

David Stoecklein
He Captured the Spirit of the Cowboy Lifestyle
By Heather Smith-Thomas

We've all seen his photos over the past 40 years—beautiful outdoor shots in glossy magazine ads for Chevrolet, Jeep, Coca-Cola, Stetson, Marlboro, Wrangler, Canon, Copenhagen and other major companies. And most of us have seen his legendary cowboy action images that celebrate the western cowboy tradition and lifestyle in the glorious photos sported by his calendars, note cards and books. He considered his photography art, with the whole outdoors as his canvas. The West lost one of its most devoted artists with the death of David Stoecklein on November 10, 2014, at age 65.

Early Years - David was born July 11, 1949 in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania—an easterner who longed to be a westerner. He was fascinated by anything western, and began taking photos that captured rural images in 1968 while taking a photojournalism course in college. But he dropped out of college before he finished the course, impatient to pursue a photography career. He wasn't satisfied with the photo opportunities in the eastern countryside however, and headed to California. He was eager to take beautiful pictures and try to make a living doing it.

After living in California for a while, he moved to Utah where he enjoyed skiing and photographing skiers, producing beautiful action shots. This led to doing photo illustrations for ski companies and sports/outdoor magazines, and he soon accomplished his dream of making a living with photography. He early on found his niche and became one of the most sought-after commercial photographers, hired by many big companies, and his work for them is now legendary.

He met his future wife, Mary Jaggard, in 1976. They moved to Sun Valley, Idaho and were married there. He and Mary had 3 sons—Drew, Taylor and Colby. Eventually David started his own photography and publishing business, based in nearby Ketchum. His business, Stoecklein Photography and Publishing is essentially two in one. The publishing side, which publishes and markets his photography products—books, note cards, calendars, gifts etc.--can be accessed via www.thestoeckleincollection.com and the photography side (art gallery, workshops and photography sales) can be accessed at www.drspphoto.net

A Passion Fulfilled – It wasn't until he purchased a ranch near Mackay, Idaho (the Bar Horseshoe Ranch, about an hour's drive from his home in Ketchum) in the early 1980's that he found his true calling. He spent a lot of time on the ranch, and also began photographing his ranch neighbors--the real working ranchers and cowboys that he had always wanted to portray. After getting to know the local people, he was welcomed onto their outfits and they didn't mind participating in his photography projects.

Even though he'd been all over the world doing photo shoots for big companies' advertisements, using professional models, David found his passion and purpose capturing ordinary working ranch scenes and action—the more action, the better. He became so interested in the cowboy culture that he spent all the time he could with the local ranchers to learn more about ranch life, horses and cowboys.

He was welcomed everywhere he went—whether in the local neighborhood or to create a photo opportunity in some other state or country. He enjoyed people, and was probably just as well known for his kindness and storytelling as for his photography.

As stated by Sydney Chickrell (who manages Stoecklein Publishing and worked with David for the past 6 years), photographing the West was not just his career but also his lifestyle. “David was so passionate about photography, the West, his family and friends; not one of these things was ever really separated from the other. His friends were the cowboys and cowgirls he was photographing. The ranches he spent time on were among his favorite places to be. His family was often with him while he was traveling and doing photo shoots and workshops. The West was where David lived, for over 40 years,” says Sydney. David lived it, and loved it.

“David was a really hard worker. He had a great memory and even when he was on the road shooting photos he knew everything that was going on with his photography and publishing business. He trusted the people that worked for him, and everyone was really involved in all the business decisions he made,” she says.

“He made people want to work hard for him because he worked so hard himself and was so good at everything he was doing. At the same time, family was so important to David—and everyone around him knew that. We all want to keep sharing David's legacy and continuing to tell his stories of the Western way of life through his photography,” explains Sydney.

Published Work – Not long after he started photographing the ranchers and cowboys on various outfits around him, David began to find ways to share these images with others. He selected some of his photos for an Idaho Cowboy Calendar, which he published in 1988. Three years later he published a 156-page coffee-table book of action-packed photos entitled *The Idaho Cowboy*.

His second book, *Cowboy Gear*, was published in 1993. This innovative project featured authentic old cowboy gear, but in a novel way—in vivid color, worn by modern-day cowboys. It took a lot of time and effort to create each scene and make it look like a glimpse into the past, portraying an earlier era. He invested \$150,000 in the re-creation efforts and photography for that book, but it is still popular today and has sold more than 55,000 copies.

Then he and Texas rancher/historian Tom Saunders teamed up to produce a book called *The Texas Cowboy*, with Saunders writing the history and taking David around to various ranches of Texas to take the photos. By the time of his death, David had produced or helped illustrate 55 books, including the photos for James Owens' book *Cowboy Ethics: What Wall Street Can Learn from the Code of the West*.

Some of the other books showcasing his photos--documenting the West and western lifestyle--include *The Cowboy Horse*, *Cowgirls in Heaven*, *Cow Dogs*, *Lil' Buckaroo*, *The Cowboy Boot*, *Southern California—Coastal Mountains to the Sea*, *Potato Country*, *The Montana Cowboy*, *The California Cowboy*, *Cowboy Wisdom*, *Dude Ranches of the American West*, *The American Quarter Horse*, and *Legendary California Hackamore and Stockhorse*.

