

# TRAIL TIP, START WITH A BOWLIN

## Part 1

By Terry Wagner

There was a time when all the big cow outfits provided a cowboy with horses, chuck (food) and lariat rope. Some outfits provided the rope to make the cowboys life a little easier and some would provide enough rope for a fella to hang himself with in hopes they could fire him for doing something stupid. In the days before good grass ropes, and long before the various grades of nylon we know today a good grade of rope made from a combination of fibers of silk and manila was a favorite among good hands. The Mexican vaqueros were partial to hand braided riatas made from stretched rawhide rubbed with sheep fat then drug in the dirt to season the feel of the finished braiding.

When I was a teenager I had one rope, a heavy half inch thick grass rope that would require dunking in the water tank in order to put some life back into it in the hot summer months. It served to rope anything I thought needed catching from roping steers to sheep and from goats to my little brother. I bought the rope at the old Pedley, California livestock auction for the whopping sum of one dollar. It did have a professional looking honda tied in it but it was showing some serious wear. I was working for the 5-C Stables in San Bernardino, California at the time as a dude wrangler, poop scooper, fence builder, and general stable hand. Bill Cole, the owner of the 5-C showed me how to cut the old honda off the rope, tie a Turk's head knot in the end and fix a new honda in the rope pulling it tight with a crow bar. When I was done I used an awl and thread to stitch a leather burner in the honda. As I recall that was the first serious "using knot" I ever really tied in a piece of rope.

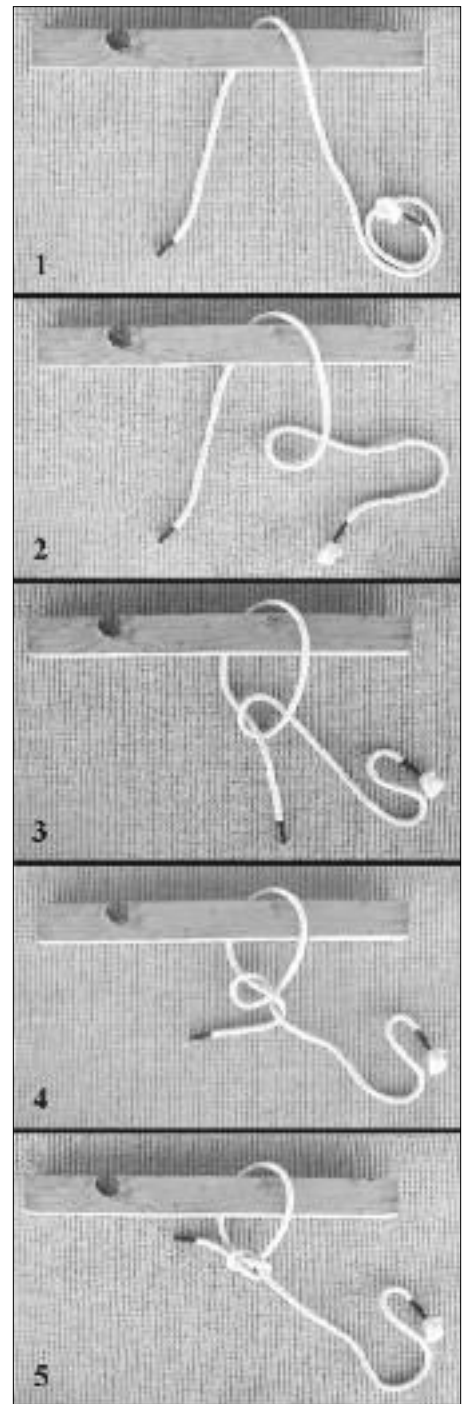
Other than the lariats we use to rope with today, unless someone is rigging a sailing vessel, ropes and the use of knots kind of takes a back seat to more con-

venient methods of tying onto things. Hitching onto livestock seems to have taken the same path. We have rope halters, flat nylon halters, plastic halters and just about every quick connect collar and gadget imaginable. Very few folks seem to use just a plain old rope anymore.

