

GUEST: DR. BILLY BERGIN

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The relationship with animal and man is a very, very wonderful one that God created that way. It's supposed to be this way. We're supposed to care for them.

Heartfelt words from someone who understands the special connection between people and animals. He was the veterinarian at Parker Ranch for 25 years. And today, he's working to preserve the history and culture of the Hawaiian cowboy. Join me as I sit down to share stories with lifelong island resident Dr. Billy Bergin next.

Aloha no kakou; I'm Leslie Wilcox of PBS Hawaii. On today's *Long Story Short* we'll meet Dr. Billy Bergin, a former cowboy and a veterinarian whose colorful stories of the Parker Ranch lands and cowboy life go way back; I mean way back, to the year 750. Not 1750; 750. Dr. Bergin tells the stories in a series of books titled, "Loyal To The Land." His personal history includes a grandfather who came to Hawaii as an Irish sailor, a father who was a plantation doctor, and another father figure, a native Hawaiian cowboy. From the cowboy, young Billy learned the Hawaiian language and customs which would help him in his role as veterinarian at Parker Ranch in Waimea on Hawaii Island.

I'm approaching my forty-second year of veterinary practice, and it's been so gratifying, where I could do for animal life what my father did for human life. Yes.

Why was it so important to you to become a veterinarian?

It would have been a wonderful compromise between being a cowboy and being a medical doctor like my father. It's right down the middle.

Were you a good cowboy?

I wouldn't say red hot, but I loved to ride young horses, and I did a lot of that when I was young and light. And the ranch I worked for, for Shipman's, was basically a wild cattle outfit, so I got to get my share of wild bulls tied to a tree. And that's the excitement, that's the boy part of it where you really—you're alongside great cowboys that are grown men, that did it as profession. But it's a very, very exciting form of work—a tremendous dependence on a good horse. And I count that as some of my most memorable opportunities in my lifetime.

Well, you've written extensively about Parker Ranch. But I haven't heard much about your own personal family history. How did the Bergins get to Hawaii?

In 1888, a young man, a 21-year-old immigrant from Ireland named Billy Bergin, William Carthage Bergin, landed in Honolulu; probably one of several trips here, before he decided to stay. And it wasn't long before he did probably the most noble thing an Irishman can do; and he opened a saloon. And we're all proud of him—
[chuckle]

--for having done that.

Where did he open his saloon?

It was called Waikiki Inn, and it was there on the water. He didn't own the property, but he owned the business. And soon after that, he wed my grandmother, who was a ranch girl from Montana, and brought her home here. And they just had one child, and that was my father, Bill.

Did your father grow up in a home attached to the saloon?

No, he actually grew up in the saloon. It became sort of a hostel that really was a boarding place for retired Irish sailors that did not want to go back home to Ireland. They were single men, and they had no place else to go, and they were happy. They were surrounded by countrymen. And I think I was a high schooler when my father and I were here on Oahu, and he took me with him—I happened to go with him to Nuuanu Cemetery. And he would go from headstone to headstone, and say a few prayers. And he said, Those were the six men that put him from first grade forward to St. Louis School when it was in River Street. And when he finished up there, they sent him to medical school at Creighton University in Omaha.

Is that right? The guys who lived in the saloon sent him to—

Yeah. That was their little boy.

--private school and college?

Yeah; yeah. So he came home in '32 to intern here, I believe, at Queen's. And then he immediately moved over

to Kona and started a private practice there, and eventually had a daughter there, and moved to Maui, to Kula Sanitarium, where Hawaii had so much tuberculosis. And had a second daughter, and then he took the family to New Orleans, where he went back to, for more medical training in surgery at Tulane University. And he returned to the islands, and that was straight to Laupahoehoe, where he had my sister Nancy in '38, and I was born in '40.

Born in Laupahoehoe.

Laupahoehoe.

You grew up entirely on Hawaii Island?

Yeah. We moved to Pepe'ekeo and I started St. Joseph School in, I guess about 1946, '45. And that was the beginning of a not so illustrious high school career in parochial schooling. But nevertheless, I subsisted and actually—

You were a naughty boy?

I think I was probably the first attention deficit kid that the Maryknoll nuns ever ran into. Because it was a frustration to them. And it's not that I was a bad boy, but I was very inattentive. And that led to my connection with the cowboy world, to a man named Holi. A few years before I was born, his wife Esther, a pure native Hawaiian lady, had been in labor for much longer than she should have been. And they brought her down from Kuka'iau Ranch to Laupahoehoe Hospital. And as we all know, in those days, the Hawaiian community was very leery of going to hospitals, whether it be the threat of leprosy or tuberculosis being diagnosed. But Esther came in, and she was toxic, and really on her death bed. And my dad, of course, did the necessary surgery to save her life, but it'd mean that she would never bear children.

