

HANNAH BALLANTYNE

A CREATIVE COWGIRL'S LIFE

BY CHASE REYNOLDS EWALD PHOTOGRAPHY BY AUDREY HALL

W

hen the Brannaman ProAm Vaquero Roping event rolls around each October in Santa Ynez, California, there's a lot to take in: horses, celebrities, flashy gear, cool western stuff and nonstop action. But amidst the bustle there's a quartet of cowgirls who draw the eye. They are everywhere at once, helping behind the scenes, answering questions, directing attendees, posing for the cameras, then abruptly interrupting it all to scramble to their mounts to take their turns competing. The dynamic young women—three of them childhood friends, all four college pals and, over the course of several years, roommates in Bozeman—grew up in ranching communities. Today, they are forging their own paths in the contemporary West, mixing a working west ethos with a cool, current take on the lifestyle.

As they compete, these girls might be sporting chaps, armitas or chinks with gracefully flying fringe that catches the light—and the judges' eyes. The energy of its movement on the sprinting horses is only matched by the girls' own flashing smiles. And after they compete, whether browsing the vendors' custom hats and wild rags or going out on the town back in Bozeman, they sport, hanging off their shoulders or dangling from their hands, striking one-of-a-kind leather bags.

The cool gear with the flying fringe is the work of cowgirl artisan Hannah Ballantyne, who grew up home schooled on working cattle ranches in Wyoming and Montana. There she and her brother James were raised by renowned western artist Carrie Ballantyne and horse trainer, ranch foreman and singer/songwriter Jesse Ballantyne in a world where nature, animals and the creative process influenced all.

Born in Cody, Wyoming, Hannah spent her early years on a historic ranch in California before the family moved to Montana; most of her childhood was spent on different sections of the vast Padlock Ranch, which straddles the border of Montana and Wyoming near the Crow Indian Reservation. "When we were growing up, until I was 15, the closest town was always at least an hour away," she explains. "It was just horses and cattle and big empty spaces."

Because of her parents' intellectual interests, creative pursuits, and love of travel, she didn't grow up sheltered or unaware of the outside world. "We always had a great library, with books on artists and more eclectic things," Ballantyne says. "Mom and Dad were always interested in learning and getting outside the box. And we didn't have TV to sap our creativity."

"When we were growing up, until I was 15, the closest town was always at least an hour away, it was just horses and cattle and big empty spaces."

OPPOSITE PAGE: Hannah Ballantyne wearing vintage armitas.





“Lots of people who love the look
don’t have a horse”

She and her brother, a talented musician, were able to dive deep into the subjects they were studying, recalls their mother. “We tried to create a holistic education,” recalls Carrie Ballantyne. “If we were looking into Japan, I tried to include science, geography, language, and literature. I’d give them a taste of something and they’d take off, writing plays, designing costumes, even making musical instruments.” (On one occasion, while studying the medieval period, the Ballantyne kids made a full suit of armor out of cardboard, spray painted it silver, then went out jousting on their horses. “My mother didn’t approve,” says Hannah wryly. “She caught us once and that was that.”)

It was only natural that a passion for the arts took hold: “They grew up at the foot of my easel,” Carrie explains. Despite home schooling her children and making every meal from scratch, she always carved out time for drawing or painting every day beginning at 1:00 p.m.. Carrie is a wildly talented and widely awarded professional artist, known for her intimate portraits of working cowgirls and cowboys. Hannah’s father, Jesse, is also artistic, a talented musician and contemporary western songwriter; evenings were often spent with the family playing and composing music together.

Hannah’s unusual schooling allowed her to graduate from high school early, around the time her parents moved off the ranch and into Sheridan. Hannah leapt at the opportunity to live and work with family friends in England for a year, then attended college in Wyoming and California before settling in Bozeman. There the quartet of young women so noticeable at the Vaquero roping came together, as roommates in a residence they promptly labelled the Hen House.

