

A long time ago, Grant Harris told a fib about a stud horse being dead. Soon afterwards, his prize colt was killed in a freak accident. Call it whatever you want. A strange coincidence. Karma. A lesson from God.

Harris says he got the message.

"That's the price you pay, dumbass, for telling a lie."

Harris is the owner of Cowtown, the oldest weekly rodeo in America, located in, of all places, New Jersey.

This old cowboy sleeps well at night staying honest and close to the cow-pied earth. "Manure," he says, "is just water and grass and a pinch of salt."

Since 1955, people have been coming to Cowtown in Salem County, N.J., about 120 miles south of New York, to watch cowboys astride bucking horses and bulls, and to look for bargains at the flea market, which dates to the '20s.

Salem County remains largely farm country. Plenty of city people have been moving here over the years, however, drawn by the open spaces. It can take newcomers a bit to adjust to the ways of agricultural life.

Urban people don't always understand that "you operate tractors even on the weekends," says Harris, or that livestock can occasionally break out of the farm fences and "wind up grazing in your backyard."

The flea market, which Cowtown bills as the original farmer's market, has attracted a diverse group of customers in recent years, with significant numbers of African-American and Latino people browsing the wares.

"People on a budget are looking for bargains," says Harris, who has changed some of his merchandise to suit the changing customer base.

Harris follows his father and grandfather in running Cowtown. He knows from experience that family and business can be a difficult mix. His grandfather, "a born showman," and his father, "a real nuts-and-bolts" kind of guy, were often at odds. Harris himself was kicked out of the house at age 19 by his dad. He joined the rodeo circuit, but found his way back home.

He and his wife, Betsy, live in a comfortable, rustic-themed house at Cowtown, but he confesses he would be just as happy living in the little mobile home they once shared.

Harris is the 13th generation of the family in these parts, going back to the late 1600s. "My people got off the boat in 1690-something," he said. "We've migrated about 10 miles in more than 300 years. We don't get out much."

In fact, he has traveled plenty, including spending a lot of time in New York City, where he has staged rodeos at Madison Square Garden.

But he feels lucky to be near the pasture, rising at 5 a.m. to "saddle up a horse and go tend to cattle." When evening comes, he can relax, bone-tired from an honest day's work. Even on a 21st Century ranch in New Jersey, it's the old cowboy way.