

The Growney Bucking String

Hard work and a little luck have put a California duo at the top of the stock-contracting game.

Article and Photographs by Gavin Ehringer



A new horse gets tested in the Red Bluff Round-Up junior saddle bronc riding.

Red Bluff, Calif., in April is a stockman's paradise. The pastures are lush, with knee-high grass, water flows freely in the creeks and mature oak trees shade livestock from the weather.

John Growney stops his black, 1-ton, dually pickup just outside a pasture gate. He parks his truck in the meadow and walks around to the back panel of his stock trailer. Swinging open the gate, he releases a load of mares and their foals. Then he stands back and watches as the group gallops out of sight.

"I love to watch them," Growney says, pausing for perhaps the only moment in what will be an exceptionally hectic day. "I really think I like horses more than people."

You'd never know it from his actions. Growney has a rare charisma, and he attracts people like bees to honey. He works any room like a seasoned politician, earnestly shaking hands and exchanging pleasantries. In fact, Growney ran for a California state government seat, losing a close-fought race to a Republican in this decidedly conservative, rural part of north-central California. That he even stood a chance at election is testimony to his formidable reputation as a common-sense rancher and his lifelong ties to the Red Bluff community. The man has a knack for transmitting warmth and sincerity with a simple handshake, a genuine smile, a few earnest words and a slight twinkle in the eye.

Growney says he doesn't believe in luck, but he's been blessed with it throughout his life.

Consider this: A likeable young bull rider sets out to become an amateur stock contractor. He befriends a famous California rodeo promoter, who offers to sell off some of his old bucking horses. Then, the young man acquires another stock-contracting company. Within 3 years, he's supplying stock to the biggest professional rodeo in California.

He sends a little mare to the National Finals Rodeo, where she earns top honors as the best bucking horse on the strength of an 89-point ride – the highest score ever in the bareback event to that time.

And then along comes a bull named Red Rock and a champion rider named Lane Frost...

A Hectic Life

It's April 18, the eve of Easter weekend and of the Red Bluff Round-Up Rodeo, Growney's hometown competition and one of the top 25 Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association events.

Over the next 3 days, Growney will sort and transport untold dozens of animals to and from the rodeo grounds, visit with nearly every rodeo-committee member, speak at a Rotary Club breakfast, meet with hundreds of friends and admirers, field persistent questions from a reporter, pull the



Growney leases 2,000 acres of pasture, ideal for grazing his horses.

flank straps of his bucking horses at the rodeo, care for his timed-event steers and calves, and somehow fit in a get-together with his extensive clan.

"You'd think doing your hometown rodeo would be easier on a stock contractor, but it's not," he says. "At any other rodeo, we'd haul the animals and do all the sorting on the grounds. But here, we haul them back and forth each day. And of course, I stop and talk to everyone. Any other rodeo feels like a vacation."

Not that Growney is complaining. He loves his hometown, and he's proud of this rodeo. "I want my community to be the best in the U.S.A. It makes me proud to see them pull together and put on a great show."

And he feels fortunate, because the town and its people have helped give him an enviable life.

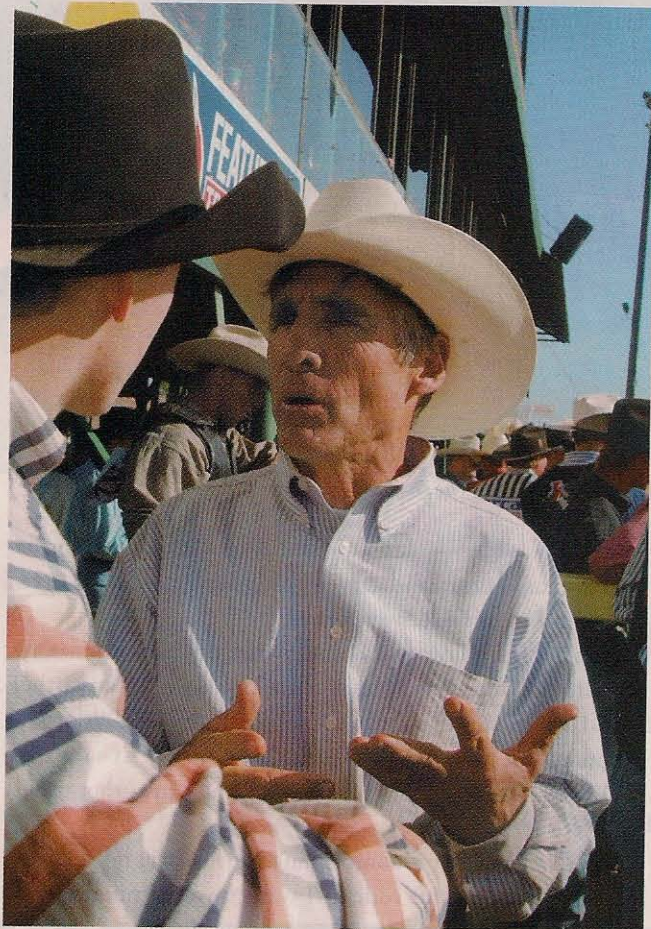
"I like to say that this place is like Bedford Falls," says Growney, referring to Jimmy Stewart's hometown in the Frank Capra classic *It's a Wonderful Life*.

