

ALFRED MEDEIROS, JR.

McCandless Ranch, Hawai`i

Alfred's 60 years at McCandless Ranch are a mirror of the cattle industry in Hawai`i, from the early days of wild cattle infestations throughout the islands, through the paniolo days of hunting and roping them, to the tame herds, selective breeding and pasture management of the present day.



Alfred started as a "tag-along" cowboy at McCandless ranch when his father went to work there in 1936. Alfred was then 10 years old. He helped drive the cattle to Napoopoo for shipping to Honolulu. When he was 14 he went to work for the Civilian Conservation Corps, but they found out he was underage and sent him home. Thus, at age 15, began Alfred's lifelong relationship of 60 years with McCandless - a huge ranch of 30,000 acres, known for its wild and rough terrain.

In 1943 the ranch was a forest full of wild cattle and the paniolo's routine work was catching the "Pipi ahiu", mostly by crashing at break-neck speed through the native jungle thick with fern, ohia and koa. With more courage than good sense, they rode and roped to clean out the wild bulls. Alfred was noticed for his natural abilities and he became ranch foreman at the age of 22, after a two year enlistment in the U.S. Army. He worked for 48 years as ranch foreman. One of his biggest accomplishments was the spay and castration program he conducted, which is largely credited as the key to finally ridding the McCandless lands of wild cattle. But if one or two are still lurking out there, as some rumor they are, you will no doubt find Alfred Medeiros not far behind.

Alfred Medeiros
Oral History Interview
Paniolo Hall of Fame
Oahu Cattlemen's Association
By Ilima Loomis
Feb. 24, 2006
Kona

Note: The first half-hour of the interview with Alfred Medeiros was lost when the tape broke. Mr. Medeiros agreed to continue and re-do portions of the interview on a new tape.

IL: I'll try holding it so I can watch the tape a little more. Ok. This is another try at our interview.

AM: We're going to start all over again?

IL: Yeah, we can go over some of the stuff we already talked about, but we don't have to go into as much detail as we did before. Why don't we start with talking about when you came to work for McCandless Ranch. It was after you served in the war.

AM: I was born in 1927 when we lived at Kealakekua by Konawaena school. My dad worked for Henry Greenwell. In 1936 my dad went to work for McCandless Ranch as foreman. We lived at Honokua. I worked with my dad on weekends and summers. I was the "tail boy". When we would drive the cattle, I would pick up the ones that would fall down. I would be the one to drive the cattle into the ocean when we shipped. When my dad worked the ranch, we would take the cattle down through Kahuloa, Sherwood's place to the Paris'. The next day we would drive them down to Napoopoo and out to the ship. That's when I was the "tail boy". I finished school in the 8th grade, then went to work for the ranch.

I went in the CCC Camp when I was 14. I came out at 16 years old. Then I worked for the ranch from when I was 16 years old. Then when I was 19 I went in the service. Then when I was 21 I came back and worked on the ranch. I took two years out, they gave me the two years. That's when I started on the ranch.

IL: It was about 1947 that you started working McCandless Ranch?

AM: Yeah, I think so.

IL: And at that time, your dad was the foreman, correct?

AM: Yeah, a little while. That's why I said, I don't know what year he went out. Anyway, we used to stay down at that place, Honokua, yeah? And then after, he got laid off, so we moved down Ala'e, by the old school down there. Then he was driving school

bus for Willie Thompson. That was when I was in CCC camp. Then I work on the ranch after that.

IL: You were telling me about all the wild cattle you guys were catching at that time.

AM: All was wild. Everything was wild. That's why I said, from 1950 or 51 or something, with Jack Midkiff. The ranch traded the place at Napoopoo for 130 breeding heifers from Sherwood (then we had Sherwood, he got the land out of McCandless.) And of course, we went some up Shipman (Ranch) at Puu O'o to buy heifers. (Then of course we had _____ buy some.) We had 300, 400 head of tame cattle in those days.

IL: When did the tame cattle come in?

AM: I'd say around 1955. In '55 actually, after Jack made me foreman we didn't buy any cattle after that, I don't think so. We just used bulls we bought from Parker Ranch – Hereford bulls.