She lost her newborn?

Yeah. And it was a little boy that they lost. So my father shared with me that a few weeks later, when Holi came to pick up Esther from the hospital, Holi's parting gesture of gratitude went like this. And he said, If you ever have a son, I'd like to partake in raising him. Well, being Hawaii born, my dad immediately understood the context of what Holi was saying. Not using the word *hanai* or *lawe hanai*, as it could be used also, but the sheer intent of that very loving gesture was kept in my father's mind. So by the end of my third grade at St. Joseph School, he took up the offer from Holi. So off again, on again, but mostly on again, I lived there with the family, with Holi and his wife Esther, who happened to be a graduate of the Normal School. And that was Hawaii's territorial teachers college. So she was a housewife, but she was completely certified to teach. And teach me, she did. And I was able to go back to St. Joe and wrap up my career there. But there we were, up in a ranch setting in a little village called 'Umikoa, where the mist and the fog, the rain, the eucalyptus and the smell of it, the smell of cattle and horses, the smell of stables, the thundering of hooves in the dark at four o'clock in the morning when the cowboys would the work horses in. But more so, to be immersed into a purely Hawaiian home, where Holi's mother-in-law, Esther's mother lived with us. And she was tiny, little Hawaiian woman who spoke no English. But when you were nine, you were able to pick up on language a lot faster than we can today. And it wasn't long before I was very much in tuned with conversations, and they appreciated and they taught me a lot more. They prayed a lot; they were rather devout Mormons, and I have always been a devout Catholic, and they respected that. But prayer is prayer; it's universal.

Young Billy Bergin would learn many lessons from the native Hawaiians and cowboys with whom he prayed, played, worked and lived. And he gives most of the credit for that to the man who helped raise him, John Holi Ma-e of 'Umikoa Village.

They were asking me the name of my grandparents, and I did not know them. And I was asked to research my own genealogy. And that's a huge difference between what we consider to be Western culture and the Hawaiian culture. Where like Holi would say, All of your goodness comes from your forebears. Any shortcomings, he said, you have to take care. And it was, as you can see from the books I've written, where there's huge emphasis on genealogy and the power of genetic passing down, the predisposition to qualities that can move you forward in life or benefit others. An example would be a Hawaiian woman from Kawaihae Uka, way up in the hills above Kawaihae. From this lady, Awa'a, there were thirty-eight great Hawaiian cowboys that descended from that one woman. No matter who intermarried, they came out to be quality, noted people in Hawaii's ranching history. That's predisposition; that's what Holi was talking about. You have to be proud of your heritage, you have to know your genealogy. And I've applied that ever since.

You know, they say Eskimos have umpteen words for snow. And Hawaiians have so many words to describe the quality of the ocean. But you're saying it's very specific, the kind of words that were used on the ranch, in Hawaiian.

Yes. Yes; and phenomenal ability to zero in on things.

And yet, you always hear that the Hawaiian language is so metaphorical that there are many things that, you know, you don't go into detail about. But instead, it's a metaphor.

That is so true, and that's a neat, neat aspect of the Hawaiian language. And it's funny, and it's good fun. Because they'll say something about something or someone; and when you understand what the metaphor means, it is so funny. And yet, it's not insulting, the way they put it. It's really clean. But it's a dirty joke, you know.

[chuckle]

It's a laughable thing. And that is very unique and very special. And some of these men that would speak to that, would be men like Holi, that were basically religious leaders, very spiritual men. In my lifetime, there were five of them on the Big Island. Holi was one of 'em. Very high ranking, devout Mormon leader, and at the same time, a Hawaiian priest. Same could be said about Reverend Kauhane in Waiohina; the same could be said about Joe Kahananui in Kona; or Robert Kekelani—

So they were navigating those boundaries.

With no conflict. How could they do that? How could they parallel those forms of blessings of a baby one-year-old party? Or they're blessing the frame of a house, and do that through Hawaiian spiritual religion, and have it work so well, and yet the next day, in their suit with a tie, conduct all of the Bible classes in a Mormon church or a Congregational church. Didn't have to be Mormon. How can the Hawaiian people do that so effectively? And yet, my cousins in Ireland, they shoot each other over which religion they belong to, you know. And to me, it was always a lesson how these people can do that so very, very diplomatically and so complimentary. The religions complemented each other.

