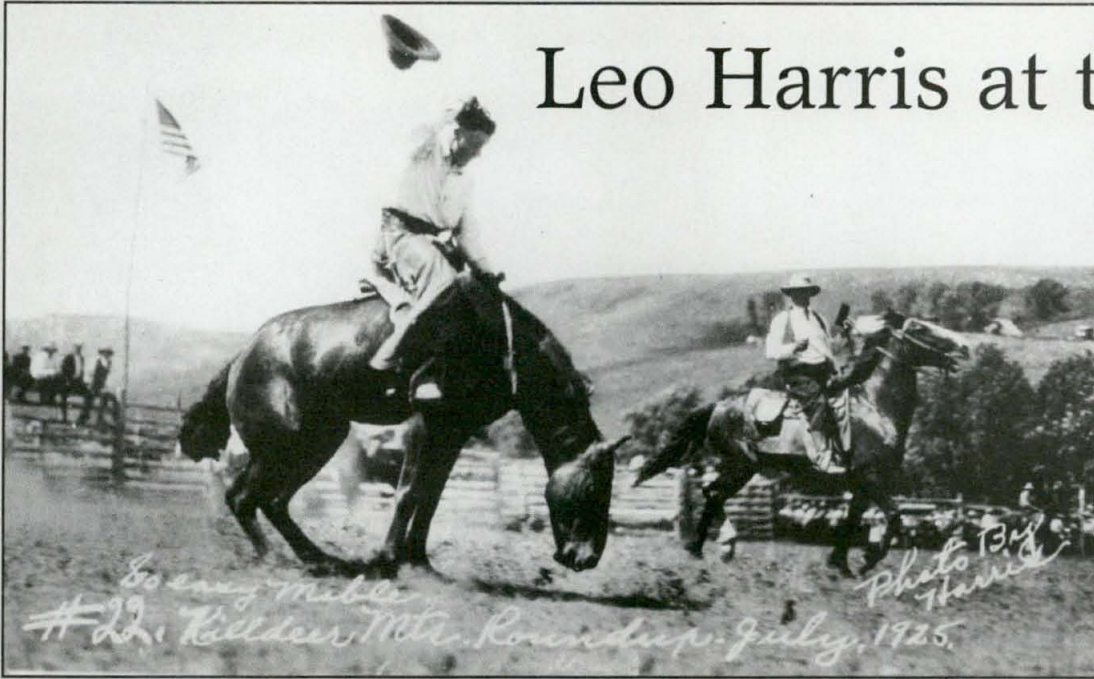


Leo Harris at the Rodeo



Leo Harris began photographing rodeo—the epitomizing ritual of ranching culture—during the 1920s, as it was being transformed from a community-based recreational activity to a national spectator sport. Today’s contemporary rodeo is a tightly structured, standardized, and commercial activity centered on the competition between highly trained, professional cowboys and specially bred livestock. Modern rodeo events symbolize aspects of human-animal relations within rural western culture and memorialize past ranching activities. In contrast, during the early decades of the twentieth century, rodeo was more informal and inclusive, open to local improvisation and design. Few participants, either human or animal, were professional rodeo performers; there were far fewer rules, and safety was less of a concern. In both structure and content, these Harris images are strikingly different from today’s conventionalized rodeo photography. They reveal rodeo events in western North Dakota being used to creatively express and comment on local social relations and cultural values, often through humor.



