

This is an autobiography of Jim Warvell. Jim and the Warvell Family, Texas Cowboy Hall of Fame Inductees, performed specialty acts worldwide, one of which featured his wife Jan as "Princess Kachina" and her horse, "White Feather" jumping over a convertible. They raised the 'entertainment' value of rodeos in the 50s and 60s to an entirely new level.

## It's Been a Wild Ride

by Jim Warvell

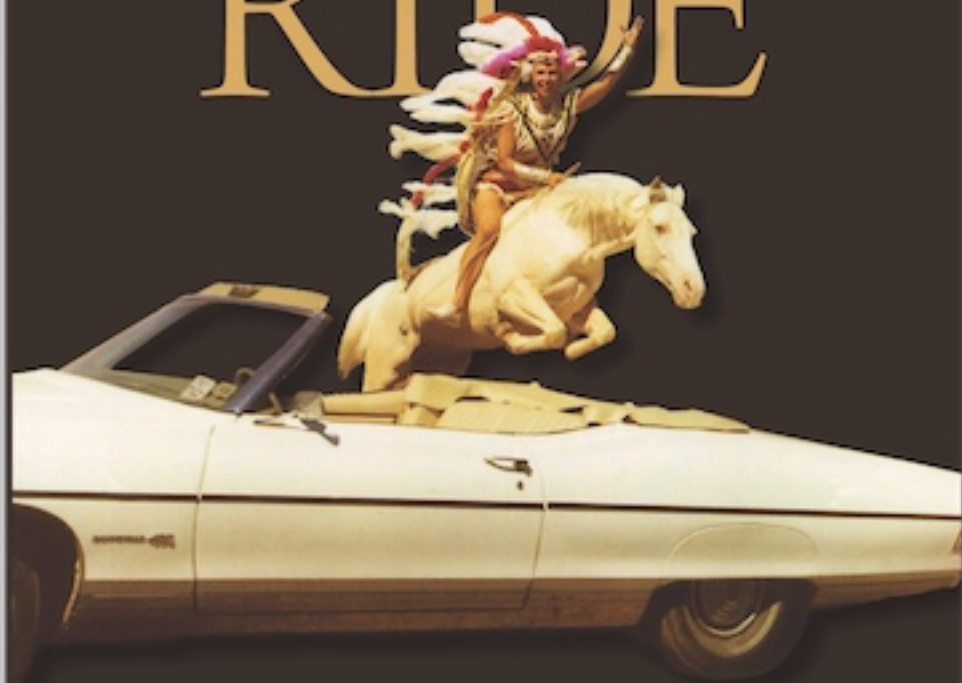
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JIM WARVELL

IT'S BEEN A  
WILD  
RIDE



WITH FOREWORD BY BILL STEVENS

***It's Been a Wild Ride***

Jim Warvell

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Cover photo: Jan Warvell as Princess Kachina atop White Feather

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# CONTENTS

FOREWORD . . . . .	XIII
INTRODUCTION . . . . .	1
WHAT IS A COWBOY? . . . . .	5
<i>Chapter 1.</i> . . . . .	11
THE FAMILY . . . . .	11
GROWING UP . . . . .	13
THE OUTHOUSE . . . . .	15
THE PONIES THAT AGED VERY FAST . . . . .	16
PASSING THE TIME . . . . .	18
<i>Chapter 2</i> . . . . .	21
A LOT TO LEARN . . . . .	22
OUR FIRST 'RODEO' . . . . .	25
THE MULE . . . . .	27
HOW SO FEW CAN BECOME SO MANY. . . . .	28
MY STUCK TRUCK. . . . .	29
<i>Chapter 3.</i> . . . . .	33
THE FIRST OF MAYS. . . . .	33
BROKEN BONE #1 . . . . .	34
WILEY . . . . .	35
<i>Chapter 4</i> . . . . .	39
WHEN THE SEASON IS OVER. . . . .	40
BUZZARD'S ROOST . . . . .	41
THE CIRCLE T RANCH . . . . .	45
RANCH HAND . . . . .	47
BETTY AND JAN . . . . .	51
<i>Chapter 5.</i> . . . . .	55
JAN . . . . .	55