IL: So tell me about going up in the mountains and catching the wild cattle. How did that work?

AM: As I say, we'd go up, chase 'em and rope 'em. Tie 'em up, and next day we'd lead 'em out.

IL: Why did you tie them?

AM: Soften – soften them up. They lead better. One cowboy came from Honolulu. Waianae. He came up. They had wild cattle down there too. He says, you folks just lead that bull with one rope? Come on! I mean, that bull come out of that trail and come for your horse. Some times he come for your horse and try to hook you from the back. If you had a good horse, he would see it coming. But most of the time, crack your horse and take off, it shake you up a little bit.

IL: What was the most dangerous part of doing that, catching them or leading them?

AM: Catching them, because they have sharp horns, yeah?

IL: What was the most difficult bull you ever caught.

AM: Well, they were about the same. Some you know, will chase your horse, try to lift your horse up. They lead pretty good, and they run away.

IL: How far up in the mountains were you?

AM: Oh, our camp was at 6,000 feet. Well, a little over 5,000 feet.

IL: And how many days did you camp up there?

AM: In the beginning, it was two weeks up there, come down Saturday, Sunday, Monday, then back up the hill again.

IL: What was the camp like? Were you in tents or cabins?

AM: They had a cabin. They had housing. You know, they hauled one house all the way up. It was kind of a new house. That was the best house, the one they had at Komakawai Camp. That camp, Komakawai, was one of best place. There was Keanapaakai camp, Hapuu camp, Kaunene, Big Hill.

IL: So when you were up at that camp, what was it like to spend all that time there, with just a couple guys?

AM: Well, most of the time you're tired anyway. Come back, you eat, then pau, go sleep. Get up in the morning daybreak, start going again. Yeah.

IL: Was it very cold up there?

AM: Oh, cold, yeah. It was frost cold. And those days, we had hard living. We cannot afford. I just had my pants and one sweat shirt I brought with me, that's all I had. No jacket, no nothing. Cold, frost cold.

IL: What about other animals. Did you see other wild animals up there?

AM: What do you mean?

IL: Aside from the cattle.

AM: Had wild dog, but we got rid of them. They didn't last too long. And we had donkeys, and sheep, goats, pigs, yeah.

IL: What was the land like? Was it rocky, or grassy?

AM: Some areas are better than others. On that side, a lot of cracks and holes. This side, mostly holes, rocks and lava.

IL: Can you tell me again about how you learned how to spay the cattle?

AM: As I said, Dr. Nagao veterinarian, he came to teach me how to spay. It was the only way we could get rid of those cattle. We used to spay them. We'd rope 10, 15, 20 cows, heifers, then we'd go out with a little knife, and the spaying stuff, it was a long handle hook that would cut and pinch the tubes. I was lucky I learned how to spay, otherwise, I don't know how we'd get rid of those wild cattle. After me I taught Paul Keohulua to spay.

IL: Why did you do that instead of just killing them?

AM: They didn't want to kill them. They wanted meat, I don't know, for the ranch. More than half is cows, so we used to go catch all the bulls. Whatever young studs we catch out there, we cut them (castrate them) and let them go. But I didn't know how to spay, so all we could do was cut the young studs.

IL: So tell me again how you became foreman?

AM: Well, there was nobody else. Like I said, Jack Midkiff knew, I knew a little cattle, knew a little horses, I'm pretty good with animals. I worked with him, and he found out I would be a good enough foreman.

IL: Then, your dad had left the ranch?

AM: Yeah, as I say, he had pilikia with the manager – Crosby and he went to drive bus for Willie Thompson.

IL: So when did they start to bring the tame cattle on board?

AM: (see page 2 about the land trade and buying heifers) That was in Jack Metcaffé's time. 1950 to 55. We had cattle from Sherwood, Apo and _____, brought them down. We started with maybe 300, 400 head of cattle.

IL: And how did you manage those on the ranch?