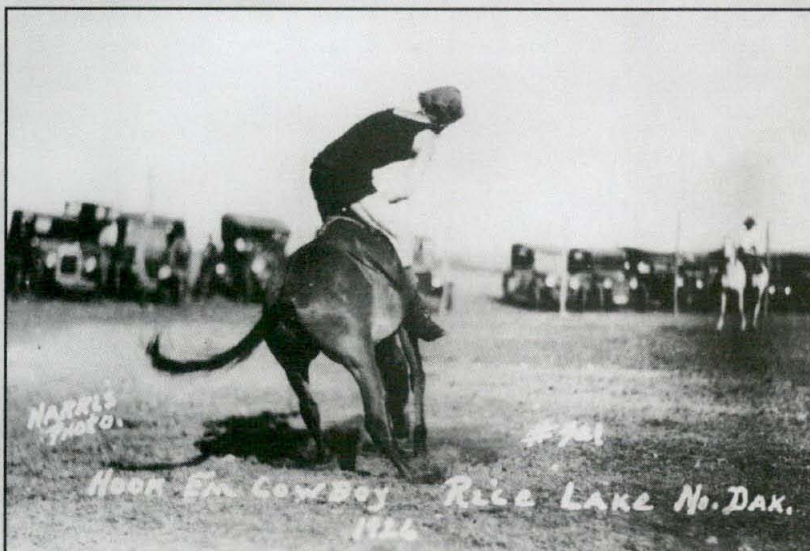
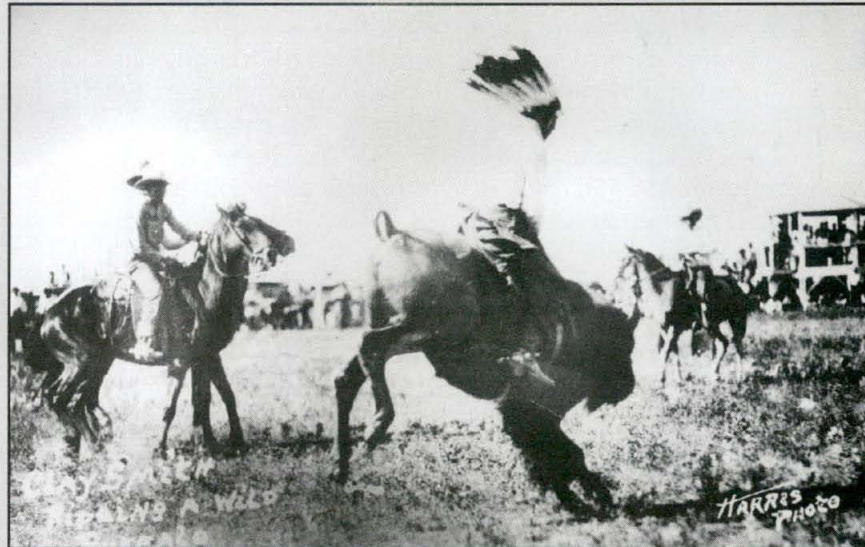
“Go Easy Mable,” 1925 (top left). The annual Fourth of July Killdeer Mountain Roundup has evolved into an event sanctioned by the Professional Rodeo Cowboys’ Association and attracts fans and participants from all over the United States. When first organized by Sam Rhoades at his Oakdale Ranch in 1924, the Roundup was known for its dangerously sloping arena and wide-open action. Rhoades, a Texas cowboy who trailed cattle into Dickinson in 1892 and became a well-known ranching figure throughout western North Dakota, probably appears here judging the contestant’s ride from the back of a heavy, bald-faced horse, a type he favored. The horned saddle with center-fire rigging, the neck rope, and the absence of a flank strap on the bucking horse is very different equipment from that used by the modern saddle-bronc rider. All photographs in this photo essay are courtesy of Cleo and Evelyn Veeder, Killdeer, North Dakota.

“E. M. Howe (?) on Flying Squirrel,” n.d. (top right) The spectacular shot has remained a staple of western and rodeo photography since the late nineteenth century. The perspective of this image is unusual but effective in emphasizing the raw power of the rearing horse and the skill of the rider, who is still spurring the animal’s shoulders. Before the use of the bucking strap, noxious liquids were sometimes applied to horses to stimulate their efforts to unseat their riders.



