

Orren Mixer

Artist of the Industry

One would never surmise that the humble, unassuming, thankful and humorous Orren Mixer was a legendary equine artist at all—not to mention an inductee of seven halls-of-fame. In conversation, he has to be continually drawn back to speak of his accomplishments and career; he'd rather talk about others and what they've achieved. He'd rather tell you a good story about a horse, rodeo, or longhorn steer. He'd rather laugh, and talk about where you live and what you like to do.

by Doreen Shumpert

That's pretty impressive for a man who's commissioned works sell in the million dollar range more than he'll ever say or may even know. Instead, he'll only tell you that "he's painted for the best and richest, but a good person is a good person, no matter who they are or what they do." Proving that belief, he's also painted on "trade" more than a few times, which is how he's ended up with everything from new trucks to ornery donkeys in the back yard.

"People are always wanting to give me something, and I'm always wanting to take it," he laughed.

For the spry 87 years-young Mixer, it's never been about making money or being famous; it's about being happy, having fun, and sharing his talent with others by depicting their animals on canvas.

A native of Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, Mixer remembers the horse and wagon days, and hanging around the Oklahoma City Stockyards as a child, trying to convince people to buy Texas Longhorn cattle. In these early days, he had plenty of time to observe the horses, cattle and people—setting the stage for his artistic eye.

"I've had horses on my mind since I had diapers on," Mixer chuckled. "One time I was still little, I was barefoot too, and got on an old pony bareback. He ran me back to the barn and cut my foot trying to scrape me off!" Mixer

added, with more contagious laughter.

When he was 9 years old, his mother died. However, he doesn't remember feeling sorry for himself. Even then, he focused on others.

"I've always had so many people helping me I feel guilty," he shared. "I've always felt sorry for people who aren't happy, because life is supposed to be fun," he added.

Around this time, Mixer rotated living with two uncles that raised cattle. One raised dairy cows and one raised Herefords, so Mixer spent the majority of his time at the latter because "you couldn't rope or ride the dairy cows." He began rodeoing as a kid, roping, bull riding and bronc riding. As he got a little older, he also got into rodeo photography around 1942, and sold rodeo pictures for \$1 a piece.

"Boy how times have changed," he laughed.

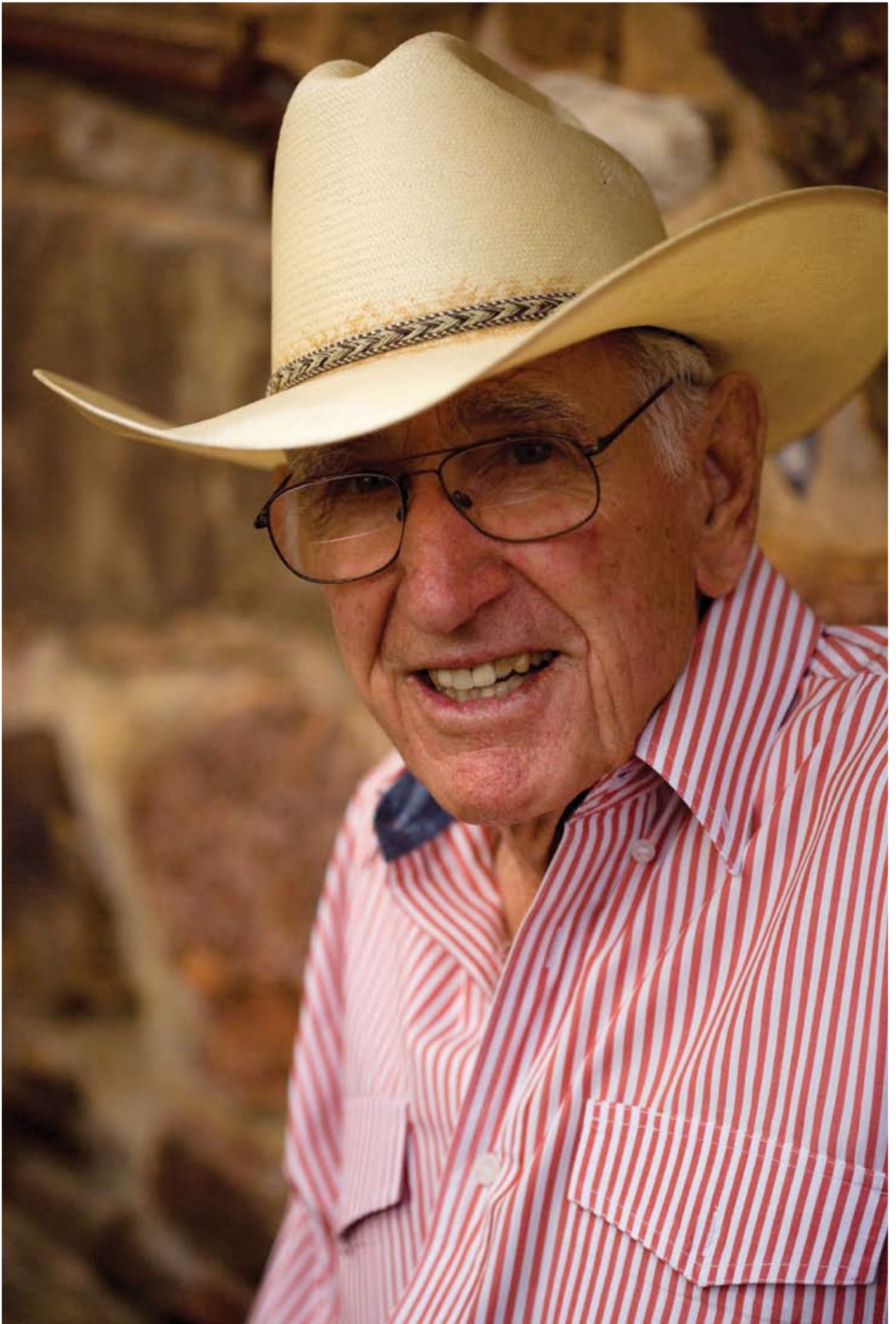
During Mixer's senior year of high school, one of his teachers became rather impressed with his drawings and sent samples to the Kansas City Art Institute in Kansas City, Missouri, and as a result he received a two-year scholarship studying commercial art. That led to various opportunities, including living in New York City for a while designing covers for sheet music, which paid \$5 a week. But back in 1940, a body could live on that just fine if he was careful. He also drew hats that were depicted in ads on penny postcards to supplement his income.

