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What life's like on the range with the real cowboys

Sep 1 2010 By Annie Brown

AS a cowboy, Buck Demers doesn't have much time for movies, what with all that rodeo riding, tending to cattle and picking up the women falling at his feet.

But if Buck had to choose the cowboy's celluloid cowboy, it would be John Wayne every time.

Buck, 22, fidgets with his stetson and answers with a measured Wayne drawl, when he ponders who portrays his job most vividly on the big screen.

"I ain't been around a lot of movies," he said. "But I'd say John Wayne. I watch him in the film *The Cowboys* and it makes want to go out and do my job. What can I say? He's the Duke."

Buck is a big hit with the girls around Philipsburg, Montana, the kind of tall, dark and moody type who is in harmony with rolling green hills and wide open sky.

He has barely broken sweat after lassoing a steer and wrestling it to the ground.

This month sees a western season on the channel TCM and the launch is at the luxurious Ranch at Rock Creek, in Montana.

Working cowboys tend the 10 square miles of rugged ranch, where cattle have been raised for 120 years, and guests are usually city slickers swapping Wall Street for a fix of wilderness, albeit five star.

They get a chance to wrangle, ride and cattle drive but the men in suits must turn green when they meet Buck.

He said: "They are fascinated by what we do. It's great to have them around. I love people but that's not to say you don't have to go off and mend a fence now and again, just to be on your own."

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Pictures Cowboys

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In reality, the true cowboy is less macho than the movie version. Buck is an adrenalin junkie but he admits there have been moments when the nerves threaten to take hold.

"Yeah, I get scared when I'm on a bucking horse that's pretty big. I have broken so many bones I can't tell you," he said. "But that's the job and if I didn't do what I do, I would have to be jumping out of planes or something."

Buck doesn't even flinch when some visitor suggests he looks like Jake Gyllenhaal of *Brokeback Mountain*.

"Yep, I get that all the time," he said with a wry smile and a shrug of the shoulders.

"It was real gay but a good movie. I liked it." John Wayne is in the new TCM western season and it's easy to forget just how huge a star he was.

From 1949 to 1974, he was named one of the top 10 box office attractions. In the TCM season, he appears in *Red River*, the 1948 epic directed by Howard Hawks that sees him play cattleman Tom Dunson.

Dunson builds a cattle empire from nothing with his adopted son Matthew Garth and together they begin a cattle drive north from Texas to the Missouri.

Along the way, Garth turns against Dunson and the story becomes one of grit, betrayal and vengeance.

Perhaps more than most, it portrays the back-breaking grind of the cattle drive.

Before the railways took over, the cowboys moved beasts thousands of miles, often across treacherous terrain, covering a mere dozen to 15 miles a day. And many of those who drove the cattle had come from Scotland.

The Highland Clearances saw the forced removal of large numbers of Scots, who then emigrated to North America, with no choice but to make a new life.

Rob Gibson, author of the book *Highland Cowboy*, said that Scots helped shape the culture of the west.

He said: "Cattle droving in Scotland was an established profession from the 16th century and many migrants took cowboy jobs in the American West.

"By the 1880s, many sons of better-off Scots would become Western cattlemen, forming or managing giant new ranch companies. Others sought work on cattle and sheep ranches."

Chisholms, Campbells, MacDonalds, Grants, Anguses and many other Scots came to the fore in establishing the cattle empires that were built on the Great Plains.

They were tough men, certainly not the type to take orders from a girl. So, they must be turning in their grave now that feminism has hit the cowboy profession.

Tammy Shields, 38, is a pretty blonde, barely 5ft 4in, who is deceptively fragile until she jumps on the back of a quarterback and shows it who is boss.

She actually is a boss, and as the ranch's head wrangler, can rope a calf as well as any man.

She said: "My dad raised cows and he used to take me on a horse before I could walk. It's the most natural thing in the world to me."

She is a mother of five and her husband is head rancher.

What about the women's reaction to her staff? She laughed: "They go crazy for Buck. He's such a smooth talker. I don't feel that me being a woman has been an issue with the guys. I think there is a mutual respect and we get on really well. But I do have the final say."

The Westerns don't tend to portray women like Tammy, concentrating on the head-scarved, wide-eyed damsels in distress or the ladies of the saloons.

But Tammy is also a fan of The Duke.

She said: "He is the most realistic. It's the horseman in him, the cattleman in him, his cowboy was very realistic for its day. The Duke is certainly someone I would have liked to have got to know."

Strangely, Clint Eastwood doesn't figure high on her or Buck's list.

Tammy said: "I can't get into Pale Rider and I just can't see Clint Eastwood as a cowboy."

Pale Rider is considered to be one of Eastwood's weakest westerns but his classic Unforgiven has been consistently voted one of the best movies of all time.

The movie won four Oscars and was voted as the fourth best American film in the western genre in the American Film Institute's Top 10 list.

In 2005, Time.com named it one of the 100 best movies of the last 80 years.

Some of the cowboys on the ranch were too young to go to a cinema when Unforgiven was released in 1992.

Back on the ranch, Kevin Cooper, 23, from Montana, prefers to learn from real life.

He said: "The bottom line is being a cowboy is a hard way of life.

"It is pretty much hard work from sunrise to sunset so you have to love it."

The TCM western season starts on Tuesday, September 6.

Method to their outfit...

The cowboy uniform is more than just a draw for the girls.

Here is what they wear and why.

The stetson shades his eyes from low sun, his head from the heat and is an umbrella in the rain and snow.

A scarf protects the vulnerable blood vessels of the throat from the cold.

Shirt fasteners mean fast release if a horse has thrown him and is dragging him by his shirt.

Chaps protect against rain, burns in branding and the sharp underbrush of the horse's coat.

The boots have high heels to anchor to the ground when branding or wrestling a steer.

The pointed toes are for accessing stirrups easily.