"Anton Fettig Playing Leap Frog," n.d. Anton (Tony) Fettig competed in rodeos at the local, regional, and national levels during the period 1925-1940, and was one of the most widely known North Dakota rodeo cowboys of his generation. Typical of that era and in contrast to many of today's contestants, Fettig was also a bona fide rancher with versatile skills. According to one source, he won every single event at the Lost Bridge dedication rodeo and at one time held the world's record in bulldogging. During the first several decades of the twentieth century, rough stock events were not timed, and bareback broncs were ridden with two hands on the rigging rather than being held by a head rope as is done today.

"Clay Smith Riding a Wild Buffalo," n.d. Ranching and cowboy skills were incorporated into many formerly equestrian Native American cultures by the end of the nineteenth century, and all-Indian rodeos became popular reservation events. Although the location of this photograph is unknown, Clay Smith may have been a member of the prominent ranching family by that name on the Fort Berthold Reservation just north of Killdeer. Both the pick-up men and the judge appear to be Native Americans, but the explicit Plains symbolism of the bison calf and the headdress suggest that this ride might also have been staged for a non-Indian audience. It is typical of the novelty acts popular during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.



"Hook 'Em Cowboy," 1926. Other creative variations of standard rodeo events humorously played on elements of the cowboy persona. This cowboy has stripped away all identity markers but his boots, while his bonnet seems to comment on and symbolically reverse gender roles, a universal device for performers. Although gender-specific roles were well developed in ranching culture, women did participate in early-twentieth-century rodeo, sometimes competing against their male counterparts in the riding events.

Text and captions
by Castle McLaughlin

Leo D. Harris:

Cowboy Photographer of the Badlands

by Virginia Heidenreich-Barber

Leo D. Harris was a documentary photographer raised near the Killdeer Mountains in western North Dakota, who chronicled the ranching culture of the Little Missouri Valley with his camera.¹ As a youth, he encountered the diverse groups of people seeking a living in western North Dakota during the early twentieth century, spanning seasoned holdovers from the buffalo days, hard-driving cowboys turned ranchers, and members of the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara tribes, who were restricted to the Fort Berthold Reservation just east of the badlands. Much of Harris's Little Missouri photography dates from the Depression years of the 1930s and early 1940s. Unlike the cadre of photographers sent to the Dakotas by the U.S. Farm Security Administration from 1936 to 1942 to document mostly arid farms and stoic people, Leo Harris was part of the rural fabric he depicted.² Not surprisingly, his work conveys a decided intimacy while documenting some of the persistent traditions and changing realities of the region.

Leo Harris was born February 5, 1897, in Boonville, Missouri, to Frederick and Rose Pugh Harris. His family moved to the area west of the Killdeer Mountains in 1906 where Harris grew up on the family's farm. Here, he witnessed the transformation of the land from open range to widespread farming, fenced ranches, and scattered towns.³ During World War I, Harris left the Little Missouri country to serve in the Aviation Corp at Fort Sill, Oklahoma.⁴ Sometime following his discharge, perhaps supported by G.I. benefits, he moved to Chicago where he attended a photography school. By 1924 Harris was associated with the *Chicago Tribune*.⁵

Harris returned to Killdeer beginning in the summer of 1924 to photograph the annual Killdeer Mountain Roundup, a three-day rodeo held over the Fourth of July. His stop-action photographs of the rodeo were highlighted in the *Killdeer Herald* between 1925 and 1927, and his 1924 dramatic shot of the slanted rodeo grounds rimmed by cars became the hallmark of the roundup, used by promoters year after year for advertising. With the growing popularity of the event, Harris hired an assistant, taking hundreds of photographs which he sold.⁶ Sometime around 1928, Harris relocated to Pittsburgh, reportedly becoming a press photographer for the *Pittsburgh Sun-Telegraph*. He moved



The "Cowboy Photographer," Leo Harris, with his press camera mounted on a rifle stock.

back home to western North Dakota in June of 1932, reporting to the *Killdeer Herald* that he was a victim of Depression-era unemployment problems in the Pittsburgh area.⁷

