

On The Road With ARIZONA HIGHWAYS

The Pride of Benson

By Diana Beaugrand Rodriguez, Producer, Arizona Highways Television
Layout By Wendy Parker • Photos Courtesy of Arizona Highways

When most of my friends decide to hit the Arizona Highways, they usually say, "I'm going up north to Flagstaff," or "I'm heading down south to Tucson." A lot of us, no matter how long we've lived here, rarely venture to the east or the west of Interstate 17 or Interstate 10.

This all changed when I became the producer of Arizona Highways Television. As a former news producer, our goal was to get to the destination as quick as legally possible. We were always running to some breaking story in hopes of getting there before our competition. In contrast, Arizona Highways is about taking the pedal off the medal and enjoying the journey along the way. For us, this means exploring a whole new world along the Arizona road less traveled.

In Benson, about an hour southeast of Tucson, we made

some wonderful discoveries.

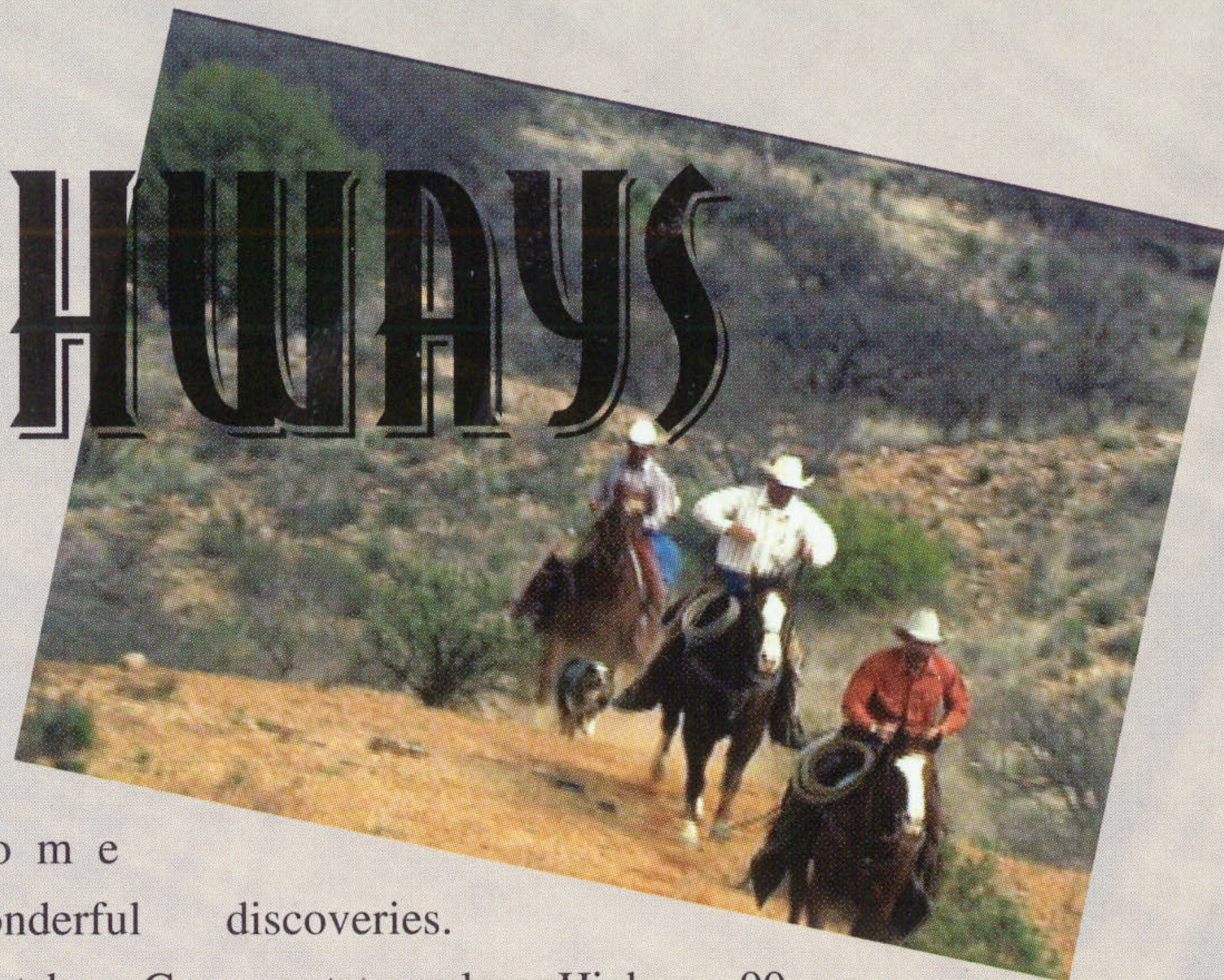
Kartchner Caverns state park on Highway 90 is a place where the lines to get in are longer than a Diamondback's opening day game. You definitely need to make reservations in advance to see this wonder in the desert.

