

Large Lessons from a Huge Horse

Terry weighed 1,920 pounds when he came up to our mountain in a horse trailer behind a pickup, and he filled out with graceful muscle as we worked with him. A two-year-old Belgian workhorse of golden color, he helped harvest firewood from beetle-killed lodgepole pine.

After he'd pulled logs out of the woods so his owners could saw them to firewood, he stayed with us that fall and winter.

Jim worked with me then, cutting and selling firewood on the ranch I took care of in northeastern Oregon's Blue Mountains.

When Jim was a baby, his parents had tied a mare to the pickup where Jim slept while the adults worked in the corral. When Jim woke and cried, the mare alerted his parents to leave the cattle and tend to their child. The mothering instinct crosses lines between species.

Jim said the adults often had to peel him off a horse to change his diapers, but he might have exaggerated with that story. In any case, he had worked with horses all his life, and he wanted to work with a Belgian. Terry's owners said they needed to board him, preferably with someone who'd continue his training. Jim jumped at the opportunity, and an equitable deal fell into place.

We built a slip, boards joined together to present a smooth 3-by-8-foot surface to the stubble left on 800 acres of mountain meadow after we'd cut the hay, baled it, and hauled it away. We attached the slip to Terry's harness, sat on bales of hay on the slip, and rode the meadows behind Terry from after work until after dark.

My daughters, Juniper and Amanda, happily gave up other pursuits to ride the slip, and Laura, my wife, often came along. Riding a slip is a wonderful way to experience the mountain world. Wildlife is largely undisturbed by a horse, its hooves clumping softly into stubble. The slip moved almost silently, and we humans were quiet and alive with wonder behind the horse.

Geese didn't fly until we slipped close. Deer and elk grazed and let us approach. Coyotes watched our conglomeration in amazement and ran only when odors betrayed the presence of humans.

The sun set behind Greenhorn Mountain. We traveled way down the meadow. Stars and moon lit our quiet way home.

Early the next morning, Jim said, "I got to trim this horse's hooves. He's breaking over wrong, and he's got cracks we got to deal with. I'll show you what to do."

Very large hooves. I remembered where I'd acquired a slight fear of horses. I told Jim. "Many years ago, Pete, my horse-shoeing friend, wanted me to apprentice with him. Everything went well the first dozen horses. Until we went to shoe a Shetland pony that belonged to a 10-year-old girl.

"Pete told me it was a spoiled pony, but we had to try to work with it without first raising and tying one leg to immobilize it, because the girl felt that would be mistreating her pony to tie it's leg up like that.

"We maneuvered the pony into position to work on its feet, and the pony got mad or scared or both and took off, galloped to the fence corner and turned and came back, full gallop. I scrambled to get out of the way, but I wasn't fast enough, and she hit me and sent me flying clear over the fence. My trousers ripped off as I was going over. Pete had to finish that pony by himself, and that was the end of my horse-shoeing career."

Jim said, "Watch." He walked under Terry, raised up, bumped Terry's belly, walked behind him, leaned against his back legs, then leaned on him from one side and then the other. "Different horse. You let this horse know what you're doing, and you can do almost anything with him, long as you don't hurt him or do anything silly. He cooperates when I lift his feet, but he doesn't understand yet about keeping his foot up. You pick it up and hold it like this, on your leg, so I can cut the front part. This here nipper takes two hands."

So I did. We nipped, filed, and cleaned four feet. I used both hands and talked persuasively to get Terry to keep his foot up while Jim worked.

Jim said, "Horse is still learning. Next time, he'll hold his foot up."

I said, "Me, too. I'm still learning. That's one heavy foot."

"Big horse." Jim sighted along each hoof, then put it down. "Lead him around the corral so I can watch him walk."

A horse of a different color entirely. Very cooperative. Friendly. We circled the corral. Jim said. "Walks just right now. We did OK. We can slip again after lunch."

And we did. And almost every day after that, when we didn't cut firewood late to fill last-minute orders.

We slipped until winter snow accumulated deep on the meadow, and we went separate ways, Jim off to Montana, Terry back down to lower country in a horse trailer. Me into the house to write and help with my daughters' education.

All of us knew much more about horses, humans, and working together than we had before Terry came to stay a while.

Slipping on the Meadow

We cut and baled the hay from the ranch we took care of in the Blue Mountains of northeastern Oregon. Classes at the kitchen table, the formal part of our home schooling, wound down for the year.

Our daughters' education went on, as it has done since their births. All of living is education, and Juniper and Amanda managed their education well, with early and never-ending reading and with many adventures with life every day that added to their knowledge and to Laura's and my knowledge as their teachers, as participants in all of life around us.

A contractor hauled the hay down the graveled river road to the owner's home ranch and left the meadow clear except for stubble and the long grass along ditches and close to the river, where we couldn't cut with the swathers.