AM: Up in the mountains, we had them up there. But in the beginning, we did a lot of fencing. We had a fence gang. That's where we used to raise them, up there. The fence gang would fence and we would clean out the wild cattle. Then we would bring up the tame cattle

IL: Were they free ranging, or were they rotational grazing?

AM: Yeah, we rotate them.

IL: How often.

AM: Depend on the weather, yeah? Good weather, they stay a little longer, it's kind of dry, whatever, we move them. Depend on how much feed left.

IL: Would you move them every couple of days, or weeks?

AM: No, no (once a month). And when we move them, we had to check if any stayed back there.

IL: And tell me how you'd use your dogs to help you round up the cattle?

AM: Oh, boy. Those dogs, they stay with us always. They stay with the cows, they don't get tired. They stay out there all night, then the next day we go back and find them. Then, I had different dogs. Use them for drive, like that. My last dogs were the best. Whatever we do, the dogs do it. So they was a big help. The last dogs I had, I retired but I had these dogs left over. And these dogs was good dogs. They read your mind. And when we go drive up there, there's only three or four of us, and the pasture is – oh man – a long ways. What happened, when the breeze is blowing this way, I go up about halfway in the paddock. I go across, I just go, and the dogs put up their nose, look at me, and I sic em. Go down, take 'em, push 'em my way. Then they come back, we take 'em back. I always stay in front, hold the bunch, and the dogs stay with me, help hold the cattle back. Anything drift off, they bring 'em back. It was a big help, the dogs. Like when we go bring in the wild cattle down here, whatever hide, the dogs take 'em right down in the pen. I used to make a gate with a rubber on it, so they can go in but they cannot come out.

IL: So the cattle get trapped inside.

AM: Yeah, go right in, and cannot come back out. Then the dogs come back.

IL: Did you ever use traps to catch wild cattle in the mountains?

AM: The last bunch up in the forest, must have had about 30 or more. Before, we used to make a trap, with a long piece of string. Pull 'em open, pull 'em shut. Pull 'em open, pull 'em shut.

IL: To a pen?

AM: Yeah. We used to watch the gate nighttime, go over there. We just used that gate, a little trap gate.

IL: How many could you catch like that?

AM: Whatever come in for water. Lucky we had the trap. Big help.

IL: So when we stopped the last time, we were talking about how you saw the ranch change in your years there. Aside from bringing in the tame cattle, how did they change the way they ran the ranch?

AM: It was all tame cattle. That's why I say, whatever, if we have to move, we move, and we go back, check whatever's in back, with the tame cattle. It was all easy going.

IL: Did they use any new skills or techniques?

AM: No, it was still the same.

IL: They kept doing it the same way.

AM: Yeah.

IL: What about the breeding? What was their breeding program?

AM: What do you mean?

IL: For the herd.

AM: We used to bring in bulls from outside. And Jack Midkiff, he made it six months on, six months off the herd, yeah? He'd put the bull in six months, put him out six months. Then afterward, they went to three months – three months on, three months off. The six months was bad. Any time we move the cattle, a lot of cows stay back, or the calves stay back, because they're just born, yeah? It was big trouble. We lose some calves that way. Anyway, the three months was right on. We could move them – they're three months old already. The youngest was three months. That was easy. Yeah, I remember the beginning, Jack say, you know, you can get more calves this old way. It wasn't too bad, we had about maybe 60 percent. I told him we try three months on, three months off. He told me try and we see. There was no guarantee what was going to happen. After that was pretty good though, we started getting 70 maybe 75 percent.

IL: Where were you marketing the cattle at that time?

AM: We had Kona Meat, Hilo Meat, and we were sending meat to Honolulu.

IL: What percent, do you think, you sent to Honolulu?

AM: Phew. About half? Roughly, I don't know. Hilo Meat and Kona Meat took most. And afterwards they had Palama Meat at Paauilo, the big feedlot down there. Andrade had a meat market down there, above Honokaa. He had a slaughterhouse too. We used to take 'em over there. (Chee, I forget his name.)

IL: As far as the management goes, did they go for a purebred herd, or did they mix it up?