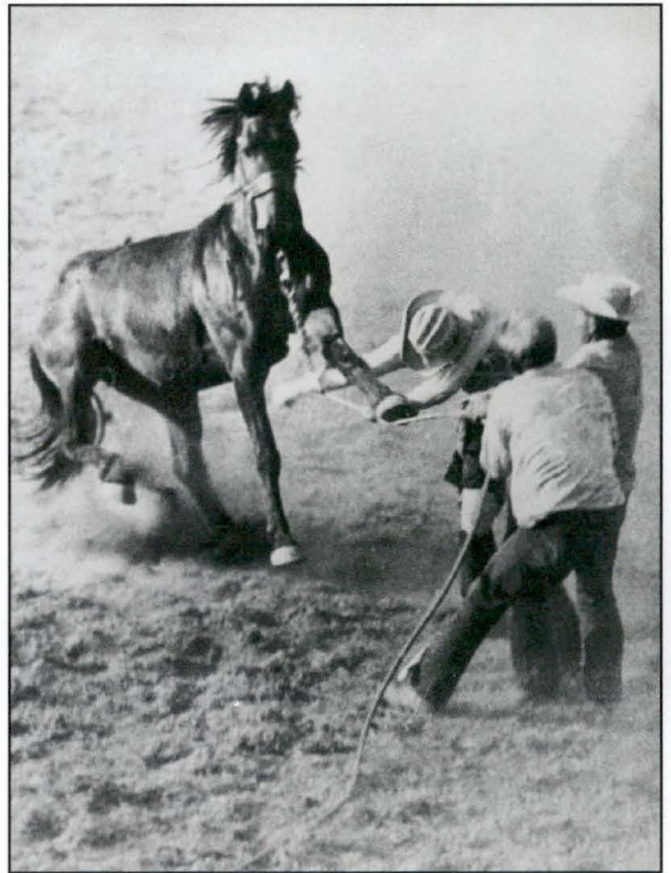
Harris set up his photographic operations—at least a darkroom—at the Park Hotel in Killdeer, which he and his mother had acquired following his army service. There is no evidence that he ever established a studio, however. His equipment consisted of large-format, press-style cameras, at least one of which he mounted on a rifle stock to facilitate quick and steady camera shooting, particularly useful in rodeo photography. He

apparently never used smaller-format cameras that became popular with the press and documentary photographers of the 1940s and 1950s.⁸

When he began work as a free-lance photographer based in Killdeer, Harris found his home state besieged by spreading drought and the Depression. Ironically, his best known photographs of ranch operations on the Fort Berthold Reservation were taken during or soon after some of the worst range conditions in the region. Indeed, his photographs, many of them depicting roundup and camp scenes, illustrate a way of life seemingly unaffected by the challenges of these dry years. While 1930s headlines in area papers indicated the ravages of the drought, careful ranching practices, particularly among those benefitting from the unfenced Fort Berthold range, preserved semi-open range customs that Harris eagerly documented.⁹

Some of the first photographs Harris took upon his return were to document a reforestation project in western North Dakota, conducted by an emergency conservation program. In addition, he shot some aerial photographs for the National Park Commission of the western Dakota badlands, to illustrate "the Theodore Roosevelt and Killdeer Mountain national park proposals."¹⁰ During the next few years, the *Killdeer Herald* reported on other local Depression-era realities, including the appearance of representatives of the Farmers Holiday Association, the Dunn County organization for stock relief for the winter months, and road work programs. Harris's photographs embraced many of these topics.¹¹

Among his work that survives are prints associated



A master at capturing the split-second action in the rodeo arena or corral, Harris provided clean, immediate photographs with nothing to distract from the intensity of action between man and horse. Courtesy of the Dunn County Historical Society.