Well, we know that there was a huge contribution from Hispanics, the vaquero cowboys. So there must be a lot of Spanish in the paniolo language too?

Well, certainly the term paniolo would be. But if you wanted to take a hundred and fifty year old prototype, it would be the Hawaiian cowboy saddle. And when you look at its profile, it's Mexican, with refinement. Leave it to the Hawaiians to go ahead and refine the saddle horn and the seat to be a lot more comfortable. Again, like Mexican, minimum leather, 'cause it's expensive and it doesn't do well in wet weather. Lots of rawhide, lots of practicality. Very few moving parts, so very few things to break. So imagine, in '33, 1833, where these three fellows came to the Big Island. And Kamehameha III brought them here to convert the afoot Polynesian who was trying to tend cattle on foot, that were wild, and not getting anywhere. And he brought these people that came with their saddles and their horses to their students of native Hawaiian people, that were athletic, that had tremendous hand-to-eye coordination. They were the carvers of canoes and utensils, that were the weavers of the sennit or the sails, to go ahead and weave the rawhide lariats, to carve the saddle trees, to braid the rawhide reins for their horses and their bridles like that. So you can imagine the immediate period of maybe only two or three years before those Hawaiian men and women were horseback,

But there was that natural affinity for the traits that make a good horseman.

Yes. And I think some of them come so naturally. The grace of roping; if you watch people rope, it's a very, very graceful—and hand-to-eye relationship. But if you take the sheer profession of hula and its grace, the warriors and what they had to do, coupled with the physical prowess condition, the great diet of fish and fiber, they had so much going for them. And I think that must have really impressed the vaquero when they went back to California, having achieved in their own observation period this finesse.

Dr. Billy Bergin, a keen observer himself, made good use of his knowledge and appreciation of Hawaiian language and customs when he worked at Parker Ranch until 1995. His role as veterinarian was vital at one of the largest working ranches in the U.S.

What took up most of your time as the Parker Ranch veterinarian for twenty-five years?

I would say the bulk of my time was spent in consultation. And what that meant was designing an animal health program for fifty thousand head of cattle, and at one time, two thousand horses. That would mean that production would be maximized at the least cost and retaining the largest survival rate. In other words, reducing death losses to phenomenally low levels by intensive animal health program application.

So system, rather than one-on-one.

Yeah; yeah. And still, there was plenty of one-on-one. The horses had to be one-on-one. But I do have to say that uniquely about Parker Ranch is this. They engaged veterinary medicine around 1901 or '02. Now, the nation of America, the livestock industry of America never picked up on veterinary consultation until probably 1950, '55, '60. And the big difference there was the leadership of A.W. Carter, who was a very intelligent Honolulu boy who became an attorney and a judge, and clearly understood that the key to productivity in agriculture is through retaining the best consultants of the world that you—I'm not referring to myself, but he brought in people from Cornell University back when, in America, we had only four or five veterinary schools. And he constantly upgraded, not just veterinary care, but agronomy, soil science and things like that, dairy science. That, when you're working with a company like Parker Ranch, who's very, very prone to stay on the forward edge of the

cutting edge of anything in agricultural science, then for a veterinarian to have an opportunity to lead in that circumstance is an absolute blessing.

Where is Parker Ranch now in terms of moving forward? You know, ranches in a sense are retro work.

The place in which Parker Ranch grew itself into was really the beginning of the A.W. Carter era in which, by his nature, he basically expected and wanted perfection. Perfection of himself, and of the people around him. And he surrounded himself with very strong people, on the ranch, mostly native Hawaiian people. And at the same time he developed an unspoken, unprinted mantra. And I've begun to put that term in print, because I always heard it from the cowboys. I heard it from the fence men, I heard it from the milkers, I would hear it from the carpenters that, That is not Parker Ranch standard. And what they mean when they say that is that those materials that you're about to use to build a Parker Ranch gate or a Parker Ranch middle house or Parker Ranch home, Parker Ranch saddle house, or a Parker Ranch saddle, are not up to Parker Ranch standard. So the Parker Ranch standard grew to become hanging a gate so it swung open naturally. Hanging a gate so that when it swung back, it was plumb with the gate post. And it had a latch that was reachable by a man on horseback. So though the ranch at times grew to be more than three hundred thousand acres, there wasn't a gate that did not open according to the Parker Ranch standard. I'm referring only to gates, now. This has every aspect of the ranch to do. What happened to that Parker Ranch standard? That Parker Ranch standard was picked up by Richard Smart, of what he expected of people that surrounded him. And as I heard him say routinely, as I sat next to him in management meetings for thirty years, he wanted to leave the ranch intact in perpetuity. Now, with that came his expectations of that same kind of conduct of the people that were with him, his beloved employees. And that mantra remained alive and well, and with his passing there began to be a situation where easing away from etiquette, easing away from protocol, easing away from the Parker Ranch standard was noticed by the cowboys, first. And they would begin to see things happening that way, where things were not maintained the way they should have been, and agreements were not held to the same standard that they had been. Because it wasn't long, especially with the passing of Richard, where the community sensed it by then, the bank tellers sensed it by then. And it was not a real happy community be in, because it is the community. And with the trust being set up so that the four beneficiaries: Parker School, Hawaii Preparatory Academy, Hawaii Community Foundation, and North Hawaii Community Hospital were beneficiaries that realized that they were empowered, just as the Bishop Estate beneficiaries were empowered.

