

THAT GOOD OL' COUNTRY LIVIN': HORSE TALES

By Terri White

I had lived in towns and cities all my life. Oh, sure, I visited my friends on their farms. Perfectly charming – except for the meadow muffins. You know, cow poo.

But in April 1987, when we moved onto Cousin Joe's property a couple of miles past the Cleburne State Park, I took to the country like a duck takes to water. No hesitation. Not a moment of adjustment. It fit me like an old, comfy pair of slippers.

The house and barn sat on 40 acres of pasture, woods, and a creek. A dream come true. The hitch? Take care of the horses. Piece of cake. A great opportunity for our boys. But we didn't stop there. Oh, no! We raised rabbits for meat, planted a large garden, harvested pecans, and raised honey bees. And that's only part of our adventures.

Tending horses in mild weather was not so challenging. However, in the winter when the water in the troughs froze, chopping through the ice proved labor-intensive. Physical labor never hurts growing boys, though. They manned up to the task.

One day, Queen, the oldest mare, moseyed into the barn, lifted the chest freezer lid with her head, and proceeded to chow down on the molasses-soaked feed. Fortunately, we discovered it before she ate herself into the grave. But how to keep her out? After scratching our heads, we created a bucket brigade to empty the old freezer and dump the feed into another chest out of her reach. All while she determined to nudge her way to the freezer for more goodies. Whew!

After Beebee, our more skittish mare, gave birth to a colt, I was tasked to bond with Prince. Oh, Beebee complained. "He's mine!" she bristled. Undaunted, I persevered to give Prince his twice daily hugs. Awkward, for sure. Not one of those bucket list items. But the experience? Totally worth it.

Later, when a coyote frightened Prince during the night, he crashed into the barbed-wire fence, tearing up his face. The next morning the vet arrived to sew him up. Guess who landed the job of vet assistant? Bingo! Yours truly. And guess who gave Prince his daily antibiotic shot in the rump? Lucky me, of course. Just another feather in my cap to add to my resume!

Let's not forget Golden Pride, the bite-the-hand-that-feeds-you horse. What an ornery old coot. For some dumb reason that I have long since forgotten, I helped the boys feed the horses that afternoon. Maybe we were offering them a treat of watermelon rinds. Maybe. When I turned around to fetch the food, he bit me in the-you-know-where! Of all the nerve.

Well, that didn't sit well with Cousin Joe, so he hired a horse whisperer to tame Mr. Bite-The-Hand-That-Feeds-You. That cowboy gave him a piece of his own medicine by biting the horse in his nose. Ewww! Gross! Just thinking of that memory turns my mouth dry. Nonetheless, it worked like a charm. Golden Pride needed to know who was boss, but it certainly was not me.

Riding Queen, the gentlest horse - the one that feasted on the molasses feed - should have been a piece of cake. Steve's dad grew up on a farm and even owned a horse that our children had ridden numerous times.

Papa saddled her up. Once ready, he hoisted Jonathan, our cautious ten-year-old, onto the saddle. Immediately, Queen started bucking. Remember, this is an old, gentle mare and my cautious son. What in the world! Terrified, I was sure the horse would fling Jonathan in the air. I envisioned him cracking his skull, or worse yet, breaking his back.

It happened. Jonathan flew off and landed with a thud. Then my not-so-adventurous son leaped up, danced a jig, and shouted, "Yehaw! I'm a real cowboy now!" Not a scratch on him. Oh, the adventures that awaited Jonathan. He's a 43-year-old successful businessman now, experiencing all kinds of risks.

So what caused our gentle mare to buck? Papa, the experienced horseman (ahem), had forgotten the blanket under the saddle! End of horse riding for that day. Queen wasn't having it.

One of our little herd's favorite pastimes was hanging out at the fence line. In fact, one particular fence line near our clothesline. No, they never chewed the flapping laundry - thank goodness. Why they preferred that fence beats me, but it proved fatal - at least to the ground on which they stood.

Unbeknownst to us, instead of a septic tank, a cesspool lay under that exact spot. You guessed it. The lid collapsed. Fortunately, the horses fled and suffered no harm. None of the horses ever approached that fence line again. Smart horsies.

That, however, was quite an enlightening experience. A cesspool? Unbelievable! Not a pleasant clean-up job, to put it mildly.

After my husband eased into the cesspool, he shoved a cable into the broken line to clear it out. Seriously gross. Of course, he secured new pipe onto the line. Then he cleared off the rotted wood that had originally covered the cesspool and replaced it with sturdier material. Soon grass grew over it, disguising the cesspool once again.

When we moved, Cousin Joe sold the property. I've often wondered if he told the new owners that a cesspool lay underground instead of a septic tank. I think not.

One day Prince was enjoying the spring grass way too much. Gazing out our window, I noticed him painfully writhing on the ground. Not good. That frost-laden, green grass gave him colic. Once a horse lands on the ground from colic, there's no saving him. My husband had to shoot Prince to put him out of his misery. Sad day.

Memories of bonding with him, helping the vet stitch him up, and giving him daily shots still resurface from time to time.

Country living is not all hearts and sunshine. Nor for the faint of heart. All in all, though, our country horse experiences are pleasant ones. At least memorable. But wait! There are more adventures to share. Stay tuned.