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NOSTALGIA

Horse Cents

— by Denzle Minyard

Would you believe that I once bought a horse in Washita County, Oklahoma for twenty five cents? I surely did, and it was a perfectly legitimate exchange, and not bad merchandise. But before your skepticism runs any higher, let me tell you that this was over a half century ago.

In the early thirties of this century, and during the depth of the great depression, farmers and ranchers were not anxious to keep any extra livestock around. Times were hard, and I mean really hard for most of us, and feed and pasture for livestock was scarce because there was also a great drouth which created the famous dust bowl days which I well remember. It was indeed a dark, frustrating time for most of us. I use the term "most of us" because the magnitude of this depression was not the same for everyone.

Families and individuals who were already on their feet, and by this I mean those who owned their land, homes, machinery, and livestock, and had a little money in the bank, simply saw the depression as a time in which they should tighten down, hang on to what they had, and simply wait it out. However, I don't think anyone had an accurate concept of the vast span of time which would pass before the great depression lifted. It raged from the Fall of '29 until the onset of World War II. Franklin D. Roosevelt did try, and he initiated many programs which helped, but the quality of these programs was poor. Most of them were work-related programs and offered salaries in the one-dollar-per-day range, which was simply too weak to pull the economy out of it. But I believe Franklin D. Roosevelt was a great man and a great president.

Then there were the less fortunate ones who had nothing when the depression hit, and, unfortunately we were the ones who usually had no special skills and very little education. We found ourselves in a destitute situation with practically no chance of breaking out. We were virtually locked in. For the most part, we were poor but proud, desperate but honest. We were willing to do any kind of

work, no matter how hard, just as long as we considered it honorable. So, it was in the early years of the depression that my father, in desperation, decided to try a venture which ultimately led him, my brother, and me to ride (horseback) all over three Western Oklahoma counties, and also necessitated several round trips from Colony, Oklahoma to Oklahoma City, also on horseback.

In the early 30's, there were still many horses in the country; almost everybody had horses. Much farming was still done with horse-drawn equipment, and most people kept two or three saddle horses to ride. But the farmers and ranchers were interested in keeping these horses only as long as they were useful, so Dad got the idea of riding around the country horseback to buy up unwanted horses: horses that were too old to be useful, lame horses, blind horses, outlaw horses. The latter are horses which emphatically refuse to be trained to ride or work. If you succeeded in getting one of them harnessed and hitched up, he was sure to have a runaway and tear up whatever it was that he was hooked up to, or if you succeeded in getting a saddle on him, he would buck you off before you had gone twenty yards.

My dad, my brother, and I had only two saddle horses between the three of us; and since I was only about eight years old, and my brother, James, was about ten, Dad decided that James and I should ride double, and that we should travel in one direction and he in another, in order to cover more territory. And so it was in the late Fall of 1929 that we struck out from our little pioneer cabin about six miles northeast of Colony, Oklahoma near Ghost Mound on our first venture in quest of horses.

James and I were riding a dapple-gray mare named Star. She was a magnificent mount, very high-spirited and extremely suspicious of her surroundings. She certainly was no kid pony, for she had boundless energy and was always tugging at the reins for more freedom to move faster. She was exhausting to ride because you had to constantly hold a tight rein on her to prevent her from winding herself. As we rode, we had to constantly watch the surroundings for anything that might spook her,

for she could bolt sideways faster than a flash and could come nearer violating Newton's first law of motion than anything I have ever known in my life.

Mother had fixed us a sack lunch which we tied to the left girth ring on the saddle, and from the right girth ring hung a small bag of oats and shelled corn for Star. Dad had instructed us not to attempt to lead more than three horses home, so, from the saddle horn hung three (lasso) ropes about eighteen feet long each. These were stout ropes with a diameter about like a lariat rope, without the rigidity of a lariat. They had a slip knot on both ends so that one end could be placed over the horse's head and drawn around his neck, and the other end could be secured to the horn of the saddle.

Dad told us not to pay more than a dollar and a half for a horse, because the stock yard in Oklahoma City was paying only \$2.50 - 3.00 a head for them, and we must make some profit on them or there was no point in doing it. So, with our horse, our lunch, lasso ropes, and \$4.50 in cash, we rode off toward the west. Mother stood anxiously in the door of the cabin and watched us vanish beyond a small grove of locust trees, but before we got out of hearing range, she called to us and cautioned us not to range out too far and be sure to be home before dark.