"When I won the stock contractor of the year award (in 2000), I really felt like the entire town deserved the credit. It seemed like every time I needed something, somebody was there to help. And it all worked out. You know when you see me smiling? It's because I know what a great life I have."

One of Growney's guests this weekend is Mel Coleman, one of Canada's most famous saddle-bronc riders. When Growney pulls into the ranch, Coleman is already horse-



Moulin Rough, daughter of Dreamboat Annie, ranks as the top bareback horse in the Growney string.



Growney confers with a cowboy behind the bucking chutes.

back, ready to help with the sorting. A rodeo stock contractor's job involves myriad responsibilities, but the main tasks are constant sorting and transporting of livestock. Unlike other contractors, to whom riding horses are as essential as breathing air, Growney seldom straddles a saddle. Instead, he leaves that to the hands who make up one of the finest crews in the rodeo business.

Among them is Don Kish, who's been involved with Growney Bros. Rodeo Company virtually from its inception. (*Editor's note:* Don't bother asking about the "other Growney brother." Growney's only brother, Mike, isn't actually involved in the stock-contracting business. Growney just liked the sound of "Growney Bros." as a company name.)

The partnership between Growney and Kish is unusual and indeed unique in the rodeo business. A little about the history of Growney Bros. Rodeo helps explain their roles.

Growney & Kish

Growney didn't grow up in a rodeo family, strictly speaking; his father was an automobile dealer but had a keen interest in livestock and the western lifestyle. Growney was a whippet-thin kid who looked up to the local cowboys. Rodeo was one way to join this fraternity, and Growney applied himself to the sport. He attended college at California Polytechnic State University at San Luis Obispo, competing in bareback riding and bull riding. His greatest success came in 1976, when he won the bull riding at the Cow Palace Rodeo in San Francisco.

Growney wrote his senior thesis on starting a stock-contracting business, and with that sketchy outline he entered the world of amateur stock contracting, using his own practice stock as a foundation.

While Growney was toiling away at college, Don Kish, a teenager with a strong interest in rodeo, was helping Growney's father back at the small Growney family ranch. When Growney moved back home and initiated his business, Kish proved a willing and able laborer.

Growney's first big break was befriending Cotton Rosser, a famous California stock contractor from nearby Marysville. Rosser needed to sell off some aging stock, and Growney willingly bought the battle-tested bulls and horses. The young stock contractor jumped at the opportunity to buy out Rodeo Stock Contractors Inc., a longstanding stock contractor that got on the map in the 1960s with a legendary bucking bull named Oscar. Suddenly, Growney Bros. Rodeo controlled the contract to the California Rodeo in Salinas, the biggest, most traditional event in the Golden State.

"Salinas was the model for all rodeos in California, and even in the Pacific Northwest," Growney recalls. "At first, I didn't realize how important it was. All the other rodeos looked up to Salinas, and having that contract opened all the doors."

Growney Bros.' reputation was also helped by a little horse named Dreamboat Annie — a horse the contractor at first showed little interest in owning. It took nearly a year for Growney to give the mare a shot, and he wound up adding her to his string.

Quickly, the mare earned a reputation for either burying cowboys in the dirt or carrying them to the pay window. At the 1981 National Finals Rodeo bareback rider Larry Peabody and Annie combined for 89 points — a record score in professional rodeo at the time, and one that stood for 15 years. The NFR stock contractors voted Dreamboat Annie the top bucking horse of the finals that year.

Suddenly, the young, upstart Californians were getting noticed.

Red Rock

In 1984 another transaction occurred, which would eventually boost Growney Bros. to rodeo's forefront. Amateur stock contractor Mert Hunking discovered that he had terminal cancer. He wanted to find a good home for a cross-bred brindle bull.

The bull had bucked off every cowboy who'd ever tried to ride him, but he was also careful with his feet and went to great trouble to avoid stepping on or otherwise mauling the cowboys he conquered. When a ride ended, the bull simply turned back toward the gate, headed for the stripping chute.