AM: Whatever, no, not purebred. You understand, we didn't have no purebred. So whatever, whatever we had, we use 'em. At that time they were using mostly Hereford bulls, then had Angus a little while. And now it's back on Angus. I think people are mostly using Angus right now, I'm not too sure.

IL: You told me before about breaking the horses, and the old way of doing it.

AM: Oh yeah. Broke neck then.

IL: Pretty rough in those days, huh?

AM: Oh yeah. That's why I said, that's all they knew. Bring 'em in, choke 'em, put a saddle on 'em. The guy hold 'em, and you jump on, turn 'em loose and yank with the spurs. They threw buck, open the gate, and out you go. That was rough. So I said, "We're doing something wrong here." And the old cowboys said, "You're mahu!" (chuckles)

IL: Why did you think there was something wrong with that?

AM: It's too rough. I mean, we were just asking for 'um. What we was doing with the spurs? We ought to go easy, easy – use the blinders, try open the blinders, go easy, easy. Anyway, what I was doing there, ho, that's the best thing I think I did. They had these couple of cowboys come in from Parker Ranch, went over there and watch them, perfect. That's where I learned the most. He said, "Watch what we're going to do with this horse. Watch this horse, what he's doing now. Wait a little while. Ok, now you can go." He can go right up to the horse. I said, that's what I was trying to do!

IL: When was that?

AM: Shee, boy. Gee, the last years, maybe 10 years before I retire. I don't know when Parker Ranch brought in those guys. But they was good.

IL: 70s maybe?

AM: I would say maybe 80s.

IL: So after that, were people more willing to try your way of training?

AM: Well, I was the foreman, so they had to do it. Yeah. Anyway, after those old people left, nobody would do that. I was the next oldest there, so they would do what I say.

IL: How many horses did you have?

AM: Depend. Three, four on my string.

My brother was here a little while too, and then he went to Kahuku Ranch. And my cousin, Johnny, was here, then he went to Puuwaawaa. And had of course Joe Gang, and Peter Jack. Anyway, that was the old guys. And then they got some new ones. They had some kind of deal with the school. They sent us four boys down from the school. Three of 'em stayed there, they gave up. They didn't want to do it. I don't blame them...)

IL: You were talking about the horses you had. How many did you have in a string, three or four?

AM: Oh yeah. Well, working horses, two or three. Broke horses, maybe four, five or six

if you're lucky. What happens is we work them, maybe two, three weeks, then we let them out. Then we bring on a new string.

IL: Where did you get your new horses from?

AM: We had colts. We used a stallion and the mares for breeding. Before, it was only scrub horses..

IL: Cheap horses?

AM: Yeah.

IL: When you were breeding the horses, what breed did you have?

AM: At the beginning we had appaloosas, and palominos. It depend what kind we could get, for the studs. Then we had Belgiums.

IL: Beigians? Must have been big.

AM: Yeah (chuckles). We had percherons. What happens, they bought these Percheron horses. They were big horses. Then we had a part Belgian stud.

IL: So how were the horses back then different from today?

AM: Hoo, I don't know. Different now. Like I say, all tame, slow easy. I don't think they get too many cowboys nowadays. They don't have 'em now. Pau, eh?

Mrs. Medeiros: He's got one old horse, that's still living. (They chuckle.)

AM: What happens, I used to play rodeo a lot. Rodeo, then polo and all that stuff. This is the last one I got. He's what, 34, 35 years? Something like that? That's the last I got. He's up in Waimea. I had Hawaiian Homes up in Waimea I gave to the kids, and he's up there now. That's my last rodeo horse.

IL: When did you get involved with rodeo?

AM: Whoa. My first trophy, for calf roping, is right over there. '52, '53. (He points it out.)

Mrs. Medeiros: Isn't that beautiful?

IL: It is beautiful.

AM: It was 1953. Before it was just cowboys, eh? Nowadays it's different. Before, I used to rope – I had four buckles, went down Maui. I win calf roping, dally team, poo wai u, and all-around cowboy.

IL: What year?

AM: '55? I don't know. Anyway.

IL: Was there a rodeo club at that time?