1. Biographical material for this article was drawn from a variety of sources. For obituaries on Leo D. [Dawn] Harris, see *Livingston* (Montana) *Enterprise*, January 29, 1962, p. 1.; *Dickinson Press*, February 10, 1962, p. 2; *Minot Daily News*, February 15, 1962, p. 6. For oral history sources, I am indebted to the work of Eloise Ogden, *Minot Daily News* reporter, who conducted several interviews among Killdeer inhabitants about Leo Harris and shared some additional information regarding his military service. I also conducted interviews, as noted below.

2. For assessments of Farm Security Administration photographers' work in North Dakota, see D. Jerome Tweton, "'Taking Pictures of the History Today': The Federal Government Photographs North Dakota, 1936-1942," in *North Dakota History*, vol. 57, no. 2 (Summer 1990).

3. See Castle McLaughlin's article in this issue.

4. *Killdeer Herald*, May 29, 1919, p. 1. Also, *Official Roster of North Dakota Soldiers, Sailors, and Marines, World War, 1917-1918*, vol. 2 (Bismarck: Bismarck Tribune Co., 1931), p. 1255.

5. Described by the *Killdeer Herald* as "an accomplished and expert movie photographer," whose work had appeared in the "large papers of Chicago," he was likely trained as a still photographer in one of the many short-term photography schools in Chicago. *Killdeer Herald*, July 3, 1924, p. 3. Killdeer residents no doubt remembered the work of filmmaker Frithjof Holmboe who filmed Killdeer residents in September of 1916. See *Killdeer Herald*, September 21, 1916, p. 3.

6. Several Killdeer residents who were interviewed about Harris remembered or still possessed photographs they viewed or acquired

from Harris. At least one recalled his intensive shooting during the day and processing at night, in order to sell his prints during the rodeo. For references to the Killdeer and other area rodeos he photographed, see *Killdeer Herald*, July 3, 1924, p. 3; July 9, 1925, p. 1; June 10, 1926, p. 1; June 30, 1927.

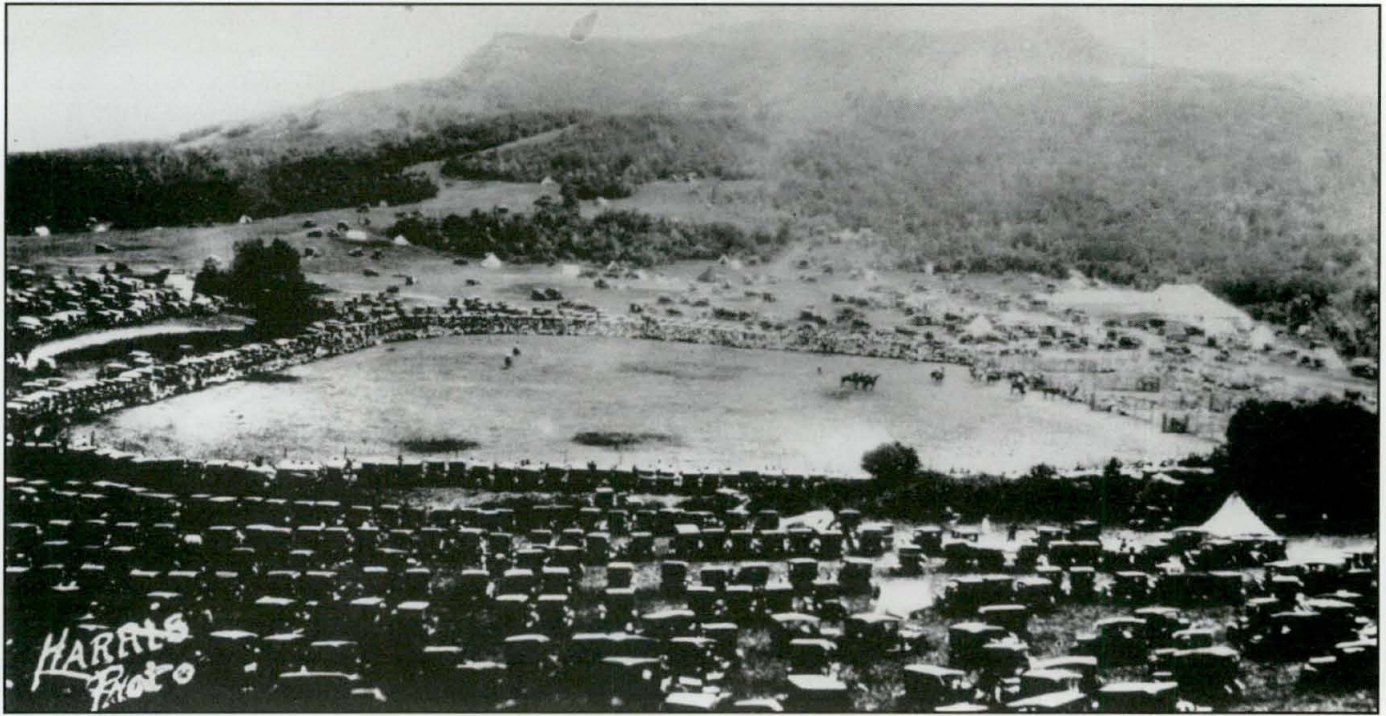
7. See *Killdeer Herald*, February 23, 1928, p. 1; also June 23, 1932, p. 1, and September 8, 1932, p. 1, which mention that Harris relocated to Pittsburgh for a photographic position with the U. S. Bureau of Mines, followed by work as a staff photographer for the *Pittsburgh Daily Star Telegraph*. Harris obituaries mention a position in Pittsburgh with the *Pittsburgh Sun-Telegraph*.