Kish had firsthand experience with the bull. He tried the bull at a rodeo in Silver Lake, Ore., lasting only a few jumps

before being tossed so hard that when he got up, he wasn't sure where he was. The rodeo bullfighters had to turn him around and direct him toward the safety of the bucking chutes.

Hunking received many offers for the bull, but he liked the way Growney's outfit cared for its animals. On Kish's recommendation, Growney agreed to buy the bull sight-unseen. Hunking even went so far as to finance the purchase so that Growney could afford the bull.

That bull was Red Rock. Over the course of his career, first with Hunking's Sombrero Rodeo Co., and then with Growney Bros., the bull made an amazing 309 trips without a single rider hearing the bell from his broad back. Nearly every bull-riding champ, from Ted Nuce to Charles Sampson to Tuff Hedeman to Cody Snyder, was thrown from the bull at least once.

"Every bull rider wanted a chance to try Red Rock because he was a great bucking bull and because they knew he wouldn't come after them," Growney said in a 1987 interview. "He won't step on bull riders or hook them once they're off, like most bulls. He has so much character in him. He has all the character of a well-mannered person. At the ranch we put kids on his back. He's a friend, a good soul."

Red Rock was retired at the 1987 NFR after having been selected bucking bull of the year. But early the next spring,

the bull was brought out of retirement to face the reigning world champ, Lane Frost. It was a publicity director's dream: the best bucking bull of all time matched against a young, charismatic and beloved champion from Oklahoma.

Frost and Red Rock met in a best-of-seven series at rodeos throughout the West Coast. In the third matchup, Frost finally broke the code and made it to the whistle, becoming the first to ride Red Rock. When the series ended, Frost had won four of the seven matchups. Articles on the series appeared in *Sports Illustrated* and *USA Today*, and were featured on NBC's *Sports Machine*. A decade later, the matchup was reprised in the film *8 Seconds*. In 1990, both Red Rock and the deceased Frost were inducted simultaneously into the ProRodeo Hall of Fame.

Division of Labor

In the midst of that great promotion, Growney and Kish's relationship hit a rough spot. As Growney said, "We were like family, but Don was in his late 20s and I think he needed to establish his own identity."

Growney struck a deal with Kish: The young bull rider and pickup man would head up his own breeding and bucking-bull program, using Red Rock and some of the other Growney stock as the foundation. Growney would continue to feed the stock for 3 years, after which Kish would have to support the program himself. Growney would also lease stock from Kish for his rodeos, but Kish would be free to utilize his stock for other events, provided the calendar dates didn't clash with the Growney Bros. shows.

Free to pursue his own dreams, Kish took the bit in his mouth and ran with it. His first unqualified success was a little bull named Wolfman, an own-son of Red Rock and a descendent of the famed RSC bull Oscar. Wolfman was small by rodeo standards and unusually fast and athletic — exactly the kind of bull Kish had hoped to breed with his program.

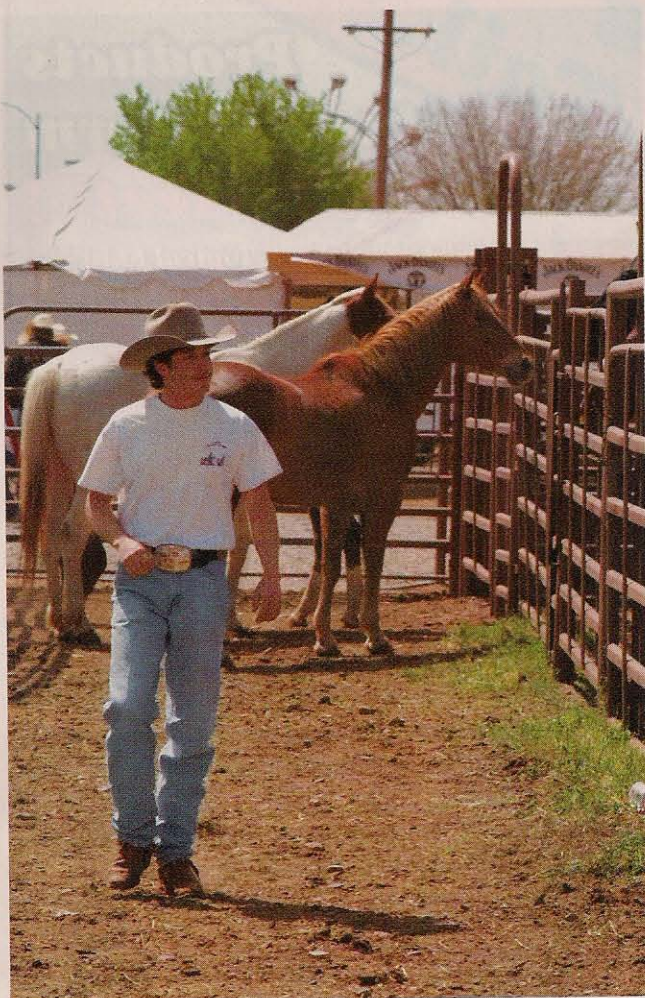
In 1991 journeyman rider Wade Leslie topped the bull at a rodeo in central Oregon, and an astounding thing happened: The judges awarded the ride 100 points, a perfect score. The ride once again enhanced Growney Bros.' visibility, and the credit for once fell almost entirely on Kish.