<i>Chapter 6</i> . . . . .	.65
HOW DID I MISS THAT ONE?	
BACK AT THE CIRCLE T RANCH . . . . .	.65
<i>Chapter 7</i> . . . . .	.67
BROWNIE. . . . .	69
THE PAINT. . . . .	76
<i>Chapter 8</i> . . . . .	.81
MILT "THE BRAGGART". . . . .	.81
<i>Chapter 9</i> . . . . .	.87
BACK ON THE CIRCUIT. . . . .	87
WILD COW MILKING . . . . .	88
THE DRAW . . . . .	88
DAVE AND A GOOD NIGHT'S SLEEP . . . . .	90
FAREWELL TO DAVE . . . . .	92
FAREWELL TO JACK. . . . .	.93
<i>Chapter 10</i> . . . . .	.95
SALINAS . . . . .	.95
GRAPEFRUIT! WHO KNEW? . . . . .	97
ON TO CALIFORNIA. . . . .	100
<i>Chapter 11</i> . . . . .	103
SALINAS, CALIFORNIA . . . . .	103
SPECIALTY ACTS . . . . .	104
<i>Chapter 12</i> . . . . .	107
IDAHO . . . . .	107
THE GREATEST RIDE . . . . .	107
JAN ARRIVES. . . . .	108
ONE LITTLE PONY . . . . .	109
<i>Chapter 13</i> . . . . .	117
TYING THE KNOT . . . . .	117
'MAY POPS' AND A LITTLE BLACK PONY . . . . .	118

<i>Chapter 14</i> . . . . .	123
REAR END ISSUES . . . . .	123
FINALLY . . . . .	124
BACK ON THE CIRCLE T . . . . .	126
COCK-A-DOODLE-DO . . . . .	127
BACK TO WORK . . . . .	128
UNTIL IT'S DONE . . . . .	129
OUT WITH THE BOSS . . . . .	130
 <i>Chapter 15</i> . . . . .	 133
IT'S NICE TO HAVE INSURANCE . . . . .	133
BACK IN THE SADDLE AGAIN . . . . .	135
I'LL STICK TO DRY LAND, THANK YOU . . . . .	141
 <i>Chapter 16</i> . . . . .	 145
A NEW ERA BEGINS . . . . .	145
GABBY HAYES . . . . .	150
STEER WRESTLING . . . . .	151
KEEP AN EYE ON JACKSON . . . . .	156
GOTTA KEEP AN EYE ON HIM... ALL THE TIME . . . . .	158
A ROSE IS A ROSE BY ANY OTHER NAME, BUT A WARVEL CAN BE A MAGGOT . . . . .	 160
 <i>Chapter 17</i> . . . . .	 163
PARTNERSHIP . . . . .	163
THE SPARE WHITE HORSE . . . . .	164
PRACTICE PAYS OFF. . . . .	167
COWBOY STRIPTEASE. . . . .	170
DEALING WITH ADVERSITY . . . . .	173
THE SHOW MUST GO ON . . . . .	180
LIFE IS FULL OF UPS AND DOWNS. . . . .	185
INGENUITY AT WORK. . . . .	189
OH, CANADA. . . . .	192
THE TORTOISE WINS THE RACE. . . . .	193
AN IDEA IS BORN . . . . .	196
 <i>Chapter 18</i> . . . . .	 201
BECOMING FRIENDS . . . . .	201
START OF THE ARENA KACHINAS . . . . .	204

<i>Chapter 19</i> . . . . .	209
GETTING JOBS FOR THE SEASON . . . . .	209
SHOWTIME. . . . .	213
MONTIE MONTANA, SR. . . . .	216
THE LAST RODEO OF THE YEAR. . . . .	219
SECOND ATTEMPT AT THE R.C.A.	
CONVENTION IN DENVER. . . . .	225
<i>Chapter 20</i> . . . . .	229
TIME FOR A CHANGE . . . . .	229
<i>Chapter 21</i> . . . . .	237
THE QUARANTINE EFFECT. . . . .	238
NORTH PLATTE AND MONTIE, JR.. . . . .	239
<i>Chapter 22</i> . . . . .	245
AUDITION TIME. . . . .	245
AUDITION #2 . . . . .	247
NEGOTIATIONS . . . . .	250
SHOWTIME. . . . .	257
THE BEST OF THE BEST. . . . .	260
FESS REYNOLDS . . . . .	261
<i>Chapter 23</i> . . . . .	267
ONE SHOW ENDS, ANOTHER ONE BEGINS . . . . .	267
SAN DIEGO. . . . .	270
<i>Chapter 24</i> . . . . .	273
ANTONIO AGUILAR. . . . .	273
MEXICO . . . . .	275
PUERTO RICO . . . . .	278