8. Late in 1919, he and his mother bought the Park Hotel in Killdeer, which his mother operated until the family's departure in the early 1950s. Warrant Deed, Doc. 38488, Dunn County, North Dakota, Book 16, p. 214. Harris never operated a formal studio, according to informants, but maintained a darkroom and small display area for his prints at the hotel.

9. See Castle McLaughlin's article in this issue.

10. There were reportedly 1,500 men employed to plant seedlings in the Killdeer area, *Killdeer Herald*, April 27, 1933, p. 4. The *Killdeer Herald*, September 8, 1932, p. 1, referred to a "proposed badlands park project surrounding Medora in Billings County." Another off and on proposed national park was mentioned for the Killdeer Mountains area; see *Killdeer Herald*, January 12, 1928, p. 1.

11. For examples of Depression-era news coverage in Killdeer, see *Killdeer Herald*, November 23, 1933, p. 1.; *Killdeer Herald*, October 19, 1933, p. 1.; July 5, 1934, p. 1; September 14, 1933, p. 1. Collections



Killdeer Mountain Roundup, summer 1924. One of his most popular early views, this image from the rodeo's first year became a trademark for the event and was used for advertising as late as 1946. Courtesy of Cleo and Evelyn Veeder, Killdeer, North Dakota.

with the Work Projects Administration, probably made between 1939 and 1942. Harris may well have worked for the WPA during the years when many white-collar work projects were funded in North Dakota and elsewhere, but no records were found identifying Harris with a particular federal program. Harris's WPA images include portraits of ranchers, ranch homes and line camps, badlands pintos and their offspring, and semi-open-range ranching activities from the Fort Berthold Reservation. He also did some writing about federal relief projects in North Dakota, perhaps intended to be accompanied by photographs, including such topics as "The Rabbit Roundup in North Dakota."¹²

In the first years following his return, Harris traveled, not only in western North Dakota, but also to the Black Hills of South Dakota and areas of Wyoming and Montana, where he took pictures of historic interest and sold them to daily papers.¹³ Most of his photographs, however, were of ranching activities in the Little Missouri country, from Fort Berthold on the east to the North Dakota-Montana line on the west. Described as something of a loner by those who knew him, Harris seems rarely to have participated in the ranching culture he observed and recorded. He nonetheless sported cowboy clothing with apparent consistency, earning him the sobriquet of "the cowboy photographer." His

consulted for this paper included the Photographic Archives of the State Historical Society of North Dakota, Bismarck, North Dakota; Dunn County Historical Society Archives, Dunn Center, North Dakota, and several private collections.