OPPOSITE PAGE: Hannah’s leathermaking process of designing, cutting and sewing.





Being reunited with childhood friends Reata Brannaman and Nevada Watt and getting to know Ceily Rae Highberger marked the start of a truly creative period for the young artist. Her companions' work ethic and the fact that they were all running businesses while attending college was hugely inspiring. Reata, daughter of horse trainer Buck Brannaman, is an instructor in the equine program at MSU in addition to running her own business starting and selling colts. Nevada, daughter of noted bit and spur maker Jeremiah Watt, is a talented silversmith; she learned her craft young and was making jewelry, belt buckles and embellishments for horse gear as a professional by the time she was in college. Celia Rae is also an artist with her own design and photography business. The four girls quickly became trend setters around town and in the western horse world. They even penned a column for Ranch & Reata Magazine, chronicling their cool western lives and serendipitous moments. (An example from October/November 2014: "Being the first to ride across a pasture after a fresh snow—the crunch of the snow with no tracks on it is pretty blissful.")

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Hannah and girlfriends Ceily Rae, Reata Brannaman and Nevada Watt. RIGHT: Hannah by Audrey Hall.



Hannah's leather business started as a hobby (she learned the basics of the craft working one summer for Sheridan saddlemaker Matt Moran) but soon morphed into a small business. Specializing in armitas (vaquero-style short chaps, with fringe around

the waist), Hannah found that her eye-catching work was much in demand. Eventually she started taking the leftover pieces of leather and making purses. This appealed to her waste-not ethic—"As a responsible businesswoman and a citizen of the world, I use what I can." It also opened up a whole new market for her work. "Lots of people who love the look don't have a horse," she points out. The growth of her business dovetailed nicely with her degrees in English and Business as the classroom concepts came up against real-world

"Everything was inspired by a love of art and history and culture. It always came back to creating and designing things. It all feeds into the aesthetics of something. The way we grew up was a huge influence."

applications, though she's always learning. "I'm sure there are things I could be doing much more efficiently," she admits, "but that's part of the learning process." Hannah received her degree last winter and finds there's no end to demand for her work as her reputation grows. She likes working for herself, setting her own schedule and, of course, having an outlet for artistic expression. More than anything, she says, "I like to build stuff that people use during their daily work, working with cattle and horses." A current project, a pair of chinks for a working cowboy, are of bone-colored cowhide with boot stitching along the yokes and long fringe. For chinks she uses set patterns drawn by hand as her templates, and allows customers to choose colors, style and details such as fringe length. "I like people to have their own personal touch on what they order, while still building in my distinct style."

Says her mother, who owns a pair of Hannah's custom-made armitas, "What's fun about Hannah's work is that everything she makes is unique. She has some basic designs she might start with, but then the creative urge takes control. She has such an eye for design."

"There are a lot of good gear makers out there," Hannah notes. "I try to make every piece pleasing to the eye, not just functional." This passion for aesthetics she credits to her upbringing. "Everything was inspired by a love of art and history and culture. It always came back to creating and designing things. It all feeds into the aesthetics of something. The way we grew up was a huge influence."

For her successful melding of art and commerce, Hannah looks to the people who inspire her and credits her recent business degree from MSU with giving her the practical tools to understand and grow her burgeoning business. Being a millennial, she has made great use of social media to grow and promote her work (she has more than 3,500 followers on Instagram) as well as her natural gregariousness and her love of people and the western lifestyle into which she was born. Her passion for horses, roping and working outside helps inform her designs and keep her creations usable and practical as well as keeping her connected to the world of working ranch people.

Many intellectually curious and talented ranch kids end up having to go away to make it in the world; they have to compromise, sacrificing the lifestyle in their pursuit of success. Hannah Ballantyne is determined to find a way to have both. And with her love of good design, some vintage tools and full immersion in today's dynamic cowboy culture, she is already on her way. **CG**

Hannah at the OW Ranch in Montana. Photo by Carrie Ballantyne