<i>Chapter 25</i> . . . . .	281
TIME FOR A CHANGE: INTERNATIONAL SHOWS. . . . .	281
JAPAN . . . . .	281
THERE IS ALWAYS ONE . . . . .	283
GETTING READY FOR JAPAN. . . . .	286
40 HORSES TO JAPAN. . . . .	287
AFTER THE QUARANTINE . . . . .	295
DON'T TRY TO SADDLE MY HORSE . . . . .	295
THE END OF THE TRIP . . . . .	296
SAO PAULO, SOUTH AMERICA . . . . .	296
HOTEL FIRE . . . . .	298
ENGLAND: BUYING HORSES . . . . .	299
COWBOY FASHION . . . . .	301
JONES' TEEPEE . . . . .	301
WEMBLEY STADIUM. . . . .	302
ARRESTED FOR ROPING A STEER IN ENGLAND . . . . .	304
KUWAIT . . . . .	308
 <i>Chapter 26</i> . . . . .	 315
OFF SEASON WORK AT HOME IN WEATHERFORD,	
TEXAS: BACK TO THE REAL WORLD . . . . .	315
PRICKLY PEARS . . . . .	316
NEW SADDLES ARE DANGEROUS? . . . . .	317
ARABIAN HORSE TRAINING . . . . .	319
FAST PONY. . . . .	323
MEETING THE PAXTONS . . . . .	324
 <i>Chapter 27</i> . . . . .	 329
A FEW FUN SHORT STORIES OVER THE YEARS. . . . .	329
TOMMY AND THE PIE. . . . .	329
DENVER . . . . .	331
LITTLE RODEO . . . . .	332
THE REFRIGERATOR . . . . .	333
WHITE FEATHER . . . . .	333
PONY . . . . .	334
CANADA EXPO '67: WORLD'S FAIR,	



MONTREAL, QUEBEC . . . . .	335
ANOTHER CANADA STORY . . . . .	337
ONE MORE STORY ABOUT A TRIP TO CANADA. . . . .	340
CALIFORNIA, CAMP PENDLETON MARINE BASE:	
IN TROUBLE WITH THE MILITARY POLICE . . . . .	341
JOAN . . . . .	342
JOAN AND THE PLASTER HEAD HOAX . . . . .	344
JOAN AND JONSIE. . . . .	345
GHOST HOTEL. . . . .	345
PEARL DIVING BOAT . . . . .	346
AMISH STORY . . . . .	348
THE BLACK HORSE . . . . .	351
<i>Chapter 28</i> . . . . .	353
OUR NEXT ADVENTURE . . . . .	353
THE BEGINNING OF THE END . . . . .	357
ADJUSTING TO A NEW LIFE . . . . .	360
A NEW PLAN FOR JAN . . . . .	362
REUNION. . . . .	364
RECOGNITION. . . . .	366
THE CEREMONY. . . . .	369
<i>Chapter 29</i> . . . . .	375
THE END OF A LEGEND. . . . .	375
THE LAST RIDE TOGETHER . . . . .	376
A SPECIAL THANK YOU . . . . .	380
COWBOY TERMINOLOGY . . . . .	381
ABOUT THE AUTHOR . . . . .	389
INDEX. . . . .	391

# CHAPTER 1

**T**HE YEAR WAS 1936. The great depression had wreaked havoc on the country. World War II was still five years away (for most Americans, at least) and life in western Ohio, Darke County to be exact, was still laid back and easy going.

This area of Ohio is known for many things. Annie Oakley was born here, only three miles from the farm where my grandparents lived and where I was born. Lowell Thomas the great radio and newspaper personality was also born in the county. Anybody from the 30s, 40s and 50s should know his name for sure!

The biggest attraction is ‘The Great Darke County Fair,’ one of the biggest and arguably the best county fair in the country (certainly in the state!) In 2018, The Great Darke County Fair attracted almost a quarter of a million people and this is just a county fair! Darke County is also known for its agricultural community and having some of the best soil in the state of Ohio. Corn, bean and wheat crops are the mainstay of the farmers and the quality of the crops is second to none!

## **THE FAMILY**

My grandparents were two of those farmers. They lived on a small farm (75-80 acres) near a town called Ansonia, about 10 miles north of Greenville, the county seat for Darke County.