We ride with halters of every kind under our bridles, I think because we have lost the way in using rope. Even if it is not a lariat rope a sixteen to twenty four foot piece of rope carried on ones saddle is a pretty handy piece of equipment and it can serve a multitude of uses, including, but not limited to pulling an obstacle off the trail, fashioning a highline or picket line, side lining a foot up for doctoring and fashioning a lead rope or halter just to name a few. No matter what you may intend to do you are going to have to fasten the rope to your mule or an object in order to make the rope useful. This almost always requires the use of a knot of one kind or another. There are a number of different knots used to work livestock. Just to name a few, they include the slip knot, square knot, sheet bend, half hitch, double half hitch, jam knot and the bowline or "bowlin knot."

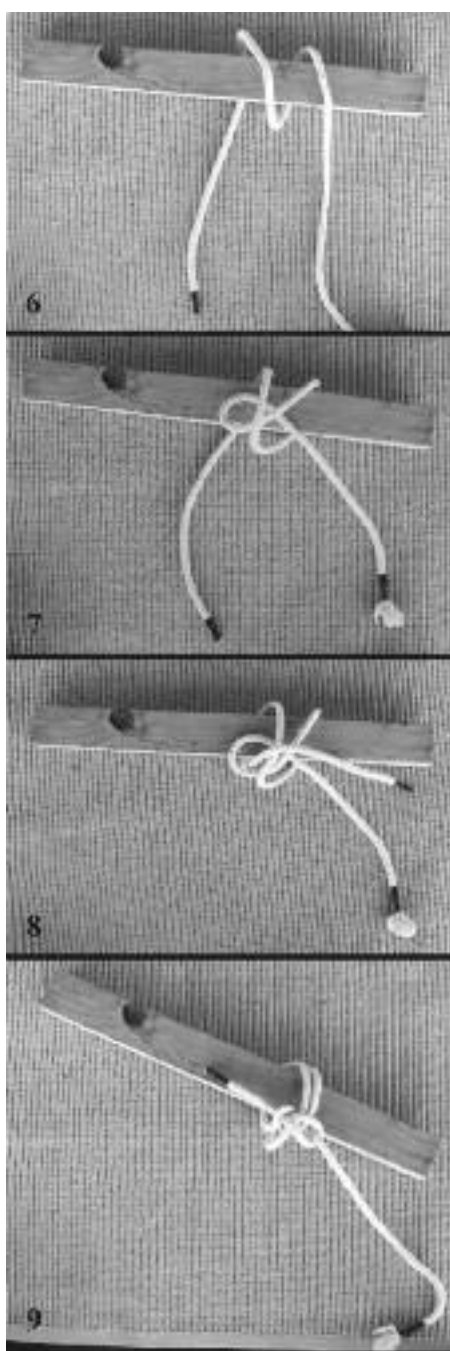
Legendary and often written about cowboy Monk Maxwell will always tell you, when it comes to tying up livestock to "start with a bowlin." The bowline knot is a knot that no matter how much pull is applied to it, it will not allow a rope to pull tight, such as when applied around an animal's neck. Yet, when the time comes it can be easily removed. I first started using the bowline knot to tie a horse up with when a brown gelding named Chunk arrived at my house when I was about fourteen or fifteen years old. Chunk was a great old horse. He was dog gentle, a great trail horse and you could rope calves off him or either end of a steer. However, Chunk was an escape artist. You could tie him up with

a halter, turn around to put your saddle up and no matter how tight the halter had been applied he would slip it off in just a few seconds. If you were at home it wasn't a real problem but when you were camping it could be a little incon-



venient. He would normally just be grazing close by but if you left out any food he wasn't particular. His taste would quickly move from blue stem grass to bread, bologna or Twinkies. Nothing was safe. I found that if I applied a rope with a bowline knot snugly around his neck, then slipped the lead end of the rope through the lead rope ring on the halter he couldn't get loose. It also made for a handy way to lead a horse. As time went on I began to notice that the folks riding spade bit horses always rode with a neck rope tied with a bowlin knot and running down through a small bosal. Not that I don't use halters, these "get down ropes" became the way I would lead horses and mules to this day.

