



# The Love of Horses

By Kurt D. Lafy

**D**otted across the landscape, in the heart of the Endless Mountains, one can see pastures filled with cows, goats, donkeys and even alpacas! Then, too, there are the flocks of turkeys meandering about. They put the “C” in country to be sure. The scene they create sheds beauty throughout the land. However, for my money, the most splendid beast of them all is the horse, those majestic, powerful, sublimely beautiful creatures. They have held a spot in my heart since I can remember.

Back when I was a kid I grew up watching Roy Rogers and the Lone Ranger. And let's not forget about Gunsmoke, Paladin, the Rifleman and a host of other shows. And on the silver screen there was also a parade of westerns: Rio Bravo, The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance and even McClintock. And what do all those television shows and movies have in common? Horses; beautiful, fast horses. They had wondrous names like Scout and Silver. And some of those majestic beasts were smart as a whip, too. (No, I am not talking about Mr. Ed.) And all those cowboys could ride like the wind. And it was always the good guys vs. the bad guys and you just knew who would win in the end. Boy, oh boy, did I want to be like them because, well, to ride a horse you had to be like them. Didn't you?

When I was a real little boy there was a hobby horse to ride. I remember it was colored a lot like Roy Rogers' famous horse, Trigger, beauty. It was attached to a frame by springs and you could get on his back and ride around and ride some more. Of course, the best way to do it was to get all dressed up in your cowboy gear.

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cowboy clothes first! I remember it was one of my favorite toys because I was emulating my western heroes AND riding a horse.

One day, when I was about 10, a plan germinated in my childlike mind. My birthday was coming up and I knew exactly what I wanted. Hey, I already owned numerous six-shooters and a cowboy hat, so the next logical step was to ask for a horse for my present. Well, logical to a 10-year-old. Now, mind you, my plan was not fully developed, as we lived just off Route 6 in Wysox and the house was situated on half an acre, far from the necessary space that was needed to have a horse. I had no idea they needed pasture land to roam and they consumed vast quantities of hay. I was a kid with a cowboy hat on my head, six-shooters strapped to my waist and a yearnin' to saddle up. I wanted to feel the wind whipping past my face.

I remember how, in a purposeful way, I strode into the living room just like I'd seen the Duke, John Wayne, walk into so many dangerous situations. There I made the proclamation that I'd figured out what I wanted for my birthday. And, as a bonus to my sales pitch, I assured both Mom and Dad that it was the only present they would ever have to give me, because it would be enough to last my lifetime. Imagine my shock when my parents started laughing! How could this be? My logic was irrefutable. Wasn't it? I urged them to consider that I, their youngest son, might bring them glory by winning the fabled Camptown Races one day. That only served to heighten the gaiety between the two. Alas, after being bombarded with questions, that were in fact empirical statements, I turned on my heel and dejectedly shuffled from the room with my ears and ego still stinging from the official "NO" proclamation. Seemed I would have to be content with just watching. And so, I did, but that pang never left as I grew.

During my adult life I actually mounted a few horses for trail rides. Once a horse even swam with me on his back. That sure was different. However, I came to realize trail riding horses are pretty boring in that they are aware of their job and they just want to get it over with. I wanted to ride, really ride like the cowboys of old. But, with case hardened trail horses, there is no need to try to do any more than stay squarely in the saddle. Jeepers, you don't even have to hold the reins. Trail horses know where to walk and when it is time to turn left and right and stop and, well, they know it all. All you have to do is sit back and watch the scenery. Even knowing this, I never passed up the opportunity



*The Majestic Beasts*  
Photo Credit: Laura H. Hewitt

to ride. Don't get me wrong, it was always enjoyable to be sure but try as I might, I just couldn't reach that feeling of "cowboy." I even wondered if I should purchase a pair of six-shooters and strap 'em on! I didn't think the trail guide would feel quite right about that, so that plan never came to fruition.

I did get pretty close to feeling like a cowboy once, as a friend of mine, Charlie Guidetti, (an Italian cowboy?) owned horses and invited me to ride through the woods with him. 'Got to be something we did quite a bit. My steed was a quarter horse and was well trained. He was no trail horse for sure. He was a real horse and aptly named, Teddy, 'cause he sure was gentle.

Charlie taught me how to direct Teddy where I wanted him to go. Heck, he even showed me how to use my heels to make the horse turn around. One day, Charlie, his daughter, and son and I were out riding in the cool, crisp, autumn air. I felt like I was an okay horseman by then. Mind you, I wasn't ready for the rodeo but I was ready. And then it happened. His daughter turned to her dad and said she was going to gallop down the straightaway ahead. And she was off like a lightning bolt. Instinctively, I spurred my horse to follow and we were off in hot pursuit. In a moment the brisk air was whistling through my hair and that little cowboy inside was yelling out, "Yee-ha, yee-ha," in an attempt to urge my horse to go faster. And Teddy did.