David felt that his cowboy photos are memorable because he tried to have them tell a story. Even though his 40 years as one of the best advertising photographers was financially rewarding, his work as a western lifestyle/cowboy photographer gave him the most satisfaction, as he sought to portray and preserve a unique culture. He always considered his photography as art rather than just capturing the moment, and this is one reason he worked so hard at each image and spent so much time creating the perfect scene. He wanted it to draw the viewer in, tell a story, and truly capture the spirit and culture of western ranch life.

Photography Workshops – David enjoyed helping aspiring photographers learn more about their craft. He was a member of Canon's educational group called *Explorers of Light*, an organization of master photographers who share their expertise in the art and craft of photography through their workshops and lectures. He started doing his own photography workshops 5 years ago at the ranch near Mackay. Some were weekend workshops and some were week-long sessions, with 10 students taking the course.

"He loved doing these," says Sydney. "The photography workshops were always a family affair. David's wife Mary, and two of his sons, Taylor and Drew, have been involved with the workshops from the start. Mary cooked the meals and David's sons helped their Dad run the workshops—setting up the photo scenes and teaching the students how to use their cameras and computers to properly expose and develop their photos," she says. A neighboring rancher often brought horses for use in the workshops.

"David loved spending time at his ranch, and especially doing the photography workshops. I think he was proud to be doing them with his family and he was such an open and inviting person that he loved sharing his special place and his knowledge of photography with others," explains Sydney.

"On Monday mornings after a weekend workshop he would always tell me, 'This was the best workshop yet' and 'The photographs are SO beautiful!' and 'Everyone loved it and had so much fun!' David had a special way of making people a part of his family and he was a great friend to so many people. I think each attendee at his workshops walked away with a greater knowledge of photography, and also a great friendship with David and his family."

The majority of his workshops have been held at the family's Bar Horseshoe Ranch, but David also put on a special workshop at the Saunders' ranch in Weatherford Texas the weekend of April 17-19, 2014. His sons Taylor and Drew plan to continue the workshops at the family ranch, utilizing the knowledge they've gleaned through working with their father and from their own successful photography careers. They will also hold the workshop again this year on the Saunders' ranch.

Students will continue to come, and continue to learn the techniques and artistry that David so willingly shared. "Just being at the ranch is an experience in itself. It is nestled in Idaho's Big Lost Valley, which is one of the most remote and beautiful landscapes in the world," says Sydney.

David R. Stoecklein Memorial and Educational Foundation – The family has created a website at <https://drsfoundation.org> for the special foundation that they have established to carry on his life's work and his passion of helping others. The mission statement is: "To preserve and document the Western

American way of life as it once was, and still is today, through photography and philanthropy. From our ranches and farms, to the men and women who work them, we hope to maintain, with accuracy, the culture that is the great American West.”

The foundation is a non-profit organization to help the causes he cared about. Its purpose is to continue his legacy of education and generosity—everything from photography scholarships to helping cowboys and cowgirls in need.

Tributes – Friends and family gathered in Las Vegas, Nevada on December 10 to pay tribute to his life, and the family is planning a celebration of life for David sometime this spring in Sun Valley, Idaho.

Kara Tolle stated on Facebook: “Good ride, cowboy! Your mission was to preserve the western way of life, and you certainly have done that. You’ve captured the spirit of the West, but you’ve also captured the hearts of so many. You genuinely loved people, you passionately loved photography, and you wholeheartedly loved the West. Those three things [created] a legacy that will live on forever... You didn’t leave us in the dust...you left a trail for us to follow. And we must all try to find our own way to follow in your prints. The bar’s been set high and I’m not quite sure how anyone will ever fill your boots...”

“You made the world a better place...I know it feels like we’ve been bucked off a horse right now, but I believe David would want us to all get back in the saddle and hang on tight and enjoy the ride. So let’s all keep the spirit of the West alive and continue his legacy!”

Larry Mahan stated on Facebook: “David’s work remains; the legacy of a lifetime—his great talent captured images that will live forever, reflecting his love of the West, so beautifully shared with all of us.” He quoted David as saying, “It is my goal to document the West for generations to come. Maybe, just maybe, my photography can help slow down the destruction of this magnificent place. My hope is that folks who don’t understand the western lifestyle will come to respect it, embrace it, and help preserve it.”

On David’s Facebook page the family wrote: “Everyone here in the Stoecklein family appreciates your kind words, memories and well wishes for David and his family. As many of you have expressed, David’s photography is one-of-a-kind and his ability to capture the American West and tell its story is unparalleled. His legacy will live on through his photographs and we will continue to run his business and share his iconic images with all of you.

Many of you know David as a talented photographer with a keen eye, great sense of light and hard work ethic. This was a very important part of his life and David loved sharing his photographs with all of you. He absolutely loved all of the relationships he has made through the years shooting the Western way of life and was never shy about expressing his gratitude for all of the people who loved his work. Above all else, though, David was a family man and a great friend. He was the kind of man who would do absolutely anything for his family and everyone around him knew it. He was generous, thoughtful, caring and full of life. He will be missed by all but as many of you have said, his images will continue to live on and tell his stories for many years to come.”