Rodeo committees clamored for Wolfman to appear at their rodeos, and the bull had a big impact on professional bull riding competitions. Kish's reputation as "the Bull Lord," grew apace with Wolfman's fame and that of his talented offspring. At the 1997 NFR, 10 cowboys tried their luck on Wolfman offspring. Seven of them tasted dirt and the three who managed to stay upright claimed healthy checks at the pay window.

Kish had a unique approach to breeding bulls. Rather than breed hulking behemoths, he favored small, light bulls that



Smoking Gun and Robey Condra combined for 92 points to win Red Bluff's bull-riding title.



Growney's nephew J.C. Selvester tends to the livestock at the rodeo.

were athletic and provided fast action. He believed the smaller bulls would endure longer, with fewer injuries, and provide a better show.

Dan Russell, a California stock contractor with Western Rodeos, remarked that stock contractors tend to be bull- or horsemen. At Growney Bros., Kish and Growney have struck a near-perfect balance. Kish handles the bull-breeding side, while Growney handles the horse breeding.

The duo share another advantageous labor division: Growney is a natural promoter, always willing to shake hands and talk with reporters. Kish tends to lay back with his posse of cowboys, relaxing in the shade of a stock trailer out of sight of the crowds. Often, Growney says, that has kept Kish and his contribution to the team out of the limelight, and that his young partner seldom receives credit for the company's success.

"I may be a nice guy and all, but it's Don's bulls that make this thing work," Growney says candidly. "We were recently inducted into the St. Paul (Ore.) Hall of Fame, and I was the recipient. But I felt that Don really should be in there. One day, though, the rodeo world will have to recognize him for his talent."

But even with a guardian angel with deep pockets, breeding and buying great bucking horses is a difficult

proposition. It's been proven that bulls sire higher percentages of bucking offspring than horses. Of 10 calves bred from bucking stock, a great breeder like Kish might expect seven to fit his string, and those that don't work out can always be sold for beef. On the horse side, however, a stockman is lucky to get half that buck. And unlike bulls, which can be bucked as young as 2 years old, a horse isn't really fit for the arena until at least age 4. To their advantage, however, a breeder can buck mares, geldings or stallions.

Then, there's the problem of seasoning the bucking horses. As Growney points out, when he was starting in the business he could start the young horses in amateur events, where they could defeat a few cowboys and gain some confidence. By the time the horses reach the pros, the cowboys are so talented they rarely get bucked off—a situation that discourages their future bucking efforts.

In the last couple of years, Growney has gotten back into the amateur business through his young nephew, John Casey "J.C." Selvester, a 24-year-old saddle-bronc rider. Growney allows Selvester to contract some junior and amateur events, using Growney's young stock.

A Good Feeling

In the waning light of a Sunday afternoon in Red Bluff, Growney is judging the "Wild Ride," a costume contest and bronc ride that's a favorite among the local rodeo crowd. Among the contestants is Selvester. When the gate swings open, the young cowboy gets in a few good spur licks before losing control. As he gets tossed over the horse's head, Growney winces. But then he smiles, because the horse has had a good day.

"It's gotta be a good feeling for a horse to throw a guy like that," Growney says. "It's good for the horse to know that he's won."

Growney clearly thinks that his animals share the same feelings and emotions as humans. When Red Rock died, he was famously quoted, "He's probably the most famous person in Northern California."

Spend some time with Growney and you'll see that he loves his animals nearly as much as he loves his own family. He's never married and has no children. Instead, he pours his paternal instincts into the hundreds of animals in his care. If you need evidence, simply stop by Growney's ranch and ask to see the burial ground for Red Rock. The great bull was laid to rest at the age of 18 under a spreading oak tree in a lush green pasture, just a stone's throw from Growney's home.

Gavin Ehringer writes the monthly column "Rodeo Arena" and is author of the WH book Rodeo Legends. 🐾