

# Freedom to Roam

**Suzanne Baker** turned her childhood love of horses and the outdoor life into a thriving career as a western painter | *By Dottie Indyke*



SAN LUIS DUST, ACRYLIC, 24 x 30.

**I**T WAS POURING RAIN AND COLD THE NIGHT SUZANNE BAKER AND HER family arrived at their new home in Three Rivers, near California's Sequoia National Park, but when she awoke the next morning she was greeted with the warmth of a blazing sun. Walking outside, she noticed a carpet of green moss covering the roof and sunlight reflected in each drop of water from the previous evening's storm. In the front yard, a group of cows lazily grazed. Just shy of her 5th birthday, Baker was awestruck. Decades later, memories of those first days in Three Rivers are indelibly etched in her mind.



It was the 1940s and the family had packed up and left Los Angeles in search of a new life. Homesteaders, they settled on a small, rustic ranch in the shadows of the towering Sierra foothills. The house had no electricity and was heated by a single wood stove. Baker's father was an alcoholic and her mother, who had been raised in a privileged family, was unprepared for the hardscrabble life, so the couple's four children were mostly left to their own devices. Baker found immense comfort and pleasure in the land.

"I hated L.A. when I was a child," she remembers. "I think you're born a lover of nature and of wide-open spaces. That love of the mountains and the cattle country and the wonderful, free landscape is something that affects your whole life."

School, for Baker, was restrictive in the extreme. She felt compelled to be outdoors and spent all her free time climbing the steep, craggy Sierras, on foot and on horseback. At 11, to buy her first horse, she earned money collecting worms in beer cans and selling them to anglers who came to fish in the Kaweah River. She rode bareback through the mountains; three years later, when she'd saved enough to buy a saddle, she was an expert horsewoman. Spurred by passion, ingenuity, and necessity, she taught herself to ride, shoe horses, and care for the family's livestock.

"I love animals. It seemed so natural to be attracted to them," she says. "You get a



SLOPES OF BIG PINE CREEK, ACRYLIC, 26 x 30.

bond and an understanding. When you grow up like we did—kind of sparse, without much parental involvement—you're lonesome. Horses filled a huge need then. They were friends. And I'm very fond of cows. They have a wonderful soul and character about them. I milked cows when I was a kid and you get attached to those silly old things."

Her mother not only encouraged her daughter's ardor for nature, turning her loose seemingly without fear for

her safety, but also nurtured her artistic talent. Many an evening in Baker's household was spent painting. Around the kitchen table, by the warmth of the stove, mother, children, and neighborhood artist friends would share a meal and take turns modeling or arranging objects for still-life paintings.

"Mother had far more talent than I," Baker asserts. "Her quality of line was superb. What a waste she couldn't do more with it. More than anything else, her lack of success, because of the rough situation of our family, made me want to be successful."



SUZANNE BAKER.

To earn money for college, Baker worked summers as a pack guide in the High Sierras and by age 18 was in great demand by the numerous outfitters in the area. Despite her aversion to school, she knew she needed to get away from home and experience





BRINGING UP THE REAR #2, ACRYLIC, 24 x 18.

a bit of the outside world. She enrolled at California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo, known for its horse and cow programs, and formalized much of the practical knowledge she'd already gained living the life of a cowgirl.

She met her husband, Gordon, in college, and the couple moved back and forth between California and Nevada, eventually settling in California's Central Valley near Yosemite National Park, where they have lived for 30 years. Baker squeezed painting in between her many responsibilities as a mother. Mornings, she'd bundle

up her three kids and send them off to school, quickly tidy up the house, and settle in to work in her studio until her children came home.

"I 'practiced' art for 20 years," she says with a laugh. "It was a long haul. I had a lot of other things to do and I didn't feel I was good enough. After my children were all grown, it seemed like it was time."