We rode west for an hour or two, watching the pastures and studying the horses as we passed by them. James I knew horses very well, for we had grown up with them. It was fairly easy to identify old horses because their movements were slow, they were not alert, and they paid very little attention to strangers riding by. Because their teeth were worn down, they became poor and boney, usually developed a rough, shaggy unkempt coat, and bore signs of malnutrition. If they were grazing, it would be for the small, more tender grasses. Only the young horses with good teeth ate the tall, tough winter grass. There were always some blind horses back then; and blindness, of course, increased with old age. Horses that had lived and worked for twelve years or more were generally considered old. Some, however, did live to be eighteen or twenty years old. It was easy to spot blind horses because of the peculiar way they held their head and ears in order to catch sounds more acutely.

We were riding by a large pasture which was part of the spread belonging to an old man that I knew only as "Old John." There was a small herd of horses about 150 yards from the road, and we could plainly see that some of them were no longer useful, so we decided to approach Old John and see if he was interested in culling out. His house was about a mile on down the road so we slacked off on the reins a bit, and Star broke into a fast gallop. We turned into Old John's driveway so fast that both of us had to lean almost horizontally to

stay in the saddle. About this time, two large coon hounds bolted out from under Old John's porch with their heads pitched skyward and mouths wide open, howling a coon hound duet which ranged at times into total discord, and then converging into pure canine harmony. With lightning-like reaction, I felt Star's rear end go down and I knew instantly that we were in for one of those extremely fast "stop and whirl" maneuvers of hers. I pulled my legs in tight about her flanks for more stability in the saddle. This I normally would not have done, for Star was extremely touchy about her flanks. I also knew from experience that once she began this maneuver nothing would stop her, not even if she lost both of us. I saw James grasp the reins tightly in his right hand, while his left hand clutched the saddle horn, and the stirrups came in tight against Star's rib cage.

For an instant we were shrouded in a cloud of dust as Star brought her powerful rear legs forward and lowered her rump almost to the ground, as dirt and dust shot upward from her plowing hooves that ripped into the earth. At this same instant, she was pawing sideways with front legs, sending a jet of dust and clods horizontally toward the two startled hounds who had already tucked their tails and were emerging from their own cloud of dust, as they leaped skyward for the porch. For a split second, I felt a whirling sensation in my head as the flesh on my face and arms crawled. Then, with a sigh of relief, I felt her rise to normal stance, and I quickly released my legs from her flanks. We knew that this was the calm after the storm. Fortunately, our bridle was equipped with curved bits which were commonly used back then to control high-strung horses.

When the dust cleared, we saw Old John standing calmly on the porch as if nothing at all had happened. "Hi, young fellers, what can I do fer yeh?" asked Old John in his slow, country drawl. Still visibly shaken, my brother stammered, "We was riding by and noticed some ol horses in your herd back there."

"Yep," said Old John, "I've got a couple at won't make't through this here winter, probly. I had thought about shootin em." (The shooting was not a barbaric gesture, but rather an act of mercy.)

"Well, we're tryin to collect a herd to take to the City market", said Brother. "

"Wat'!! I get my hat," said Big John.

The ragged screen door slammed as Old John entered the house. When Old John came out, we went down by the windmill, got a cold drink of water, and moved on down to the horse lot where we watered Star while Old John saddled up. He had three saddle horses in the lot. Two of them were large, beautiful quarter horses, and the other one was a small pinto mare. She was predominantly a dark-gold color with large, irregular cream-colored spots which were randomly spaced about her body. She was plump and slick, but smooth mouthed (meaning she was definitely past her youth). Old John called her "Beanie" because she looked like a pinto bean. Beanie was an affectionate little mare and loved children. Coming over to me, she stuck her little nose right up in my face and gave me a good smelling over. I patted her on the neck and moved swiftly away from her because Star was backing her ears and I knew she was getting ready

to lunge at little Beanie and knock her down.