Their house was typical of the small family farms that dotted the entire country. My grandparents cooked over open flames in a large ‘fireplace’ type oven. There was no electricity and no running water (all the water had to be pumped by hand) and, of course, there was the proverbial outhouse. The doctor and veterinarian were miles away and

because the only mode of transportation was a horse drawn carriage it meant they were at least two hours away (one hour to go get the doc and one hour to bring him to the house!).

Grandpa was called 'Red' and besides being a farmer, he was also the blacksmith of the area. He worked out of the barn and all the locals brought their horses and equipment to him for repairs and upkeep. Between that and farming he was kept pretty busy.

With no doctor or veterinarian nearby, my grandparents quickly learned to be self-reliant and that meant grandpa had to learn all about their animals. He was the vet of the family and grandma was the doctor! When necessary, grandma also became a midwife and on May 2, 1936, she had to use those skills as she delivered her first grandchild, a bouncing baby boy: *me!*

I was given another name, but one day my grandfather looked at me and said, "I'm going to call him Jim." Not James, not Jimmy and not Jimbo. From that day on, I was Jim to him and to everyone else as well. It is the only thing I will answer to.



*Goldie Warvel (c. 1930s): Grandma Goldie cooking at the family farm where I was born*

My mother was one of six children and she was very active in sports when she was in high school. She would have two more children in the years to come. Jack, born two years later, and Joe, the youngest who would come along 12 years after me. My father was about 5'8" and very strong. He went by the name of 'Lefty' (for obvious reasons) and did whatever it took to keep food on the table. He played professional baseball with the St. Louis organization, sold sporting goods in Greenville at Skillman's Department Store and he managed semi-professional baseball teams. He also worked and bred horses. He did anything to make a dollar and put food on the table and clothes on our back.

Growing up in this type of environment may seem harsh to some (hearth cooking and outhouses) but it was normal to us. We were not the only ones who lived like this because our friends were in the same boat as we were! We just made the most of it!

Dad loved baseball and he groomed me to be a baseball player from a very young age. I loved the game and I was decent at it, too. I could pitch and play the field, something my high school team would later use to their full advantage.

## **GROWING UP**

I went to Butler Township school for grades 1-8. We had a basketball team but you had to be in the 7th or 8th grade to be on the team. During lunch those of us in the lower grades (1-6) would all hit the basketball courts in the gym and play. One day, the coach of the school's team saw us play and he wondered why I was not on the basketball team.

"Would you like to be on the basketball team?" he asked.

"Sure," I told him, "But I'm only a sixth grader so I can't be on the team."

He was surprised but he recognized I had talent so he went to the principal and asked if he would make an exception. They contacted my parents and when all was said and done, they allowed me to be on the team as long as it did not affect my grades. I got to play basketball for three years instead of two!

When you graduated junior high school, and were ready for high school, there was a choice to be made. Because of where we lived, we could pick our high school. We could go to Arcanum High School (the biggest school in the biggest local town) or we could go to New Madison High School (now called Tri-Village High School). It was up to the student as to which school they would attend.

I chose New Madison High School and it was here that my athleticism allowed me to play varsity baseball, basketball and track from my freshman year on.

In the 10th grade, my brother Jack and I, like many farm kids, had our own horses. We used to race them at county fairs. We eventually sold our racehorses and bought two quarter horses from Texas. The quarter horse is reputed to be the fastest breed of horse over a distance of a quarter of a mile. They were bred for speed and we raced these horses as well.

In 1954, I set the county record for the pole vault! It lasted for several years until the new fiberglass poles came into common use and allowed pole vaulters to jump much higher. I set the pole vault record with a stiff, one piece metal pole. With these solid, non-bending poles, you had to have a spring in your step and power in your jump because that was all you had to get over that bar! (The fiberglass poles would bend and the 'spring' of the pole as it straightened out would send the pole vaulter soaring through the air.)

I tried one of these new fiberglass poles but my timing was thrown off and I never did figure out how to use it properly. I was playing four different sports. Other pole vaulters started using the fiberglass poles but I stuck with my trusty metal pole, set a record and when I left high school my record was still standing.

The family moved to Savona, Ohio, a small town with a maximum population of 55 people, provided you counted the transients and the visiting relatives. It was only three miles from New Madison where the high school was located. The railroad tracks were less than 150 feet from our house and since this was one of the major forms of transportation,

we got a lot of trains running near our home. The big, modern steam engines would come flying down those tracks and when they did our beds would shake a few inches across the floor.