12. Few of Harris's photographs in collections I examined are dated, but some two dozen images from the State Historical Society of North Dakota are identified by a Works Progress Administration (WPA) logo, implying they were made with support from that program, probably between 1939 and 1942, when that agency name was in use. Archival materials at the Dunn County Historical Society indicate Harris worked on several writing projects dealing with conservation and drought relief.

13. *Killdeer Herald*, November 16, 1933, p. 1.

14. Drawn from interviews by Eloise Ogden and by author with Beryl Fettig, June 29, 1993. Also, information drawn from interviews with Joe Wetsch and George Fenton, June 30, 1993, all of Killdeer, North Dakota.

15. The Four Bears monument dedication, pictured by Harris,

appears in *Killdeer Herald*, September 14, 1933, p. 1. The Sacred Bundle return is described in *Killdeer Herald*, January 13, 1938, p. 1. Harris's closeness to Indian people was much remarked on by informants, and his photographing the contents of the Sacred Bundle was cited as evidence.

16. The booklet, according to interview with Joe Wetsch, did not sell well. Copies are located at State Historical Society of North Dakota archives and Dunn County Historical Society.

17. Joe Wetsch, who reported that he drove Harris to many nearby shooting locations, noted that "he made AP deadlines lots of times." See, for example, *Denver Post*, May 25, 1947; *Bismarck Tribune*, July 25, 1945.

18. Examples include "Rancher of the Air," February 2, 1946, "Posts that Made History," July 6, 1946, both in *Dakota Farmer*.

19. Several versions of "Magpie, Nazi of Birddom Meets His Nemesis with Sportsman," appeared in print, including in *Rocky Mountain Empire Magazine*, May 25, 1947.

Cover photo for the booklet Harris produced about the projected impact of the Garrison Dam construction on Fort Berthold residents. Pictured is the Mandan-Hidatsa Crows Heart.



repertoire of photographs include himself astride a horse with a second horse packing his bulky camera equipment.¹⁴

As range conditions improved, Harris continued to document herding, roundups, rodeos, camp scenes, and even a rancher's experience with using the new technology of aircraft to survey isolated cattle herds. He had a great affinity for Indian as well as white ranchers on the Fort Berthold Reservation and began photographing some tribal events, including a heavily attended dedication of a monument to Four Bears and the much heralded return of the Sacred Bundle of the Water Busters Clan of the Gros Ventre Indians from the Heye Foundation in New York City.¹⁵ When the flooding of the reservation by the Garrison Dam approached, Harris produced a modest publication illustrating tribal members and area landmarks to be affected by the inundation. The twenty-six page booklet, printed in 1949, was titled, "Water is Coming." The cover featured a striking full-length profile of the Mandan-Hidatsa Crows Heart from Fort Berthold; the booklet included images of the dam site towns and of rodeos and people from the Sanish area. Despite the serious threat to the Indian inhabitants of the Berthold reservation, however, the text accompanying the photographs is neutral, even diffident.¹⁶

Relatively isolated and far from the larger market of publications and big city newspapers in which he had once worked, Harris nonetheless maintained his connections with the Associated Press, plying the bureau with newsworthy "human interest" photographs, which were published occasionally in regional papers.¹⁷ In the tradition of the times, his insightful photographs were

accompanied by rather saccharine captions about these "western scenes." For several years he was also a correspondent for the *Bismarck Tribune*, and sold pictures and modest picture stories to various North Dakota magazines and newspapers, including *North Dakota Outdoors* and *Bar North*, particularly during the 1940s.¹⁸ His ranching photographs also appeared in several editions of *Fifty Years in the Saddle*.