As we closed ground on Charlie's daughter,

I experienced my first negative horse ride. As her mount churned away, clumps of mud were thrown up and splatted my face. Now I've never been afraid of getting dirty but I've never had the urge to taste a mouthful of soggy earth either. But I did. I can tell you it is gritty and, well, not very tasty. The straightaway ended and we reined in our rides. The nearly-a-cowboy in me laughed as I spit gobs of soil out. That memory has never faded.

In the last 10 years I've come to enjoy more dealings with horses than I ever thought I'd have the opportunity to do. I met a wonderful woman, Laura, who, like me, has always loved horses. She proudly boasts her very first horseback ride was in Ireland! When I met her she owned three of her own and we added a fourth. Right off the bat I was eager to pitch in and "play" with the equines. She was all too happy to share the workload. Since it was summer all we had to really do was ensure there was water in the old tub and muck out the barn a bit. No big deal. Because of the hot weather we could eat dinner outside and watch the miniature herd graze while our souls soaked it all in. Wow, life was so free and easy. It was wonderful.

Sometime past the 4th of July my much better half informed me it was time to get the hay in the barn. Being game for anything, pitching in was not a problem. Little did I know we needed what seemed like 6000 bales in the barn for the winter to feed our horses! Being engaged in that monumental

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*The Culprits*  
Photo Credit: Laura H. Hewitt

chore started to alter my perception of what being a horse lover actually meant. And as I get older, I swear, not only every year does a 40-pound bale get heavier but, of late, every bale gets heavier than the last one! I suppose we could just get rid of those hay-eating-machines they call horses but my two-legged darlin' has flat out stated I'll be gone before the horses go. So as I am old enough to know what's good for me, I guess I'll just keep bringing in the bales, mucking out the barn and rubbing liniment on the sore spots. This ol' cowboy's joy at tending to his horses had taken a bit of a hit.

Since we had four horses, it was decided to expand the grazing area and create paddocks so we could control their eating habits. You see, horses are quite finicky eaters and will continually eat "x" grass while ignoring "y" grass because, well, I assume "x" tastes better to them. And they will also eat "x" down to the nub. Not a great thing to allow. A design was created and this farmhand went at it. You get these steel posts and a human pile driving machine and you get to work. And work it is! This is Bradford County and what we are world class at is growing rocks. So, I'd be pile driving this steel post and wham,

you'd hit a rock and have to pull the post out and move the post down a few inches and begin again. And you'd do that again and again. And again and again! Let me tell you, I was plenty glad when the last post was driven. Unfortunately, you weren't quite finished yet. You had to string the wire and electrify it. Oh yeah, you had to run two strands so if one broke the other fence line might just keep the horses in. And then it's done and ya' think, "Well, that was a good week's work in a month's time!" Little did you know you created a bigger monster.

We'll talk about weed whacking those fence lines. And no, I won't bring up the fact that fence lines are needed to keep those hay eating machines on the same property. Seems like we have about, oh, 600 miles of fencing and it's all up hill! Mind you, it used to seem like a few hundred yards but you've got to figure in the age factor, my age that is. Every year the weeds grow up and short out the lines. So, the high weeds have to be trimmed, or else, well you guessed it, those hay eating machines will bust out and end up in the next county! Yes, I've thought about allowing that to happen but I keep remembering that "you or them" dictate.

To make my life easier, I went out and bought me one of those lawn mower-type weed whackers. Man, oh man, can that chew through the heavy weeds. But man, oh man, is it hard to push over those not so smooth pastures. And this dang-blamed infernal beast is in the same category as those demonic hay bales. It gets heavier every year, further dampening my enthusiasm.

Did you know that deer may just be a bigger bane to my life than anything else? No, you didn't know and can't imagine why that could possibly be? Well I'll tell ya'. Bambi and her mother like to graze in our paddocks as much as the horses do. Thing is, when the fence was put up, the paddocks were empty. I will go to my grave knowing I did not fence any deer inside.

So how do they get there? Trouble is, deer can leap pretty high if they want to get into the pastures and do a bit of munching. That would be okay with me if every other day they actually correctly judged how high they had to jump to clear the electric fencing. But they don't do that and sometimes, in their effort to leap over, they whack the top line and break it. So, this aging fellow has to spend all the time that is necessary to periodically mend the fence lines. Talk about another damper on things.

