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FINE FARRIER, FINE MAN

Terri Gorshing

*"It seemed that
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People have been putting shoes on horses' feet for centuries now. In the very beginning, men used animal hides to protect hooves. Eventually, metal shoes crafted by a blacksmith with a forge were nailed to horses' feet. Even today, although the shoes themselves are manufactured, the art of shoeing horses has prevailed without being altered by technology.

The shoeing of horses requires a special kind of person. He must have great strength and be in excellent physical condition. Although shoeing horses doesn't appear to be difficult, a great deal of stress is put on the farrier's arms and legs while he works. In order to deal with the physical work of farriery, a shoer must also possess a love of horses. One such man is Joe Kelley of Dill City. A great many people rely on his skills as a farrier to keep their horses' feet in good condition.

Joe is probably the best-known farrier in Western Oklahoma. Unlike most horse shoers, who start at an early age, Joe was unable to attend the school until he was twenty-nine years old. His interest in shoeing came long before then, however. It seemed that every horse he saw needed foot work. While working as a private investigator for a retail credit company, Joe coincidentally received two weeks vacation at the same time that there was a two-week farrier school. He attended and was certified at the North Texas Farrier School in Mineral Wells in 1971.

Joe said that he was worked so hard in the school

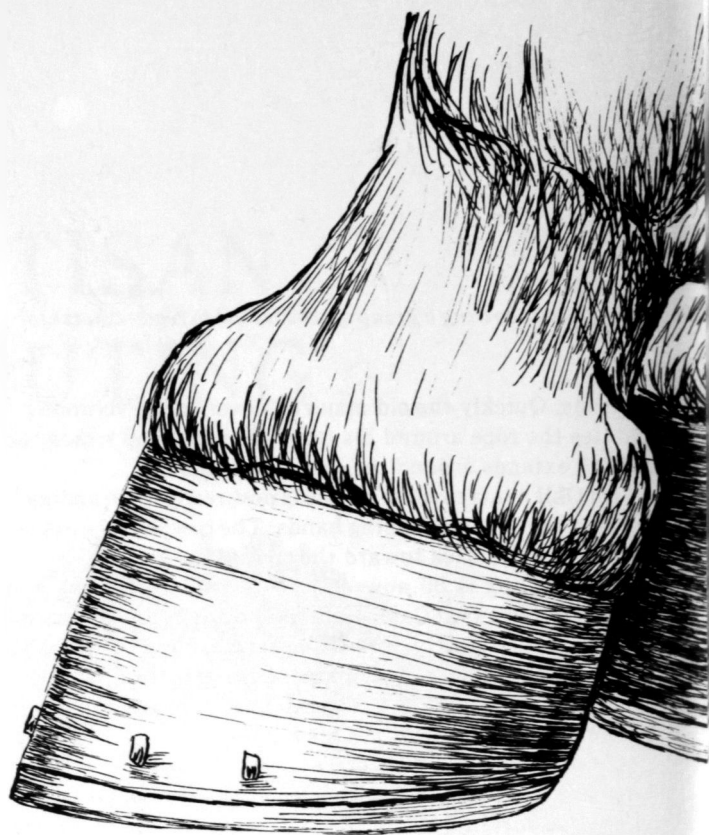


Illustration by Cindy Koehn.

that had it not been to pay back money borrowed to attend the school, he would never have shoed another horse. His first job after he was certified took three hours, but he soon learned to love his work. Two years later, in 1973, he had so many clients that he decided to try shoeing as his only employment. He quit his job with the credit company on a one-year trial basis to see if he could make it. His plan worked, and he has been shoeing horses for a living these sixteen years.

Although shoeing horses and his spouse's job have been the primary source of his family's income, Joe has occasionally taken other jobs when they were offered to him. At one time, he was chief of police in Dill City. Some of the teenagers in the town have always been an ornery bunch, able to run off most of that city's police officers. When they discovered that Joe had been a private investigator, which was true, but not the type of private investigator they imagined, they left him alone and behaved as young ladies and gentlemen. Despite their good behavior, Joe quit because he was too busy to be a policeman and a farrier at the same time.