Kartchner is a rare "wet cave" with more than 90 percent of its beautiful limestone decorations still living and thriving within the cave. It's a huge underground world of stalactites and stalagmites, growing within a delicate eco-system, that people can actually see and tour.

As amazing as this site is, the story behind its discovery is even more extraordinary. The cave was discovered by two college

roommates who, for 14 years, kept this precious natural wonder a guarded secret. It remained under wraps until it was decided how to best preserve and maintain the natural integrity of this treasure. This place is so special and fragile that we were

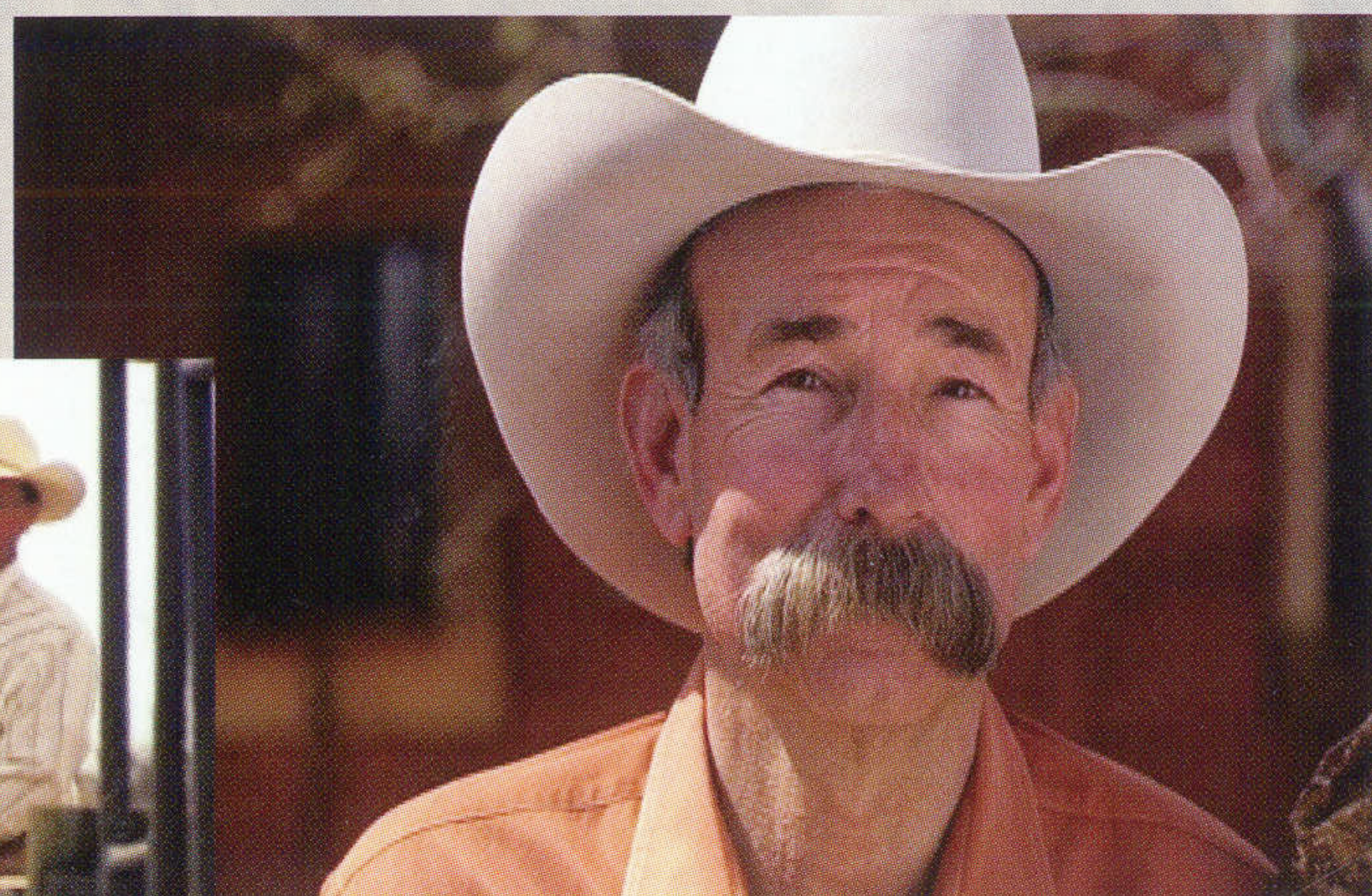
one of the few camera crews that have ever been allowed to take pictures inside. Earlier this year, another cave rumored to be even bigger than Kartchner was discovered. It too is being kept a secret, until state officials can decide the best way to keep it safe.