## **THE OUTHOUSE**

Our home was just like the other homes in the neighborhood. Again, we had no running water and we had to use an outhouse. Our neighbors were in the same situation as we were and, once again, we just made the most of it. To us, it was how people lived.

We should pay a little tribute to the beloved outhouse! Believe it or not, the outhouses of this era were as much a status symbol as anything else. This may sound strange but it is true!

If you had a brick or concrete outhouse, you were considered 'affluent.' Most folks (including my family) had the old wooden outhouse with spaces between the boards and knotholes in the wood. These 'facilities' usually had two holes in them, one large and one small.

Since most families were not 'affluent,' they tried to save money any way they could. So, instead of toilet paper, every outhouse had a large catalog in them. These were usually from one of the larger retail stores because their books were bigger and had more stuff to look at!

These catalogs served two purposes. You always had reading material and you always had 'toilet paper.' Unfortunately, the catalog pages were not very 'comfortable' to use so, while you were sitting there reading the books (or looking at the pictures), you tore out a few pages and crumpled them over and over again to soften them and make them usable for the task at hand.

Lime was scattered over the contents to keep the smell and flies away (it didn't always work but we tried!) When the outhouse needed cleaning, there were people who went around and did that, just like the people of today who go around and do odd jobs like mowing the yard.

On the back of the outhouse was a trap door exposing the waste. These traveling outhouse cleaners could shovel it out and make cleaning easier. This cleaning would usually cost around \$2.00.

I remember the outhouse had a wooden door and in the middle of the door was a knothole that you could see through while you did your business. On the outside, under the roof and around the building there were usually several wasp nests. One day, I was sitting there (reading the Sears catalog) and my brother Jack was near the outhouse. He had his BB gun with him and he decided to take a shot at the hole in the door. He did and it was a 'perfect' shot. The BB went through the hole and hit me in the shoulder! Thinking I was being stung by wasps, I jumped up and ran out of the outhouse screaming and hollering with my pants still down around my ankles.

To this day, Jack has never let me forget that story!

### **THE PONIES THAT AGED VERY FAST**

The farmers were not rich enough to own tractors so they had to use horses and mules to plow their land and haul wood to the house. These animals were a necessity and we learned at an early age how to take care of them since they were some of the most important things we owned.

There was a big barn on our property. Dad fixed up two stalls in this barn and got us two ponies, one for me and one for my brother Jack. The ponies were not the best by any means but my brother Jack and I took great care of these ponies. We brushed them, walked them, fed them and made sure they could be ridden with ease. Jack and I would often ride them and play cowboys and Indians.

One day, dad came and told us the ponies were getting old and would soon disappear. Jack and I did not know what he meant until about a month later, we went out to the barn and the ponies had disappeared! We were stunned but remembering what dad had told us, we understood.

Two more ponies showed up before long so we took good care of them too. After a few weeks of grooming, riding and nurturing these ponies, dad came to us and said that these ponies were getting old. A month later, these ponies were also gone!

It did not take long before two more ponies arrived and the process repeated itself once more. Dad informed us that ponies got old quickly and disappeared because of their old age. This continued on and on over the course of the year.

Ponies would arrive, they would be given to us and then Jack and I would take care of them. After a month, they would get old and *poof*, they would disappear! I tell you this story because there is a happy ending to it!

About 25 years later, I was visiting a horse barn in Greenville, Ohio, when I was introduced to a man who trained race horses. We talked for a few minutes and then he made a statement that took me by surprise.

"I knew your father," he told me, "and I knew you and your brother Jack, too!" I smiled and tried to remember him but there was no memory of him.

"Sorry," I said sheepishly, "but I don't remember you. How did you know the family?"

"Well," he explained, "I ran several carnival rides and one of them was a horse ride for young kids. I had to have gentle ponies that were used to having kids ride them. I always bought my ponies from your dad because he used to tell me that he had two boys who brushed the horses, fed them, rode them and took great care of them. I never had to worry when I bought ponies from your dad. They were always gentle and well taken care of by your family." I laughed and told him what happened and how dad told us the ponies were getting old right before they would disappear from the barn.

He laughed and told me the rest of the story.

"I once asked if you boys cried when he took the ponies away from you. He said he told you boys the ponies were getting old and going to disappear so you boys would not feel sorry for the ponies and not cry in front of them!"