The Bishop Estate controversy was instructive to Parker Ranch?

It was; the comparison I have witnessed is that those beneficiaries of the Bishop Estate realized they were empowered, lawfully empowered. Hence, the seated trustees today have been selected uniformly by the beneficiaries. And when you do that, you bring coalescence, you bring back one direction in which everybody is marching.

Does that mean the Parker Ranch standard is back?

I think it's coming back. I think with the leadership of Chris Kanazawa, who has ties to the community; but more important than that, he has the spirit of correctness, underscored by preserving the heritage of that community.

Do you think Parker Ranch owes so much its strength and endurance to those cowboys with religious training and religious leadership?

Yes. And I think you've raised a real neat point. And that would be resilience. I'll first put in it in a form of leadership. Richard Smart did change leadership a lot, and it was just his nature. So for the twenty-five years I was there, I had seven different management changes. The resilience and dedication of the men in the field that never missed a step.

Dr. Billy Bergin's observations and experiences have helped him document the history of the Hawaiian cowboy and ranch life on Hawaii Island. As a young boy, he witnessed part of an important chapter in Waimea's history – the establishment of Camp Tarawa, a World War II training facility that housed tens of thousands of Army, Navy and Marine troops in this ranch town. Camp Tarawa resulted in new jobs and new businesses created by locals, and it left the community with new buildings and water resources, an ice plant and electricity.

You were a little kid during World War II. So tell me what you know of what happened to Waimea, with forty thousand troops coming into Waimea to bivouac.

The development of that community into such a massive military outpost was, I think, a brilliant, appropriate tactical measure of our federal government, as well as our territorial government, in that what does Waimea have? It has the truck gardening capital of Hawaii. Intensive as it is today, truck gardening; there's cabbage everywhere, there's lettuce everywhere, there's exotic vegetables there. So you have a pork producing ranch, you have a beef producing ranch, you have a lamb producing ranch, coupled with all of the fiber that you may want to have out of the truck gardening community. That's why it wasn't Wahiawa that got forty thousand of 'em.

It wasn't Lahaina, Maui. It was right there in Kamuela you had—

Do you remember seeing those guys?

Yeah; because we were just kinda leaving Laupahoehoe and moving to Pepe'ekeo, and the train line ran right below our house. And of course, you can hear the rumble of the train coming, and we'd all run out. And car after car of marines in uniform, some of them squatted down, some of them standing, in open flatbeds. And that's how they took them to Paauilo, and then trucked them from there up into Kamuela. But the sheer presence of forty thousand great men, ably fit, well dressed, well groomed, tough marines. And I think that affected everyone, families alike.

Dr. Billy Bergin says being a ranch veterinarian is “right down the middle” between being a cowboy and a doctor. And he was raised “right down the middle” by a medical doctor in a coastal plantation village and a native Hawaiian cowboy on a working ranch. From this vantage point, Dr. Bergin continues to document the history and culture of the Hawaiian cowboy through books and the non-profit Paniolo Preservation Society. Mahalo piha to Dr. Billy Bergin, and to you, for joining me for another *Long Story Short*. I'm Leslie Wilcox of PBS Hawaii. A hui hou kakou.

Video clip with production credits:

One of Holi's nephews that he kinda raised was a very, very handsome Hawaiian cowboy named George Kealoha. Great cowboy, great image guy. But he wasn't real friendly, and I don't think he cared for my inquiring or at least interviewing him. But we were setting this imu, and part of it was a side, the preparation of chicken luau. And I said, George, you know, a hundred years ago there weren't chickens in Hawaii. I mean, how did Hawaiians make chicken luau? And very straight-faced, he told me, With owl. And I think I was in high school before I realized that he was just kidding me and it never would have happened.