We mounted up and rode on out through a series of corrals and out into the pasture. We could see the herd about three-quarters of a mile away. Slinking along behind and silently keeping considerable distance were the two coon hounds. We reached the herd and cut the two old animals out so we could size them up. They were large, still in fairly good shape, but definitely very old. But we were sure they could easily stand the drive to Oklahoma City. "How much do you want for the pair?" inquired James.

"Oh, I reckon about three dollars for the pair of em" said old John.

"Well, I don't know", said Brother, "We can't make much on em at that price."

Just then I blurted out, "We'll give you three dollars and twenty five cents if you'll throw in Beanie."

My brother practically knocked me out of the saddle, as he slugged me in the ribs with his elbow. "Shut up, you little fool," he whispered. It wasn't that he objected to the bargain I was driving. The point was simply that I was a kid and wasn't supposed to open my mouth. Anything that I might have said would have been out of context. Old John stiffened in his saddle and looked squarely at me as I slunk down in the saddle behind Big Brother. Slowly an amused country grin spread across his weathered old face. "Young feller, you gist bought yourself a bargain. Heaven knows Beanie is worth more an any twenty five cents. She's always been a good brood mare, but she's gettin too old to breed, and I don't need her as a saddle pony, aint got no kids around nohow."

I could hardly believe my ears! I had bought Beanie for twenty five cents! I knew that James might have bought the other two horses for less, if I had kept my mouth shut and permitted him to negotiate, so I sat perfectly still. I knew I had said all I needed to, all I dared to say. James reached into his pocket, counted out \$3.25, and slowly handed it across to Old John. I slid silently from the saddle, took a handful of oats from Star's lunch sack, removed two lasso ropes from the saddle horn, and walked slowly, with oats extended and rope behind me toward the two old horses. The oats did the trick, and in no time I had both of the horses caught, and was leading them back to Star.

We secured the ropes to the saddle horn and headed back to the horse lot to pick up Beanie. The two canines followed silently, still keeping their distance. By now it was far past lunch time, so we went to a large mulberry tree near the windmill, fed Star her oats, and sat down on a bench to eat the lunch that Mother had packed for us. Old John kept the chickens fought back while he bragged on his dogs and told coon-hunting stories. I ate rapidly, for I was anxious to get Beanie. I wanted to crawl on her little fat back and see how she rode.

When we had finished eating, Old John and I went down to the lot. He went into a small barn and got an old halter with a three-foot rope attached to the ring. "She's halter broke," he said, "and you can keep this old halter." He meant that she could be ridden simply with a halter. I slipped the halter on her, jumped as hard as I could, and landed

belly down across her back. Then I swung my right leg over her rump and erected myself, making adjustments for proper bareback riding. Beanie stood still and relaxed as I mounted her, just as if we had done it a thousand times. As I picked up on the rope, Beanie turned her head around and looked directly at me as a contented gesture, and I thought to myself, "This is her way of smiling." Old John patted her on the shoulder as he looked up at me and said "Take good care of her, Son, and don't ride her too fast." And I looked squarely into his wrinkled old eyes and said, "Thank you sir, and don't you worry, for nothing bad will ever happen to Beanie."

I sat proudly on Beanie's soft, fat little back, and as we rode out Old John's driveway, I turned to wave at him before we vanished down the road, and you know what? Old John and the two hounds were standing silently on the porch. The hounds were wagging their tails, and I could have sworn all three of them were smiling.

Brother and I rode proudly home with our purchases for the day. Mom and Dad were happy for us, and we never did tell them the fine details of that first day. We simply told them we bought all three horses for \$3.25. But before this horse-buying adventure ended, we had made dozens of trips which ultimately took us over the greater part of three counties. The trips were as varied as the Oklahoma days and the individuals we encountered along the way. A full account of these experiences would fill a whole book, and this would not include the drives horseback from Colony to Oklahoma City, down old Highway 41 straight into the stock market. Since we could make only a dollar or two per horse, we could not afford to ship them to market; so when we had collected a small herd, twenty-five to thirty head, we would herd them the sixty some miles to market. Mother went along and drove a covered wagon in front of the herd. They soon learned to follow the wagon. We would make camp along the road late in the evening, sleeping and eating in the wagon. But this is another story whose account I hope to find time to write someday.

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