"He told me you boys thought 3-year old ponies died of old age. It was easy for him to sell those nice ponies to me and then take some



‘unbroken’ ponies and give them to you for training. You guys did a nice job of training them, too!”

It was nice to know that ponies don’t disappear when they get old.  
You learn something new every day!

### **PASSING THE TIME**

I learned quickly that horses on a farm are a necessity. When they are seven or eight years old, the work horses are usually sold. The ones that have a lot of cow experience usually stay a little longer. They can be used to rope, cut the herd and other important things necessary to keep a farm or cattle ranch in business.

Although the work was hard, farmers also learned to have fun, too. I used to love it when the farmers would put on horse shows to ‘show off’ their horses and contests to see who had the best horse and rider combination. I participated in most of them and my friends and I became pretty good at them, too!

One of these contests was the ‘scoop shovel’ race. A shovel would have a long rope tied to the handle. The end of the rope would be put around the saddle horn and while one rode the horse, his partner in the race would grab the shovel’s handle, sit on the metal part and ‘ride the shovel’! The object was to have the horse and rider pull the shovel across the arena, around a barrel and back to the finish line. The fastest one would win, provided they crossed the finish line with their partner still ‘riding the shovel.’ If you fell off, there was nothing for you except a disqualification and a lot of bruises! Our scoop shovel partner was Danny, our travelling buddy. Danny was so good at this event, he earned the nickname ‘Scoop Shovel’!!!

We also had a ‘pick-up’ race. Again, it was a race involving two contestants. One would be riding a horse at the start-finish line. The other contestant would be waiting at the far end of the arena. The horse and rider would take off as fast as they could, race to the waiting partner and the partner had to grab either the rider’s arm or the saddle horn and pull himself onto the horse. Then the two of them had to race back

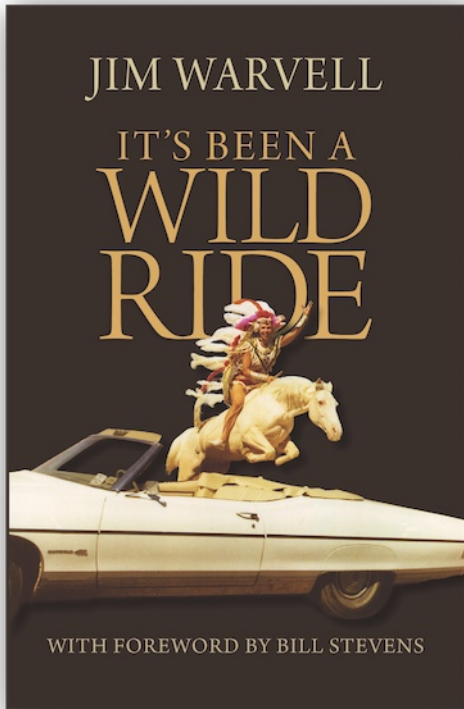
to the start-finish line. Again, the fastest time would be the winner but if the partner missed the 'grab' he was in for a nasty fall!

The tire race, however, was by far one of the funniest to watch and one of the toughest to do. Tires were laid out in the arena and a contestant had to ride as fast as he could to them. Once there, he would dismount and his horse would (hopefully!) stand perfectly still while the contestant got off the horse, ran to the tires and then crawled through them while not letting the tire leave the ground! (Try it sometime!) Once through the tires, the contestant ran back to his horse, turned him to the finish line and while the horse was now running at full speed, the contestant would hang onto the saddle horn, let his feet hit the ground and then 'jump' onto the saddle, similar to what the Pony Express riders used to do.

These were fun and very competitive. I enjoyed them immensely but had no idea I was preparing myself for my future! Heck, I was not even out of high school yet!

When I did get out of high school, I had a chance to play professional baseball. I knew if I signed a contract my time would probably be spent in the minor leagues and I was not very interested in that. By now I had spent four years playing baseball, basketball and track. The senior yearbook staff listed my future in the world of coaching but that did not interest me, either.

It was time for a change!



This is an autobiography of Jim Warvell. Jim and the Warvell Family, Texas Cowboy Hall of Fame Inductees, performed specialty acts worldwide, one of which featured his wife Jan as "Princess Kachina" and her horse, "White Feather" jumping over a convertible. They raised the 'entertainment' value of rodeos in the 50s and 60s to an entirely new level.

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