Sometime later, the oil boom brought rich times to Western Oklahoma. The money bug seemed to bite nearly everyone, including the Kelley family. In 1982, Joe was offered a job as a mud engineer, and he took it. He didn't need the extra money, but greed was an overpowering force. Finally, in 1985, after deciding he really didn't enjoy the high-paying position, and two jobs were too much work, once again Joe returned to

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only shoeing horses. Everybody knows about hindsight, including Joe. He said in retrospect that his involvement in the oil boom was foolishness.

It would seem that Joe simply enjoys being too busy to relax. Not only has he held two fulltime jobs in the past and quit them because he found himself too busy, but now, along with shoeing all the horses he can every day except Sunday, he is also a fulltime student at SOSU. He started to college in 1987 when he was 44 years old, and he is determined to earn a degree in Elementary Education. Nearly every semester since the start of his college career, Joe has made the Dean's Honor Roll.

His shoeing and school schedule would be tight enough if people took their horses to his house to be shod. Amazingly, however, Joe travels to people's homes to do the shoeing. He is about the only farrier in Western Oklahoma who makes house calls. His clientele lives within a fifty-mile radius of his home in Dill City. He plans his route as much as possible so that he can circle the area and end up close to home.

At one time, he traveled within about a hundred-mile radius as far south as Eldorado and Frederick. But then the cost of fuel jumped; so rather than boosting his prices, he cut his area in half. Now he travels as far as Elk City to the west, Hobart to the south, Colony to the east, and Putnam to the north. This circle isn't rigid, however. It simply encloses most of his shoeing area. He occasionally travels farther in his work. He has several clients in Mountain View and some in

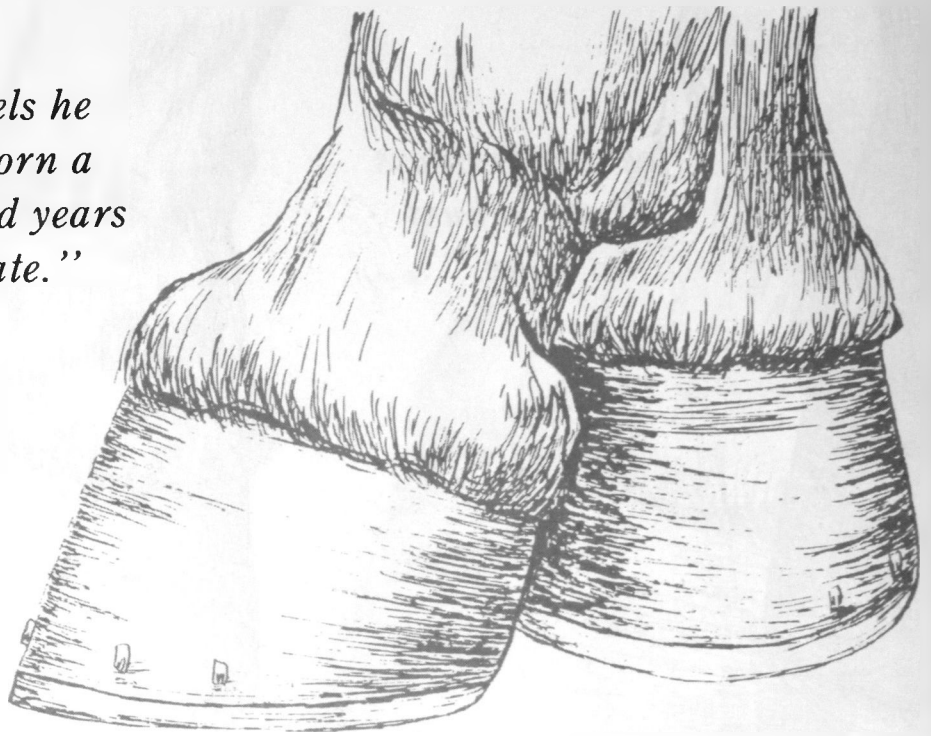
Weatherford and Butler among others. On average, Joe's Datsun pickup chugs approximately one hundred miles a day.

