

# Alaska's Roping



# Retailer

Charlie and Nancy Willis  
rely on the three “R’s”  
to keep their retail business  
going: Roping, Riding  
and Rodeo.

By Daniel DeWeese,  
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The rising cost of energy is on everybody’s mind these days as manufacturers, distributors and retailers all try to hold the line on prices to their customers. Faced with incremental jumps in shipping costs in recent months, businesses all along the chain of distribution to the horse and rider market fret about the impact of higher prices on their sales.

For Charlie Willis, high shipping costs are part of the price of doing business in Alaska and he struggles constantly to keep those costs down.

Willis, who grew up cowboying in central California, moved to Alaska during the oil crisis of 1974. He met his wife-to-be, Nancy, shortly afterwards. He worked security in the oil fields

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**Charlie Willis and his family, Nancy, Garrett and Callie, in front of the CW Tack & Western Wear tack trailer, which features five-foot-tall photo murals of Callie rounding a barrel on her horse.**

of Prudhoe Bay for nine years, during which time he married Nancy. Their son, Garrett, was born in 1981; the arrival of Callie in 1984 prompted a career change. The young family settled in the Matanuska-Susitna Valley, named for the two rivers that drain glacial runoff from the rugged Alaska Mountain Range into Cooks Inlet near Anchorage. The property, located between Wasilla and Palmer about 45 miles north of Anchorage, was large enough to run a few horses for Charlie to play with, and they converted a barn into a retail store they dubbed CW Tack & Livestock Supply. The inventory included equipment and supplies, along with hay for horses and cattle. To augment sales, Willis also operated a delivery service.

“I had a Ford truck with a gutted cab-over camper and I delivered supplies and equipment to dairies twice a week,” he recalled. “We called it The Udder Truck.”

Meanwhile, Nancy went to work for the state of Alaska’s social services department. In the late ’80s, they introduced Western apparel into their inventory mix and renamed the store CW Tack & Western Wear. Willis relocated his store twice be-



**Charlie and Nancy with a loaded trailer of merchandise, ready for the 2,500-mile trip up the Alcan Highway to Alaska. Photo by Ericka Parker.**

fore settling into their present location in a shopping strip along the main highway in Wasilla. The Parks Highway connects Anchorage, Alaska’s largest city, with Fairbanks, the second largest 300 miles north. It also leads to Denali National Park, where Mt. McKinley is located, and during the summer is one of the busiest highways in the state.

Renowned for its fertile soil and surrounded by majestic mountains to the east, north and west, the Mat-Su Valley is the fastest growing area in Alaska with a population of 74,000 people. More than half of the 670,000 people who call Alaska home live in the area that includes Anchorage and Mat-Su Borough. A high percentage of the state’s estimated 25,000 horses are kept there, but Willis has expanded his business well beyond the Mat-Su Valley with a mobile tack trailer that he hauls to fairs, horseshows and rodeos as far away as Homer, on the Kenai Peninsula to the south, and Destruction Bay in Canada’s Yukon Territory, a nine-hour drive to the north.

The long, hard Alaskan winters force ropers and other Western riding enthusiasts into a virtual hibernation. Few indoor venues are geared for timed Western events, so there is little activity from September through April. When the weather starts to warm up, horses and cowboys come out of the woodwork and CW’s tack and saddle sales kick in again.

“From the beginning of the horse season until the end of State Fair, we are at every show or rodeo whenever



**One whole wall of the long, narrow retail space is dedicated to boots. Photo courtesy CW Tack & Western Wear.**



**The Willises set up shop for the 10-day run of Alaska State Fair each year.**

er we can get there,” Willis said, adding that they attended 11 events last year. “It got to the point where we were doing two shows a day. I’d go to the horse shows at six in the morning, leave at noon to go to the little rodeos and then back. I’d do that every weekend. It’s a very big part of our business because a lot of people who ride are at the shows. My saying is ‘I like horses that rear, dogs that chew and kids that lose,’ because they are going to have to replace one thing or another.”

Most of the trips are two- or three-day weekend affairs, except the State Fair, which runs ten days. Frequently, the Willises arrive at events with two rigs and trailers—the second trailer loaded with horses for Charlie, Garrett or Callie to compete on. Both children grew up helping in the store and the tack trailers, and are accomplished riders and ropers. Callie now lives in Kennewick, Wash., where she can run barrels and rope year round. Garrett, who has been with the Alaska Highway Patrol since 2001, ropes and helps with the tack trailer whenever he can get away from his duties as a State Trooper. Willis estimated that nearly a third of his sales come from the tack trailer.