AM: We had rodeos all over. I used to go all over – Honolulu and Maui, that's about it. Then afterwards there was a lot of jackpot roping, in Waimea, that place Hale Kea, and Billy Bergin has his little arena too, eh? Plus Ka'u, always Ka'u, every fourth of July.

IL: What was that rodeo like?

AM: That was where I got this trophy. And before, as I say, those days you rope a calf, maybe 25, 30 seconds, you win first place! (laughs.) Now, ho! Seven, eight seconds, you won. What happened, I fooled around rodeo, and then my grandson used to stay with me and I used to take him out rodeoing. I said, "you're pretty good!" I was trying to get him to rope calves. He said, "Oh, grandpa, I cannot knock down those calves." So high school rodeo on the mainland, had this little haole girl. Lucky 98 pounds. She roped this calf, jumped down, knock it down and tie it up. How you like that? Hoo, boy! (laughter.) He said, "I think grandpa I'm going to rope calf now." (Laughter.) Now days the kids is terrific. They get clinics too, all this stuff teaching them how. We went up the mainland, the kids doing calf roping and dally team – those guys don't even know how to saddle their own horse! Someone comes to saddle their horse. They don't even go school. Tutors come their place. Had a couple old people like us saying, "HO it's hard to compete with those guys."

IL: Why did you enjoy doing rodeo?

AM: Well, that's how my life was, no? Show your horse, show what you can do.

IL: Did you use cowboy horse for that?

AM: My regular couple of horses. Those days, the cattle was all tame. So if I take my horse and move the cattle down here, it's not like the mountain, yeah? Then I used to go out rope wild cattle, bring them. I used to keep them up here. I used to take them down to the arena and practice roping. Yeah, down here, we built that arena, at the old Honaunau school.

IL: Who build it?

AM: Us rodeo guys.

IL: What was that rodeo club.

AM: Uh, Kona Roping Club. Anyway, we started fooling around, then we started making rodeo. Put in a bull pen, bucking chutes.

IL: You said you did polo too?

AM: Yeah. It was good fun. Indoor polo, not the outdoor polo, though. We played in the arena. Outdoor, with the long [field] you just run, run like crazy. I went one time, I said, "I'm not coming back here no more!" You run for nothing, no action. You've got to get a long-winded horse. Those polo horses, you've got to exercise too, yeah?

IL: So you did that with the other cowboys?

AM: What, polo? Freddy Rice was for polo, and Peter Baldwin. Kona guys, I'm not too sure. _____ They had five, six games and finally gave up. Then they went outdoors – at Waikii they had that polo game.

IL: So you said you retired from McCandless in 1980?

Mrs. Medeiros: You had surgery in 1988. It was a year after that, I think (1989).

IL: What was the ranch like when you retired.

AM: All tame cattle – easy, easy. As I say, the cowboys today, if they had to do what we used to do, no way they'd be working on the ranch.

IL: Hm, why's that?

AM: It's too rough. Half of those cowboys probably cannot even ride down here full speed. You know. Now it's different, you have to go slow. That's why I said my favorite word is "go easy, go easy!" (chuckles)

IL: After you retired, they split the ranch in three parts?

AM: Yeah. Just before I retired they start dividing it. Then they split 'em.

IL: Why did they do that again?

AM: They didn't get along. All them want to be ranchers.

IL: The three daughters?

AM: No. The two daughters and a boy: Lester and Tita and Cynthia – that's three. You've got to split the ranch three ways. So the boy had three daughters, so they split it one, two, three ways when he died. This is one of the girls' place, where I live. And then one got all makai. They're selling that, I think. And the other got up the mountain.

IL: How many cattle were on the ranch when you retired?

AM: Whew, boy. I would say maybe about 1,200, 1,500 cows. Maybe about a thousand. I don't know, I forget.

IL: What do you see as the future of the ranch?

AM: This ranch now? All is gone. Only Tita hanging on now. Cynthia gave up, up mountain. They get a little place down here, but all the weeds coming in. I don't know how they're going to do it – they cannot. No place to put 'em. So just Tita now. Tita, I don't know how long she going last.

IL: Well, Mr. Medeiros, thank you so much for talking with me.