

# Cowboys, Poetry and Spurs

*Former ranch managers—one a respected cowboy poet—focus on making custom spurs*

By Jeanie Senior

Woman from New Hampshire who loves horses moves to Arizona, meets Texas-born man with deep roots in Colorado ranch country. They fall in love, spend the next three-plus decades working in ranch management throughout the West. She also trains horses, writes books. When they retire, the couple moves to Goldendale and starts a custom spur business.

Briefly outlined, Virginia and Pete Bennett's life together sounds like a good plot for a novel or a television series. Living it, however, has been a lot more complicated.

"After we were married we decided we didn't want to grow up—so we just started cowboying," Pete jokes. "We said that we'd go anywhere for any amount of money."

But through the decades, he adds, "We paid a terrible price with our bodies."

Their chosen occupation took them to cowboy and ranch management jobs in Idaho, New Mexico, Oregon, Washington, Colorado and Wyoming. They worked for a variety of owners, a few more challenging than others.

"Boy, you really do meet all types," says Virginia, a former barrel racer who cowboied, drove teams, and broke and trained horses.

Pete developed all of the skills involved in ranch management—including cowboying, mechanics, veterinary, fencing and welding. He describes a good ranch manager as someone "who is honest and can be left alone to do the job."

Virginia also worked as a journalist, writing stories for Range magazine, the Capitol Press and Cascade Horseman. She wrote books, appeared on NPR and PBS, and became a respected cowboy poet. She was a featured performer for 14 years at the National Cowboy Poet Gathering in Elko, Nevada.

The last ranch where Pete and Virginia worked was a huge spread in California with a horse and cattle operation, as well as



**Pete Bennett shapes the base for a spur in his workshop in Goldendale. Pete creates spurs tailored to the wide variety of his customers' requests.**

olive groves and an airstrip for the owner's collection of vintage airplanes.

In 2004, Virginia was training a jumping horse there when she had what she describes as a "horsewreck," a fall that broke her spine in four places. It was a near-fatal accident. A doctor told her that riding again would be suicide.

The California ranch demanded the attention of two people. With Virginia in fragile health, they decided to retire. "We had always worked on ranches together," she says.

When looking for a place to live, they thought they wanted to move back to Washington, where they had worked on ranches in the North Cascades. "That felt like home," Virginia says.

They had only seen Klickitat County from US 97.

“We didn’t even have a clue how beautiful Goldendale is,” says Virginia. “We didn’t know about Mount Adams. It ended up being a really good fit for us.”

In their new place, Pete started to make custom spurs.

“I’d always wanted to make spurs but we were too busy,” he says. “I love good spurs.”

He knew what a working cowboy wanted and needed but he also knew the starting price for most custom spurs is way out of their range.

The first spurs he made “were primitive as hell,” he says. More than 100 pairs later he feels better about his end product. Bennett’s Custom Spurs have gone to cowboys across North America and in Europe. One recent pair went to Paris, another to Switzerland. Bennett spurs sell for an average of \$300 to \$450, although a pair recently sold at a benefit auction for \$1,000.

Virginia, who maintains a website and a Facebook page for the business, does all of the public relations. She talks to the customer to gather details about the spurs he or she wants, then does a scale drawing, which she sends to the customer for approval.

The base spurs and the rowels are steel. The ornamentation is made from copper or brass.

When it comes to ornamentation, “I’ll do whatever they want,” says Pete. “Everybody always wants something different.”

He has decorated spurs with a customer’s initials or their ranch brand, with crosses, grizzly bears or wolves. A packer in Wyoming wanted—and got—a pack horse.

The important thing, he says, is that these are one-off spurs made for working cowboys. They are not a pair from a run of 20,000.

At the buyer’s request, he has made some spurs with “jingle bobs” attached to the rear of the spur. “You walk, they jingle,” Pete says. “I don’t push those,” he adds, with a straight face.

The Bennetts say it is an advantage they have been working cowboys and know what makes good, workable spurs. Notes from satisfied buyers on their website, [bennettspurs.com](http://bennettspurs.com), support that: “Good morning Mam, my spurs came in yesterday evening and they fit & look great. They have a real punchy look to them and you and Mr. Pete were a pleasure to work with,” wrote a man in Texas.

“My Pete Bennett spurs are beautifully made,” wrote a California buyer. “Pete is a master craftsman whose well-built spurs any horseman would be proud to wear. I am well satisfied with my purchase and have spread the word to all my friends.”

Although a recent surgery gave Virginia considerable relief from her back injuries, its effects linger. She hasn’t written



**Pete and Virginia in the Bennett’s Custom Spurs workshop. Virginia focuses on the company’s PR, while Pete creates the personalized product.**



**Pete holds a spur in its early stages. He has crafted more than 100 pairs.**

poetry for some time. And, she says with great regret, “I’ve had to give up horses.”

Her last book of poetry, “In the Company of Horses,” is available at their website. The book tells the story of their ranch experiences and includes photos of Virginia, Pete and their son, Jesse. ■