And then winter comes and what do ya' know. Those 6000 bales of hay have to be fed to the horses. And do they eat. Jumping jeepers! Ya' think they would do this older guy a favor and stop needing to be fed when the temperature is so cold that the thermometer freezes up. But nooooooo, they need a little extra so their metabolisms can help keep them warm while digesting the hay. And while we are on the subject of hay, let me explain another factor that diminishes horse enjoyment. Little did yours truly know that at least 4000 of those 6000 bales of hay would be turned into horse poop INSIDE the barn! Yep, I think it must be a scientifically proven fact that horses love to cause their handlers grief by waiting to do their duty until they are inside the stall. I don't even want to pause to reflect on why in heaven's name those four-legged darlings don't do their duty outside. And it all has to be mucked out, much to the dampening of spirits for the hired hand—that would be me!

So now, how bout we address that pile of manure that builds up from mucking out the barn during the winter? What, you thought that mountain size pile took care of itself? Right outside the barn door is a concrete deck. You all should know how this works. Daily, you scoop the poop up with a shovel and throw it outside

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onto the pile. Sounds easy, right? But, did you know that when it is really, really cold outside the poop has a tendency to freeze solid to the floor! Yep, I discovered that about tending to horses, as well. And, I found out that it is best to use a grub ax to get it loose. Chip the crap loose and get 'er out of the barn. Day after day after day, after weeks and after months of freezing your posterior off, you endure the cold for those me-or-them horses. The resulting pile is so high that I have been contacted by Guinness Book of World Records that wants to measure it against Mount McKinley. ' Seems they heard about me through a bulletin issued by NASA 'cause one of their satellites picked up this huge mass growing in Bradford County. I politely told them where they could store their telescope.

Let's get back on point. When the weather turns good, oh joy, you get the tractor and move the whole pile of - - -well it rhymes with get. Trouble is, the scoop on the tractor can't seem to pick it all up. So, out comes that shovel again and lo and behold, you're shoveling something that rhymes with "get" AGAIN! Yes, seems like a viscous cycle, doesn't it?

By now I am sure you're asking, "What about riding?" Oh, we ride, but it isn't our horses! Nah! See, I was never a bronco buster and, well, these horses either have never been ridden, haven't been ridden in a long time or, my favorite, you don't wanna' try to ride

them. Yes, that leaves trail riding. So, it seems to have come full circle. Well, not quite. In all my trail riding days I'd never experienced being tossed off a horse until a couple of Octobers ago. We were down near Winchester, Virginia and booked an hour-long ride. The guide gives me a "typical," or as I soon came to learn not so typical, horse to ride and off we went. I should have realized there may be trouble when the guide told me the horse name was Rocket! We were about one third of the way into the ride when shazam, Rocket bolted straight ahead! No real problem, besides the surprise. I buried my feet into the stirrups and pulled back on the reins and the horse stopped. The guide said, "He hasn't done that in a long time." I thought, "Well you could have told me!" But, as the saying goes, no harm, no foul. So we continued and we were about two-thirds of the way through the ride and Rocket launches again. Problem was, this time he turned sharp left, as in ninety degrees! So, I buried my feet and pulled on the reins. Oops! The left rein, the one opposite the way I was leaning, BROKE and I went flying. It was me that Rocket launched. Crash, bam, boom and next thing ya' know, I've got broken ribs. My ego wasn't hurt but my right side surely was. Talk about dampening your enthusiasm for horses.

And so it goes for horses and me. I can

assure you I've grown use to all the work in caring for them. I mend the fences, help bring in the hay, feed them and even sing to them when they are in the barn. I guess you could say my overly enthusiastic desire to be a cowboy passed a long time ago, but so have a lot of other wants in my life. Now, as I sit writing at my keyboard, the wind is moaning a frigid tone and the thermometer is hovering on the brink of 10 degrees. I've just come in from the barn and hung up my cowboy hat. Yes, I had to chip poop from the floor, muck out the stall and feed the hay eating machines. Especially during these winter months, I try to bring the horses an apple and carrot. Today I've brought them both. You see, I've taken it upon myself to care for these gloriously wonderful beasts. And, regardless of the scooping, the feeding, the haying and all else that goes with caring for horses, it is all worth it. Their affections, though sublime, are genuine and can be witnessed by their softly rumbling vocal cords when I go out to feed them. It is as if they are my charges and only wait for their benefactor to see what comes next, all along knowing I will take care of them.

The sun has passed over the mountain top and, once again painted the sky with glorious tints and hues of red. I can look out the window and see it all, the wonder of horses and the glory that is the Heart of the Endless Mountains.