We emerged from this underground paradise with a sense of awe and amazement. Next, we were off to swap wits with a man who also shares our love affair with Arizona. Just a few miles away, we arrived for lunch at the home of Baxter Black, a self-described cowboy poet and large animal veterinarian. Most people would probably know him from NPR radio where he is a very popular radio columnist.

Life above ground at Baxter's ranch is quiet and peaceful. The skies are wide open and blue. Breathtaking clouds in all sorts of curious shapes move above his home throughout the day. Baxter told me he knew he wanted to live in this remote corner of Southern Arizona the minute he looked at that sky and smelled that desert. In fact, I believe Baxter was born to live here; it truly suits him.

He says, "I like the harshness of the desert, you kind of have to earn your right to live here." His poetry reinforces his passion for our



sacred land. Hearing his words makes me proud to live in our wonderful desert state.

"You can stand in the Canyon's cathedral, where water and sky never rest. And know in your bones, that the meek on their own will never inherit the west.

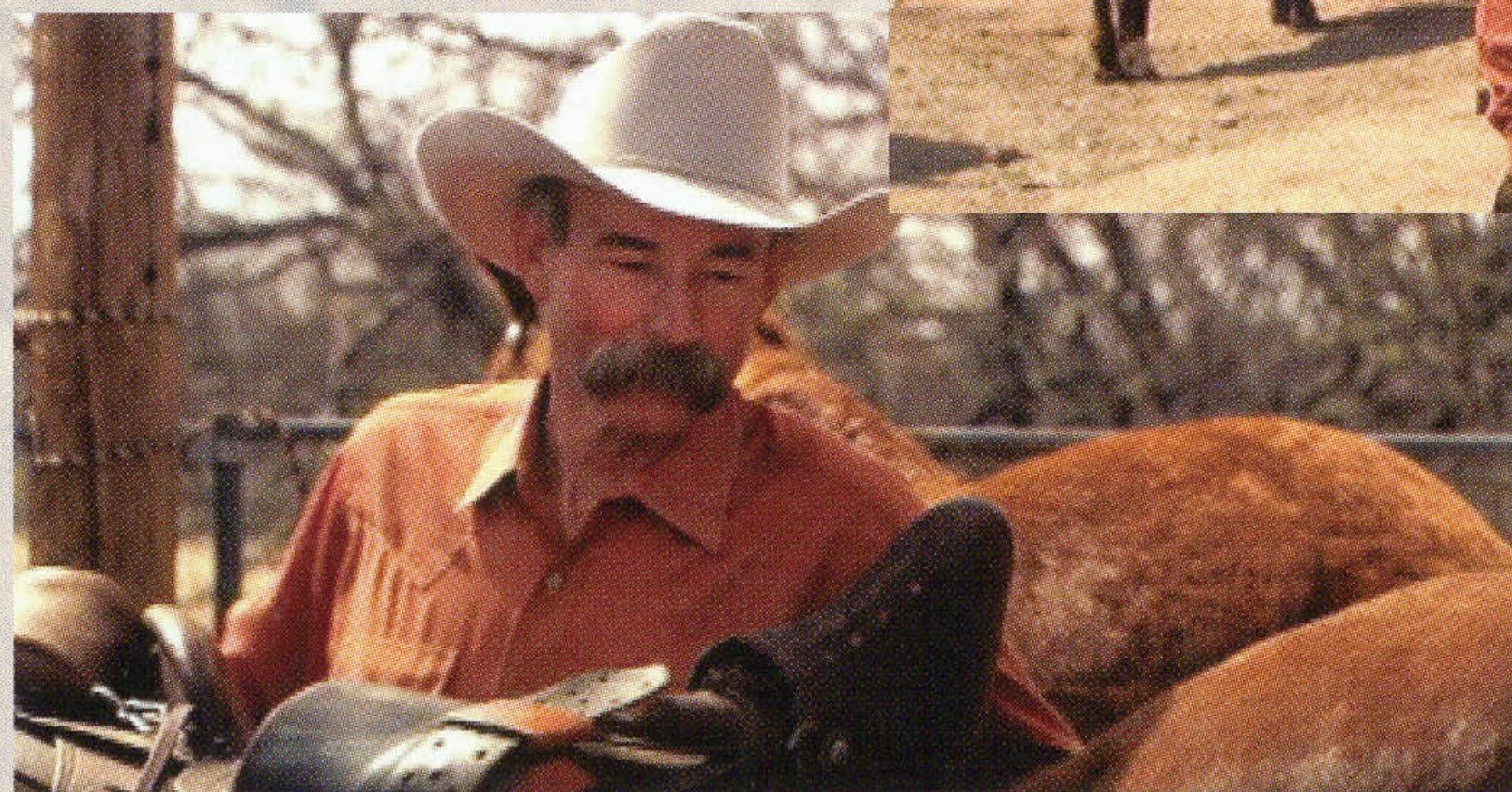
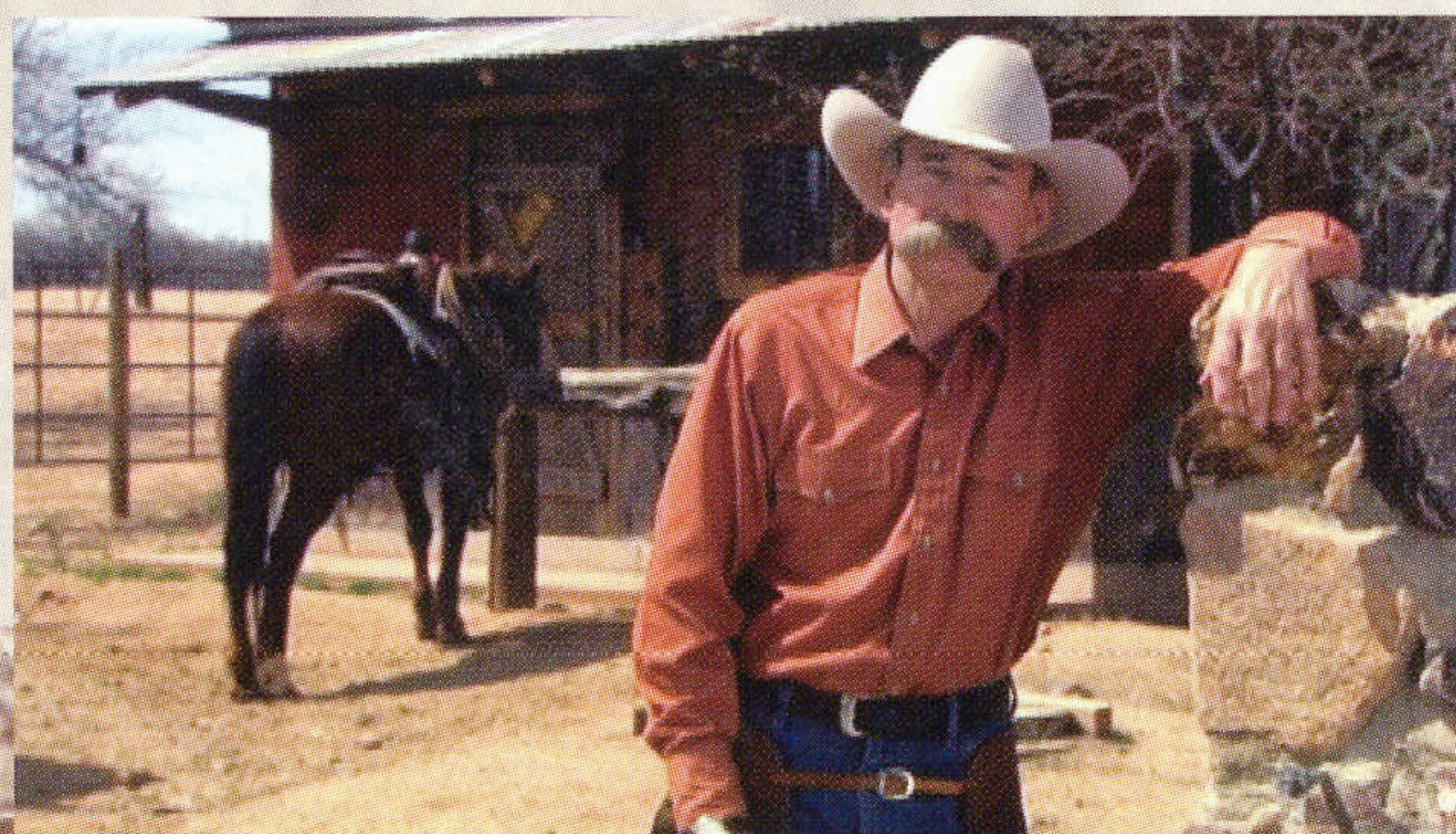
It's big, it's wild, it's lonesome...where the dream of first blood still survives. And it beckons to those who can bid adios...to the comfort of 8 to 5 lives.

So come, all you brave caballeros...cinch up and reach down inside...until you feel the heat, then take a deep seat...because the west boys, she ain't broke to ride."

~Baxter Black

I think I can get past these long, hot, summer days. I know that as an Arizonan, I'm hearty enough and lucky enough to not only live, but also thrive here. I'm not one of the "meek" ones Baxter refers to in his poem. I survived that infamous 122-degree record setting day a few summers ago. I look for shady parking spaces, even when it's not hot outside. Yes sir, I know the

west "she ain't broke to ride," but I'll gladly, proudly walk beside her any day of the week. For me, this means taking the slow ride on and off the Arizona Highways.



Do you want to learn more about the places along Arizona's highways? Tune in and ride along with Robin Sewell as she uncovers some of the Grand Canyon state's most treasured secrets.

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Arizona Highways airs at 6:30 pm every Saturday on NBC