Indeed, Baker attended her local community college well into adulthood—her grown son was a student at the school at the same time—and took classes in figure drawing and composition. Just as with her

horse skills, she was already accomplished—in this case, the creator of expressionistic western paintings—by the time she was taught the basics of art.

In 1985, she was invited to attend a seminar at El Prado Gallery in Sedona. Friends had told her they thought El Prado was a perfect place for her to show her work, but she went with no expectations other than to learn. When the gallery owner asked to see her paintings, all she had to offer was a few slides. "The rest is history," she says. "The first month I showed there I got a check, and they never really did stop [coming]." Today, Baker exhibits in galleries in Arizona, Wyoming, Colorado, New Mexico, and California.

Since her debut as a professional artist, Baker has focused on landscapes and the cowboy life in California, Nevada, and the High Sierras. "I never get tired of it," she says. "There's so much diversity, color, mood, and flavor. Once I get tired of sagebrush, I move on to rocks."

Many of her paintings are inspired by cowboy gatherings, events where buckaroos get together for ranch rodeos and there are sure to be herds of horses to oblige her need for subjects. While the throngs are in the bleachers cheering the ropers and racers, Baker's likely to be found in the parking lot amid the horse trailers.

Every summer she takes a couple of weeklong treks into the Sierras. Traveling by foot and hauling a backpack, the only art supply she can carry is her camera, which she uses to document the landscape and the



numerous pack trains she encounters on the trail.

Her penchant is to depict the gentle bond between people and animals, those times when humans hold the reins softly, seemingly in communication with their fellow creatures. And, with a lifetime of intimate contact, she can practically paint horses with her eyes closed. Her style is loose and spontaneous, more expressionistic than realistic, and her goal is to evoke mood and feeling. Viewer interest, she maintains, stems from the emotional and psychological rather than from literal representation, though she admires those who make paintings that replicate life. "I try to express the soul of my subject," she says. "That's the reason I want to paint. It's the peace, the glory of the morning, and the wonderful shadows of evening."

Five days a week, from morning to late afternoon, Baker works in her studio. Each painting is an amalgam of perhaps a dozen different photographs. Since it's almost impossible, when collecting material in action, to get a perfect image, she combines the best movement, composition, and expression, and adds the dust and scenery as necessary. She paints quickly, only putting a piece aside once she feels it "completely works." If she stops too soon, she says, she risks permanently losing the energy and emotion that drives the work. She then hangs the canvases on the walls of her studio. With time and perspective, she can see more clearly what finishing touches are needed.

Art is a full-time occupation

for Baker, and she's the type who needs a serious job to fill her days. "I really don't miss horses," she says. "I rode avidly for 30 years. Then, about the time my art was taking form, I had to make a decision: Am I going to be a horse trainer or an artist? So I let go of horses."

Like her mother, Baker has passed her passions along to her children. All three live nearby and all have inherited her love of the outdoors. Her two sons, she says, express their artistic talent through building and her daughter, a psychologist, takes after her father. "She's totally friendly, outgoing, personable, and a very ladylike character," Baker laughs. "I try to be a lady but I'm kind of rough and ready."

But perhaps most of all, Baker aspires to grow. The ultimate

goal for this lifelong self-learner is to be a better artist. "I want to say more about what I feel than I'm able to say right now. I want to say things with fewer strokes. But I hope I never think I've gotten there. When anyone thinks they've conquered it all, what's the point of going on with it? It's the striving and the incremental growth that's the excitement of this business." □

*Dottie Indyke wrote about Arturo Antonio Chavez in the December issue.*

BAKER IS REPRESENTED BY LEGACY GALLERY, SCOTTSDALE, AZ, AND JACKSON, WY; MOUNTAIN TRAILS GALLERY, SEDONA, AZ; SAGE CREEK GALLERY, SANTA FE, NM; AND GALLERY ON GLASSSELL, ORANGE, CA.



IN AT A TROT #2, ACRYLIC, 26 x 32.