About two years in New York was enough, and Mixer decided to return West and joined the United States Navy for three years, and was stationed in Chicago, Illinois. He kept up his art and photography work, and did some artwork for other Naval recruits. It was during this time he also painted three horse pictures, and sold them to a store. Two of them sold immediately, before Mixer even left the place. That day, the most world famous equine artist of all time was born, as the event inspired him to focus on painting horses rather than commercial art.

After being discharged from the Navy, Mixer and his wife Evelyn returned to Edmond, Oklahoma, where they still live today. They've been married 66 years and have four sons together.

"They're better than me!" Mixer states with pride in his voice. "One is in the horse business, one runs a whole town in Missouri, one builds barns and houses, and one is in charge of the big lake. And they have a good mama," he added. "She wakes up every day wondering what I might do next!" he laughed.

Originally, Mixers settled a little ways up the road from where they are now, but have lived in the same general location since 1946. He describes it as his "house at the studio" rather than the other way around. His workshop is classic, cozy, inspirational Western Americana in style. Rock walls are adorned with longhorn skulls, his works of art and other



Perhaps the most famous of Mixer's works is his legendary portrayal of "The Ideal American Quarter Horse," depicted in his painting of the same name.

Photo courtesy AQHA and the AQHA Hall of Fame



Western memorabilia. There are huge wood beams and art materials scattered all about. It's an impressive site, especially to some Australian friends that happened by.

"I've got some huge timbers and beams in here. The studio is half underground, and has 30 foot ceilings with railroad beams that weigh a ton a piece," he said. "My friends from Australia are still talking about the size of these beams!" he laughed.

"Then the other day, I walked down to the gate to get my mail and there were some people visiting from France. I talked to them for about an hour, and they asked if they could take pictures of my mailbox!" he added, still laughing. "Can you imagine that?"

What's truly hard to imagine is that since the day Mixer shifted his focus to painting horses, he's been asked to paint so many he can't begin to give you a number. He's painted—and met—most of the legends of the American Quarter Horse Association (AQHA), including Cutter Bill, Shining Spark, Marions Girl, King, Leo, Music Mount, Rebel Cause, Poco Bob and Poco Dell, Easy Jet, Go Man Go, and Coys Bonanza—just to mention a very few. He was also commissioned "around 1960" to paint the now famous representation of the breed, called "The Ideal Quarter Horse." That was followed by commissions to paint the "ideal" of several other breeds, including

the Palomino, Buckskin, Appaloosa, Pony of the Americas, Arabians, Paints and more. Currently, he's working on a painting depicting the first cloned foal, and another featuring the AQHA Superhorse from three years ago. He's also painted legendary Quarter Horse people, like cutting horse trainer and competitor Matlock Rose, and he's also depicted donkeys, cattle, ranching scenes, dogs, and many lesser-known horses simply because the owner requested such. Before he paints, he likes to visit the horse or person and take several detailed photos to work from. From there, he's been characterized as having a "photographic memory" and an uncanny ability to accurately reproduce what he sees.

But does he have a favorite work? Not really. Similar to his philosophy on humans, "a good horse is a good horse, no matter what breed he is, and what's important is that his owner likes him and has fun with him."

Consequently, Mixer has either owned, raised or competed with Quarter Horses, Appaloosas, Paints and even a Thoroughbred or two. He's owned successful racehorses amongst these breeds, and the first colt out of a Shining Spark mare and the first AQHA champion by legendary sire Zan Parr Bar.

According to AQHA Executive President Bill Brewer, in a recent interview with Western Horseman Magazine, Mixer's works "depict

balanced, correctly proportioned horses. His works certainly demonstrate the fact that he 'sees' the entire horse. Even to the uninitiated, you just know when you're looking at a Mixer painting. His style, ability and the beauty of his art are evident."

These days, he's still paints every day, takes care of some cows, and has some horses around. "Mama" added that he's had a few health problems and has been to the hospital, but he said he only went to visit all the other people.

"There's nothing wrong with me!" he laughed. "But I think they knew who I was by the time I left!" he joked.

Otherwise, all is well, and Mixer couldn't be happier. He maintains an upbeat attitude, proclaiming he thinks "everything is exciting, even fishing and riding my bulldozer."

"I love everything," he shared. "I feel sorry for people who don't have anything to do. I love life, and if I die tonight I've enjoyed as much as anybody in this world," Mixer said.

And thanks to his talent and willingness to share it with that world, he's immortalized countless equine legends on canvas—even their great grandsons and granddaughters. In so doing, he's preserved their history and very essence in timeless tributes that will last forever.