Tying a bowline knot always seems to puzzle a few folks. My wife Sandy however, holds the world's record for the longest time to learn this skill; twenty eight years. Her other knot tying skills are also worth mentioning. Most folks will tie their mules up using some form of a slip knot. Sandy's slip knots take origi-



nality to new heights. These knots of hers contain about six feet of rope wound into a single ball with the end of the rope no where to be seen. The only saving grace is that you can follow the rope to the mule. For years I have kept a sharp folding knife on my chaps just in case I ever have to untie one of these. I have come to the conclusion that men do not possess the genetics necessary to navigate these knots. I have to give her credit though, I have never seen a mule free himself when tied with one of her knots.

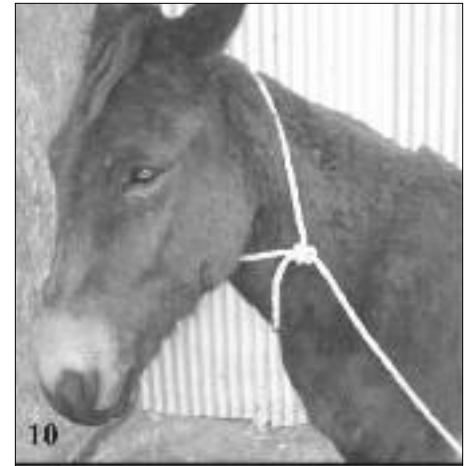
Just about everyone has a piece of rope lying around their barn or trailer that they haven't done anything with in years. Just about any rope will do for a get down rope but my favorite is half inch diameter braided nylon. Climbing rope makes a great lead rope and rope to carry on your saddle as it does not tangle, is extremely abrasion resistant and will last for years. In order to tie the rope around your mule's neck using a bowlin knot throw the rope over your mule's neck. Bring the end out on the left side. Take the lead rope end in your right hand and twist a loop in it. Take the short end and put it through the loop from the front to back. Bring the short end under the lead rope then back through the loop and pull snug. The old directions used to go like this; *the rabbit runs out of his hole, around the tree and back into his hole*. Pull any slack you

may want in order to make it snug around the mule's neck. If you want to be perfect make sure the tail end of the rope is on the outside of the finished knot. There is probably no more useful knot around livestock than the bowline knot. Check out photos 1-5.

Another bowlin knot is what I call the multi-line or duel line bowlin. In this version you can take more than one wrap around the mule's neck. Take the lead line end and twist a loop in it. Push the loop under the coils and use the short end just as you would in tying a normal bowline. See photos 6-9. Photo 10 shows a finished bowlin around Ace's neck and photo 11 shows a finished duel-line bowline around his neck. This knot is useful if you need to use up a little extra lead line or can be used as a tree saver for a highline or picket line. A bowline around the lower portion of the mule's neck is the start of a side line hitch. This allows you to hold up a rear foot for doctoring. Recently I found that my old mule Jim had a little thrush in his back feet. I used the old stand-by remedy of Koppertox to doctor him. It is always best to let the medication soak in and I used a side line to hold Jims back feet off the ground one at a time, for about five minutes each time I doctored him. Ace models a sideline in photo 12. Note that there are two knots showing in this photo. The lower of the two is a bowlin knot. The bowline is the start of

several quick halters that can be fashioned from a piece of rope that we'll get into next time.

Since I started this article Sandy has a piece of cord on one of our dining room chairs and practices tying a bowline every morning. It seems to be helping.



A finished bowlin around Ace's neck



A finished duel-line bowline around Ace's neck



Ace models a sideline

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