location, is the home of both beef cattle and Corrientes, a rugged breed used primarily as rodeo stock. "We opened up to the movie industry to support our cow habit," Duke laughs.

He admits it is sometimes tricky finding time to put the ideas in his head into finished sculptures, but the wealth of inspiration as he works with other cowboys and rides the rolling hills and valleys of the Charles R is vast, transforming his artistic visions into sought-after sculptures.

His work is familiar to Western art collectors and working cowboys. The limited edition figures include wildlife studies, humorous subjects and poi-

gnant imagery of everyday ranch life.

Inspiration, however, isn't the only catalyst for his sculpture. Duke has done several commissions, including a longhorn steer for the University of Texas in Austin. Another commission, *The Traders*, sits outside the business department at New Mexico State University in Las Cruces.

The tri-cultural, life-size bronze consists of three figures—Hispanic, Anglo and Native Indian—trading goods. As with all of Duke's sculptures, the garments, implements and items represented are historically accurate.

Duke prides himself on attention to detail. Nothing pleases him more than to have a cowpuncher go up to one of his sculptures and say, "Yeah! You nailed that, you got it just right."

It's that concern for the lives and times of real cowboys that sets Duke apart as an artist and as a man. Cowboy artist is his identity.

As the child of a career military man, Duke lived abroad as a youngster. "When I came back to the U.S. at age 13, I was searching for my identity, probably more than most kids my age. My brother introduced me to the cowboy life and a pencil artist named Don

McDonald showed me I could express myself through art.

"This is a lifestyle I came into by choice. If I romanticize it some it's because I think we're all romantics in a way. We all reach for a dream. If it seems unattainable that doesn't stop us from reaching, and sometimes, we catch it.

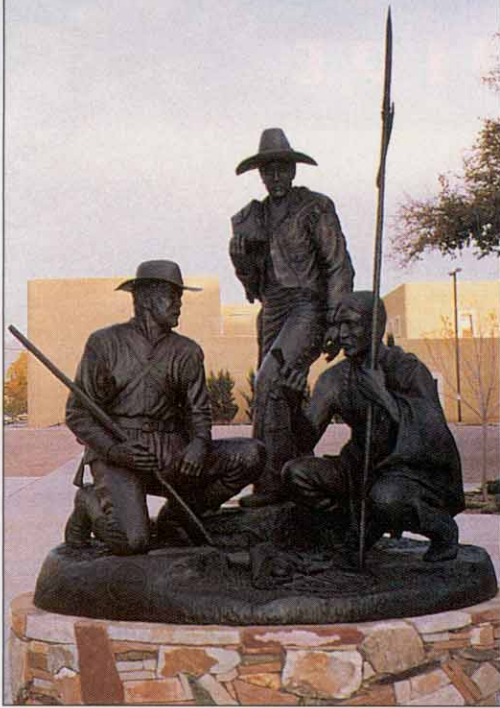
"But as an artist I'm also a realist. I'm not trying to fool anybody with this stuff. Honesty is important to me. I think we should strive to be as honest as we can in everything we do."

Honesty, integrity, abiding by your word, these are tenets Duke lives by as a man and aspires to in his sculpture, although the latter is difficult to do at times.

A commission he did several years ago is a case in point. The subject of the sculpture had died. To get a sense of who he had been, Duke spent hours looking at old photographs.

"The sculpture came down to this guy, a pipe in his mouth, leaning over unbuckling his chaps, his dog Shep wagging his tail, kinda sniffing. It looks like a really fun thing, typical reunion after a long ride. But I couldn't seem to get Shep right. The woman who com-





The Traders depicts early commerce on the Western frontier. The sculpture, done in an edition of 65, measures 15-inches high by 12-inches in width.

missioned the piece asked if I liked how the work was coming and I said, yeah, then I told her about the problem I was having with Shep. She got kinda quiet, then she looked at me and said, 'You know, Duke, I guess I should have told you, there were four Sheps.'

He hoots a familiar laugh. "There I was, looking through old black and white photos, in some of them Shep wasn't any bigger than a pencil eraser, trying to come up with one dog out of four images. That was an inspiration in itself."

Duke's cowboy and art careers have run a compatible parallel since his graduation from NMSU in 1971. He worked as a ranch hand on his Uncle Harry Mosiman's place near Las Vegas and also spent time working at Nambé Foundry in Santa Fe. All the while, through his sculpture, he was finding new ways to capture Western life.

