

Farmer Horse

Dave Turner was another farmer who loved his time in the mountains. It was summer, the field work was caught up, and he was itchin' to get off the dusty dry flats and into the cool, green, lush mountains. So Dave gave me a call and said he had four or five horses to shoe.

The day I headed up into his area I had a car-full. Along with a few of my kids, my dad came along on this trip. Dad was raised on a farm himself, and has plenty of his own tales about livestock. It was through his genes that I received my love for horses. But the Great Depression had shown him the value of an education, and he had chosen to spend his life as a professor.

Now, you understand, there hadn't been any pressure on me to be a teacher. Really! All the opportunities were provided, of course. But I wasn't pushed. And for twenty years, my folks supported me in my choice to be a cowboy.

Being a professor, Dad had the summer off, and the folks had stopped by to visit us for awhile in Montana. So today, Dad was in the Suburban with me and the kids, on the way to shoe horses north of Cut Bank.

I don't know where the conversation had been headed, but Dad had a thought he was compelled to mention. "You know," he said, "if you were a teacher, you could still have your summers off to shoe horses."

My kids just hooted! "Dad?! A teacher?! You've got to be kidding!" And that was the end of that subject.

We finally got to Dave's place, and I questioned him about the "four or five head." "Well," he said "I have five head, but I don't think you can shoe the fifth one." I just grinned at my kids. Of course we could shoe him. I could shoe *anything* with hooves and hair.

The stock was typical 'farmer' horses: only half-broke, and the other half spoiled. The kind of horses that really make a shoer work. They couldn't decide whether to

lean on me or pull away. But I'm a cowboy, and I advertise "mules, broncs, and colts a specialty."

Most times, a shoer's visit is a good time to catch up on doin's around the country, and I usually work with an audience. We swapped stories all around while I worked, and we had the first four horses done just in time for dinner.

I was moving a little slower when we went back out to finish up. I really hadn't needed that second piece of pie.

Dave was a little worried about that last horse. He told how his buddy had attempted the job last year. It had been quite a fight. They'd been upside down and right side up and all tangled in rope. They'd finally gotten iron all around, but when the dust had cleared, the horse and the shoer were both too lame to go to the mountains!

This horse was a good one to ride, Dave said, and he'd really like to have shoes on him. But it wasn't worth getting someone hurt.

For me it wasn't a question of if I shod the horse, it was a simply a matter of how much gear was involved. My outfit was well-supplied with ropes, hobbles, straps, halters, and nerve lines. The last man to try this horse was an amateur - rough horses were my business. I had enough sense to be careful, but not enough to quit.

I moved slowly as I began work on the grey's feet. He was snorty, he was goosey, and I didn't trust his teeth. He never relaxed a muscle. I had to keep talking, and move slow so as not to startle him. He made me work to pick up a foot, then he leaned on me. I was holding up nearly half of his weight. Through the whole process, the grey was a tightly coiled spring. Any time I tried to shift his weight off of me, the horse would pull away and snap his foot back to the ground.

The grey was dangerous. They say ignorance is bliss; if Dave hadn't been so ignorant, he would have been afraid to ride him. But I had three shoes on. I'd managed this horse with sheer finesse, and I was nearly done.

Things deteriorated pretty fast as I worked on the last foot. I was getting tired and the horse was getting impatient.

I eased my hand from his hip down the leg and picked up the foot to trim and level it. My knees struggled to hold up the weight which he transferred onto them. A

few times there was a mutual decision between us to set his foot down quickly. But we were almost done!

The fuse on this horse was slow, but his powder was dry, and suddenly I was knocked to the ground by the force of his explosion. I hit the ground crawling to avoid his heels. There was an explosion of splintering wood and clanging metal as a hoof hit dead center on the box that held my shoeing tools.

I lay in the dirt amidst the nippers, nails, and pieces of wood that were blown in a thirty-foot radius in back of the horse. My Dad was quiet. Dave was white. I don't know who he was more worried about - me or his horse.

I checked myself over to see if I was hurt, and gathered the scattered tools into a bucket. I stifled the urge to imbed the claws of my nailing hammer into the grey's forehead, right between his eyes. The time for gentleness had passed.

I was determined to teach this horse to stand for shoeing, so I went to my trailer and pulled out a war bridle. With it I could put pressure on the horse's mouth whenever he pulled away. Most horses quickly learn to avoid the pain by standing still. But not the grey. I jerked so hard on the line that it broke.

There is no question but that horses weren't domesticated until after rope was invented. My next step was a half-hobble on his pastern and a rope knotted in his tail. I started pulling up the slack, planning to pull the foot up into a handy position and let the tail hold the weight of the foot while I nailed on a shoe.

But rather than the foot coming up off the ground, his hip started to drop down. A slap on the butt got the horse upright again. That's when he began to kick.

He jerked his leg forward then kicked out back as he tried in vain to reach whatever it was that had a hold of his tail. When he slowed down, I tried again to pick up the foot to put in some nails. But the action of his hoof matched the look in his eye - he was out for blood.

Another trip to the trailer for a rope to cinch his leg up toward his neck and shorten the travel of his kick.

It's hard to say which one of us was working the hardest. Sweat was dripping off both the horse and me in about the same proportion. I was working against his 1300

pounds, and he was working against the ropes.

With his leg immobilized, at least he couldn't lay on me. But his foot was at an awkward angle, and I was working upside down. I could have thrown him all the way to the ground, but then I'd be working sideways. And I never figured a horse learned anything on his side.

When I reached under the horse to grab his now-immobile foot, he pulled it further away from me - and sat right down on the ground!

We slapped him with a rope. We kicked him in the ribs. We bounced on his chest. But the grey just lay there and glared at us.

Finally I grabbed his nostrils and pinched them shut. A horse is strictly a nose-breather and it didn't take him long to run out of air. With a violent heave he was back on his feet.

The horse was starting to weaken!

With my sweaty shoulder against his heaving ribs I leaned under and grabbed his foot. Laying the shoe on the bottom of the hoof, I stuck in a nail and gave it a whack. With every blow of the hammer the horse would jerk, but each successive pull was less violent.

It took five raps apiece on each of the eight nails, then twist off the excess. The grey's head was drooping. Another round with the hammer to tighten the clinches, and he hardly flinched. Pull the nail-ends down with the clincher, and dress off the hoof with the rasp, and I was done.

All the fight was gone from the horse as I untied the ropes. We gathered all the equipment and packed up the ropes. Dave handed me a beer along with the check. He would go to the mountains with all five horses this year.

Dad was still quiet as we drove away. It was a couple of miles down the road before he finally spoke. "You know," he said, "the next time someone tells you a horse can't be shod, maybe you shouldn't take it as a personal challenge!"