With an eye toward selling his work to out-of-state markets, Harris was not above enhancing a story. To illustrate the scourge that magpies had become to cattle during the Depression—so serious that a bounty was paid for them—Harris urged Beryl Fettig, a tireless magpie hunter in the early 1940s, to strap on a .45 pistol for his photograph, although her methods were no more sinister than plucking baby birds from their nests.¹⁹ On the other hand, the realities of life in the Dakotas sometimes seemed too preposterous for an eastern city editor. One picture story Harris sent off documented the life and times of Killdeer, which included the sizable herds of cattle that were trailed through the streets of the small town en route to the nearby railspur at roundup time. The story was roundly rejected by the editor who stated, "[A]ltho the yarns spun by Harris were indeed very interesting, they were so implausible that no eastern reader could be expected to believe them."²⁰



"World Champion Magpie Hunter," Beryl Fettig of Killdeer, North Dakota. Courtesy of the Dunn County Historical Society.

Harris appears to have led a somewhat marginal existence financially, depending in part on the operation of the family's Park Hotel. Oral accounts about his photography include mention of his trading photographs for gasoline when times were lean. In later years, he no longer drove, due to health problems, and depended upon friends to drive him to photographic locations. While his work was exhibited in some nearby places, Harris expressed frequent disappointment about the relative lack of local interest in his work.²¹

In the summer of 1950, Harris and his mother moved to Livingston, Montana, where, in declining health, he lived his remaining years quietly. He died in Livingston on January 29, 1962, following a lingering illness. Today his work is preserved in several locations in North Dakota, including the Dunn County Historical Society Museum in Dunn Center, which exhibits a number of his photographs from a collection of more than 250 photographs and negatives. Harris continues to have a presence in Killdeer, where a rustically framed collection of many of his portraits of old timers from this country, titled "Dakota Days," hangs in the Cowboy Bar on Main Street.²²

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Acknowledgments

My appreciation goes first to the people of the Little Missouri who gave of their time for interviews and/or viewing of photographs, including Beryl Fettig, Lynell Sandvig, Alice Westerem LeRoy, Verne Howard, Joe Wetsch, George Fenton, Leo Kostelnak, and Cleo and Evelyn Veeder. I am greatly indebted to Eloise Ogden of the *Minot Daily News* for her assistance and encouragement with research for this article. She shared the interviews she conducted with Killdeer residents with me and provided several additional pieces of information, including relevant news clippings on Killdeer and



Leo Harris on horseback, leading a pack horse laden with a tripod and cameras.

Leo Harris from the *Minot Daily News*, as well as certain other documents. I am also very appreciative of the guidance of Castle McLaughlin, assistant professor of anthropology at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, who suggested the topic of Leo Harris and shared with me information and a number of his photographs that she encountered during her continuing research on the ranchers of the Fort Berthold Reservation.

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20. "Where West Begins: Killdeer Swings from Roaring Past to Promising Future," by Douglas Pike, in *Minot Daily News*, October 4, 1953; also in "Killdeer, the Cowboy Capitol," by Ed Doherty in *Bar North*, November 1953.

21. Most information extant in newspapers and oral recollections suggests his main love and occupation was the documentary coverage of his beloved Little Missouri country. Nevertheless, he was not well supported by the modest market in western North Dakota. Interviews with Beryl Fettig, Joe Wetsch, George Fenton, Jack Murphy, and Cleo Veeder, in Killdeer, June 30, 1993.

22. See obituaries cited. According to oral history sources, Harris left the Killdeer area discouraged by the limited market for his prints, particularly among local people. Some negatives were reportedly burned by Harris upon his departure from Killdeer, but a box of photographs and some negatives were left in a locked box in the Park Hotel, to be retrieved years later by the purchaser of the hotel. Phone interview with Elmer Nordsven, June 27, 1993. These photographs were eventually sold to the Dunn County Historical Society, forming their Harris collection.