His first big break came when he was invited to give a one-man show in 1978 in Dallas.

"We took a couple of small bronzes with us and thought if we could just sell them for \$75 apiece, we'd at least make our gas money for the trip up and back."

Within the first hour and a half, he and wife, Suzanne, had taken orders in excess of \$20,000. The Dallas show moved him from art hopeful into the

realm of professional artist.

Duke's subjects are mostly lighthearted, but occasionally he takes on a more somber theme such as the war memorial commissioned on behalf of New Mexico Military Institute in Roswell.

Four life-size figures surround a single heroic (larger than life-size) figure. The four peripheral subjects represent major conflicts of the 20th century and bear the names of NMMI alumni who died or served in the conflicts. The fifth and central figure is of an alumnus who, out of his entire squadron, was the sole survivor after more than 25 bombing missions during World War II.

Although the war memorial was not his usual subject matter, Duke says he welcomed the opportunity to do something out of the ordinary. "I had to study a lot of history to get the details of

the uniforms right and I had to learn a lot about the central subject. It was an interesting experience."

Attention to detail and concern for authenticity are his strengths as an artist. Only once has it led him to abandon a project.

"The one idea I never followed through on was *The Broken Leg*. It was of a cowboy who had to shoot his horse. He's turned around, loosely holding a pistol in his hand and he's kinda disgustedly looking over his shoulder, upset about what he's had to do. You don't see the horse or anything, just the cowboy.

"It was sad but beautiful. Then I thought, 'What am I doing this for?' I was depressed while I was working on it. But that's part of art, isn't it? I mean how many sad songs do you hear that are great songs! But I just couldn't finish it."

As an artist Duke would love to do the piece. As a businessman, he can't justify the time or expense. Sad doesn't sell.


Would he do *The Broken Leg* if someone commissioned it? "At the drop of a hat. It's a

beautiful and touching subject. I can see how he would be holding the bridle in one hand—I mean I've had to do that. The gun, not like you're getting ready to shoot but . . . I had to shoot." He sighs and shakes his head.

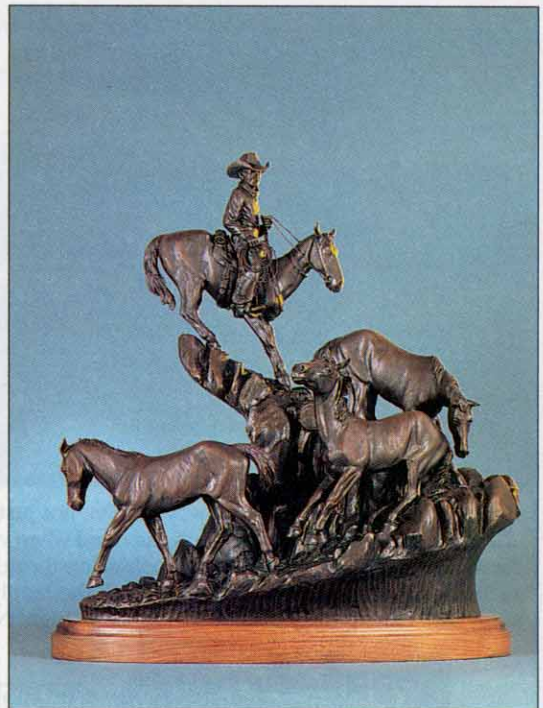
"Like a sad song there is a place for *The Broken Leg*. I just haven't found it yet."

For Duke, part of the fun of being where he is today is the journey it took to get here. "I wouldn't have missed any of it. Sure there are some things I might have changed but if you don't experience the bad stuff now and then, how can you appreciate the good stuff when it comes along?"

Nailing it, immortalizing the Western way of life through sculpture, has been the payoff for Duke Sundt in his love affair with the cowboy life.

"To really express it, you have to live it, and even though I know more now than when I started, I'm just glad not to have known it then. It's like that Garth Brooks song, 'you're better off not knowing or you would have missed the dance.' I'd never have wanted to miss the dance." 

**Sharon Vander Meer** writes a column for the Las Vegas Daily Optic.



In Jinglin', a cowboy helps push a herd of horses downhill toward their corral.

The sculpture, in a limited edition of 15, measures 23-inches high by 22 1/2-inches long.