“Just at the State Fair itself we sold 300 hats,” he revealed. The carpeted, 24-foot-long trailer boasts a seven-foot ceiling, metal grids and merchandise racks, a dressing room

and a checkout counter. It also has lighting and a sound system.

“Everything that’s in the store is in that trailer, except for boots, and a few pairs of pants,” Willis said. “Basically, it’s all tack, equipment and hats. We take a lot of special orders from the trailer. When we go to these things people aren’t looking for a new wardrobe, they’re looking for tack and equipment.”

The trailer’s exterior features the store logo emblazoned along both sides along with six-foot high photos of Callie rounding a barrel on her horse. “A friend of mine has a company called Sign King,” Willis said. “He wanted to do something differ-

ent on the trailer, and he came up with this idea. It’s attracted a lot of attention. When we drive down the road it looks like that horse is going to run you over!”

Willis does some television and radio advertising, but uses his presence at events as a key part of his marketing. He provides trophy buckles and other items for rodeos and sponsors a wide variety of activities.

“I give a lot of gift certificates to different functions,” he explained. “With a door prize or a gift certificate, all through the night you hear, ‘Hey, here’s another door prize from CW Tack & Western Wear. Look, here’s another gift certificate from



“ ‘Gosh, how does Western wear make it?’  
Well, it makes it because we work hard at it.”

CW Tack & Western Wear.’ ”

Willis added “Alaska’s Cowboy Store” to the store’s logo because his travels have made most of the inhabited parts of the state his market. He also offers exclusive products and services that justify his claim.

“I’m the only retailer in Alaska who will clean and shape a hat,” he said. He charges \$30 for the service and few balk at the cost.

Alaskans do have their limits when it comes to the cost of Western apparel and riding equipment, and Willis struggles constantly to keep his costs under control—especially shipping costs.

“They’re killing us,” Willis said of freight shipping costs to Alaska. “We use the U.S.P.S. 95 percent of the time, but a lot of our suppliers have a hard time understanding why we use them rather than UPS. These other shipping services kill us. If someone sends us a hat in a hat box from anywhere in the lower 48 states, it’s \$45 to \$50 if they use UPS.” He said that many vendors don’t want to bother dealing with the postal service, but most of them don’t understand how to use it or how much it saves in shipping fees.

“I say, ‘I can teach you how to do it from your office. You don’t have to go to the post office. They come to you; they’ll pick it up.’ ” He was recently charged \$35 for a pair of boots needlessly shipped second day air.

“I called the company and said, ‘Listen, I did not request this. You have to give me a credit or do something,’ ” he



**The Willis’ daughter Callie is an accomplished rider and barrel racer.**

said. “I do have some suppliers that understand and they help us out as much as they can, but still the costs are getting high.”

To help defray shipping costs, he has resorted to hauling inventory from Washington in a horse trailer. He had merchandise drop-shipped to Callie, pulled a trailer with four horses from Alaska, and then loaded two empty stalls in the trailer with merchandise for the return trip. As a bonus, he and Nancy, who retired from her job with the state of Alaska last year, get to visit their daughter. Their first trip went off without a hitch.

“They didn’t care about what was in it except for the horses,” he said of the customs officers. “I brought up a lot of stuff that I sold over the summer and it really helped out.”

On his second trip, he drove a truck emblazoned with store signage. That caught the attention of Canadian customs.

“When we hit the border, I had forgotten that the signs were on my truck. They asked me how much I was carrying, because I was going to have to start paying a bond on merchandise that I carry across Canada. He said, ‘I’m not going to make you pay this time, but next time you better have a bond to get your stuff across.’ ” Willis added that even if he has to secure a bond for transporting goods across Canada, he’ll still save money on shipping costs.

Sales were up overall in 2007 at CW Tack. Willis credits the presence of the military bases around Anchorage, renewed oil activity in Prudhoe Bay and the growing airfreight business between North America and Asia.

“It’s unreal how many planes come through here with freight. All those pilots live around here and they like certain boots that we sell,” he said, adding that the demographic makeup of his market is changing. “I’m seeing a lot more military, oil companies, airline pilots. In the past, we would see people going to work in the bush, then all that died and there was hardly anybody around. Now things are booming. People are coming through and moving up here.”

While prospects look good for the future of his business, Willis doesn’t expect to expand any time soon.

“I’ve got as much stuff in that store as I did when we had a 3,000-square-foot store. When you’ve got a big store, you have to figure out what’s making the most money. I don’t have to worry about that because the whole store is making money. People ask, ‘Gosh, how does Western wear make it?’ Well, it makes it because we work hard at it.” 🐾