Terry, a golden Belgian gelding, two years old, boarded with us while his owners went to Arizona. Jim, my partner in wood cutting and friend of my family, trained and exercised Terry.

Jim's worked with horses all his life. He says they had to run his horse into a blind chute and peel him off the horse's back to change his diaper.

Jim and I built a slip of boards that put a smooth wooden surface 12 by 3 feet on the grass. We put two bales of hay across the slip, to sit on.

I ran to the house while Jim circled Terry slowly on the smooth, mowed ground north of the barn. I said, "Come on everybody. We have something really fun going on out by the barn. Hurry. Terry and Jim are waiting for us."

Laura, Juniper, and Amanda ran with me to the meadow, and we rode on the slip behind the big, golden horse until dark. Riding on the slip on the meadow became part of our days. Late afternoons or evenings, when the day's ranch work and wood cutting were done, we toured the cooling meadow, with Terry harnessed and hooked to the chain on the front of the slip. We took our jackets.

Warm evenings in Whitney Valley are nothing more than a rumor, even in the hot days of summer. Sometimes Terry broke into a gallop. Jim was working to teach him not to do that unless he was told to, but slip rides at a gallop were exciting. We had the whole wide meadow to tire Terry out and to get him to slow down, so there was never any danger.

Sometimes Laura stayed at the house and did needed work there or studied in preparation for the next day's classes. Sometimes one or two other friends came out and joined our explorations.

The grass stubble, grass roots, and soft dirt absorbed most of the sound of Terry's hooves as he trotted across the meadow, and the slip he pulled behind him glided over the shorn meadow as quietly as whispering.

We started putting one of the girls up on Terry while everybody else slipped behind. Amanda rode Terry when he broke into a gallop. Amanda slipped to one side of the big, galloping horse. I stepped forward, ready to jump off to try to knock her out of the way of the slip if she fell, but she grabbed hold of the hames, pulled herself up to a firmer seat, and held on.

Jim brought Terry down to a trot, then to a walk, then stopped him. I walked up and lifted Amanda down. I asked her, "Were you afraid?"

She spoke from the middle of a glow that lit her up like sunshine. "No. That was really fun. That's even more fun than riding on the slip. Let's do it again. I want to ride some more. Now that I know what to hold onto, I'll never fall off."

If we were quiet on the slip and if breezes didn't carry human scents to them, wild animals reacted to us without fear, as they would to a horse alone on the meadow. They didn't flee as they would from humans on foot or in machines.

Juniper, Amanda, Jim, and I slipped up the meadow toward the west boundary, accompanied by the soft thuds of Terry's hooves and the whisper of the slip. The shadows of the western ridges reached far out onto the meadow.

Twenty-four elk browsed their leisurely way across the meadow, our side of the western boundary fence. We sat still on the hay bales, except for Jim's small motions with the reins to direct Terry to pass close to the elk. Ten females with young, three yearling bulls, and one older bull with widespread antlers looked up and watched us pass. Then they continued browsing toward the timbered ridge that rose from the edge of the meadow.

Jim turned and looked at Juniper, Amanda, and me, and we all shared smiles, delighted to be part of this quiet conspiracy to

see wild animals up close. When we turned to look where we were going again, we saw two sandhill cranes standing at the edge of the timber, close to Aspen Spring, south of us. Horse, slip, and four quiet humans continued south at a fast horse walk until we were close to the cranes, among the most shy and unapproachable of all wildlife in the valley.

The cranes wouldn't allow even a horse to get very close to them and began walking away from us. Jim tweaked the reins and turned Terry aside. It was well to be polite. Again, we all smiled at each other.

The coyote was our prize of the day. A young male in fine fur (gray, russet, and white), he trotted toward us, relaxed as we slipped toward him. The coyote turned away from us enough to not come too close to a walking horse, but trotted as if to pass us only four horse-lengths away.

Jim, always seeking a laugh, spoke to the coyote in his deepest voice, "How you doing this fine evening, Coyote, my friend?" The coyote suddenly realized he should have seen the humans behind the large horse, because coyotes never intentionally mix company with humans. He leapt in the air in his amazement, turned, and landed at a full gallop directly away from us, not returning the greeting and not lingering for any conversation.

We all got a quiet laugh out of that. Jim said, "Coyotes learn fast. He's probably never going to trust a horse again." Daylight faded. The waxing moon rose above Cottonwood Butte. We put on our jackets and slipped toward home, quite satisfied with our evening and ready to tell anyone who wanted to listen about the wild animals we had seen up close.

We slipped behind Terry most evenings that fall of the year until Jim needed to be somewhere else and Terry's owners came to get him. Then we put those wonderful times together on the meadow with all the natural world close around us into our most treasured memories as something we could draw from the rest of our lives.

Read more about Terry, the golden work horse, in my book. Somewhere in an Oregon Valley, available as an ebook from the Book page, this website.