Not only is Joe a master at his trade, but he is also one of Western Oklahoma's nicest people. Seldom is he seen without a big smile on his face. When the smile is absent, his associates know that he is deep in thought about his course work. He is such a friendly fellow that he can perk up the spirits of nearly anybody with his presence. Almost everyone who knows Joe regards him as a trusted friend because he has never done anything to make anyone feel differently.

While on the job, Joe talks constantly; however, never does a word of gossip roll off his tongue. His subjects vary greatly from school to sports to politics, but mostly they involve horses. The pleasure people have in visiting with Joe while he is working leaves many people feeling as though they have had company, rather than having a job done. This, along with knowing that the shoes are set perfectly, compensates for the money they fork over when the job is finished. Twenty-five dollars is what most farriers, including Joe, charge to shoe a horse. Most people prefer to give the money to Joe rather than some stranger who is not nearly as friendly or convenient.

Besides busying himself with his job and school work, Joe also has his own horses to look after. Unlike some people who have horses but can't find the time necessary to work with them, Joe takes time out of his busy schedule to see that his horses are cared for

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properly and ridden regularly. This would be a big job with only one horse, but Joe has five of his own—two mares in foal, a four-year-old, a three-year-old, and a yearling. One of the mares is only half his, so he gets every other foal from her. That may not seem much to someone who has never been around horses, but the young horses must be handled very often to establish and maintain good manners.

Even though Joe is allergic to horses, everyday he handles his animals. They are the pleasure in his life. The more horses are handled while they are babies, the better they grow up to be. Joe has one baby every year, and every other year he gets the colt from the part ownership of the other mare. This keeps him very busy just handling and halter-breaking colts. Usually at the same time, however, he also has a yearling colt to work with. He handles yearlings extensively and prepares them to be ridden the following year. On top of that, he often has a two-year-old. Horses are ready to ride at two years, so Joe breaks his horses at that age, which requires many hours of work and patience every day. Besides, he has three-and sometimes four-year-olds that must be ridden often just to keep them from forgetting what they've already learned.

The training process is hard work for anybody, including Joe, but he has an edge—he knows horses very well. It sometimes seems as if he even knows what the horses think and how they feel. Some say that Joe is part horse himself. Perhaps that's the reason all of his horses turn out to be such fine, well-mannered animals.

Besides training his colts, Joe enjoys attending trail rides, too. He is a member of the Clinton Round-up Club and participates in the organization's rides and other activities when he can. Joe also tries to travel to

Colorado every year and ride in the mountains, the big event he looks forward to every summer. He joins a group of about ten or fifteen riders who come from several different places. They take their horses and camping gear and head to the mountains. Although the ride is a great deal of fun, it's also difficult and dangerous. The terrain is very rough, and in some places there's only a narrow trail with the mountain dropping almost straight down on one side. Only a sure-footed, reliable, well-trained horse can make the ride. These mountain rides provide Joe with his most pleasurable experiences.

Although the mountains are his favorite, Joe loves to ride anywhere. He feels he was born a hundred years too late because the lifestyle of the middle 1800's would have suited him perfectly. Although he is sometimes inconvenienced by the hassles of modern times, he still makes the best of life as it is today.

Joe Kelley is admired and respected by many people. He has made quite a name for himself with his abilities with horses and with his outstanding good nature. Most people know him, however, for his masterful skills as a farrier; and as long as people have horses, there will be farriers to care for the hooves. Who knows what the next generation of farriers will bring? One thing is for certain, though; there will never be another person like Joe Kelley. ●

TERI GORSHING of Bessie is currently studying Biology at SOSU. She has had a lifelong passion for animals, especially horses, and hopes to find a career working closely with animals.