

## Wild Horses, Early 1870s

### A LEAF FROM THE EXPERIENCE OF L. E. WITHERBEE

No story of the early day can be more pathetic than that of the Wild Horses that roamed the range in the very excess of freedom and joy of existence. It is a story that must hold the interest of every human being who still can thrill to life in the natural, and respond with sympathy to the final despair of the wild as a changing order crept inevitably upon them. Civilization laid heavy tribute upon all wild life, but upon none more heavily than upon the horse. Fleet of foot and free of spirit he seemed a part of the great open spaces. He was a part; but the wide open spaces finally yielded to limitations, and so at last did also the Magnificent Monarch to the toil of his civilized kindred and subjugation to the will of man. How this was eventually accomplished can best be told by the actual experience of L. E. Witherbee who rode the range in the early '70s. The story is taken, by friendly consent, from the History of Logan County, written by Mrs. Emma Burke Conklin in 1928. It is abridged to save space, but quotations are accurate.

#### Quoting—

“The range country in the early '70s between the South Platte and the Arkansas rivers was infested with herds of wild horses. They ran in bands of from ten to fifty. They had their well-known watering places and knew every foot of the country over which they ranged. When the time came to eradicate them the job was a big one and was accomplished only by the most determined and concerted action.

“It required our top horses, well grained and in perfect condition, and ridden by men who could rope and shoot. It required several relays of our best stock to run down and corral a bunch of mustangs. Their speed, endurance and head-work was marvelous. I have dropped in with a fresh horse at the second or third relief behind a flying bunch and watched with amazement their untiring efforts to elude their pursuers. Every one would be covered with a white foam; but they were just then ready to do their best. No man except one who has had experi-

ence, could believe that a bunch of wild horses could possibly hold out to run at top speed for 40 or 50 miles at a stretch."

Here Mr. Witherbee tells of the usual method of running them down, but also of one rider who did it quite successfully another way. He says:

"The most successful wild horse hunter on the range discovered that he could *walk* them down and do it without injury. His name was Wild Horse Jerry; at least, though I knew him many years I never heard him called by any other. One day I got him to outline his mode of procedure, and this is the way he gave it.

"He would locate a band of 30 or 40, find their watering place and move his camp into that territory. He would have three saddle horses. Leaving two on picket he would mount the other and ride out leisurely, allowing himself to be seen by the wild horses. They would run away. He would follow, still leisurely. When he came up with them they would run again and again he would follow; and this would be kept up all day. As night came on he would maneuver to direct their course toward the place where he had left the other horses; there he would leave the tired one and take a fresh one. He never allowed the band to reach the water nor rest a moment.

"By the end of the second day he would be nearer them and by the end of the third up with them. Many would be limping and have a tired and worn look, the effect of no water, no rest, no sleep. At the end of the fourth day he could drive them in any direction, but they were not ready yet to be corralled. That was a work of art. When they were so footsore and worn that he could ride in among them and whip them up with a rope they were ready to be brought into civilization and would quietly walk into the corral. After they were rested and fed for about a week they were ready to be shipped east and sold."

But notwithstanding Jerry's success with this method the group of which Mr. Witherbee was a part still continued by the method of speed. Again quoting:

"When the time finally came for us to make our raid on the mustangs there was real excitement in the camp. Every man

rode his top horse and looked carefully after every detail. His saddle was thoroughly examined, gun cleaned and oiled, saddle blankets reduced in number to hold down weight; everything discarded that could be. But I never discarded my chaps after one painful experience. That was one day when I had roped, saddled and was riding a wild horse," (one recently captured) "when suddenly he turned his head back and snapped my shin bone with his powerful teeth; he would undoubtedly have crushed it but for the chaps. As it was the pain was excruciating when his iron jaws slipped off and snapped together like a pistol.

"On an early spring morning we started from the "22" ranch on the south side of the South Platte about midway between Greeley and Julesburg. The champing of bits, the jingle of spurs and the first streaks of dawn lent a sort of enchantment to the scene. We rode out slowly, for a real Westerner never hurries his horse at the beginning of a day's work; that is an unwritten law that is never broken. Speed comes later.

"The Platte river, a mile wide in those days, we left behind us just as the day was breaking in the east. The morning wore on; the sun came up over the sand hills in spring time splendor, flashing on spurs, buckles and bridles. The horses all looked fit and the sixteen riders felt the witchery of adventure, each knowing that he would do his best."

This sentiment was put to the acid test in Mr. Witherbee's case later when he was assigned a duty that under no other circumstances could he have done, and that even as a duty was almost impossible. But the law of the range must not be violated—a duty assigned by a foreman must be performed. And so, this lover of horses, before the end of the day, had killed two of the most beautiful he had ever seen.

In the wordless organization among wild horses, one, generally the finest of the flock, is the leader. While his herd grazes or rests he is on the watchout, and when he gives the signal all follow him implicitly. He would lead the herd far away from their captors, therefore he must be eliminated. In this case the tragic duty fell to Mr. Witherbee. But he can tell the story best himself.

"I saw the leader of our riders slow down and stop; he dismounted and motioned to all of us to stop and be quiet. Then he crawled on his hands and knees to the top of a low sandy

ridge; carefully he looked through his field glass, then crept back and told us the wild horses were just over the ridge about three-quarters of a mile away.

“‘Boys,’ he said, ‘we are going to corral that bunch of horses; it will be rough riding and dangerous, but every thing is in our favor; wind is right; run will be down hill; our horses are in fine shape; the flat where the wild horses are is almost in the shape of a horseshoe with the open end toward the ranch; we will surround the bunch and they will have to go out that way.’

“Then to me, looking at his watch: ‘What time have you?’ I showed him my watch. ‘All right,’ he said, ‘give me just thirty minutes to place my men, then strip your horse and expose him on that ridge; the leader of the mustangs will come to him; he will come on until he sees you; you are to be lying down with gun in position. When he sees you he will turn broadside, but only for an instant; *that* is your time. Can you do it? Will you? I must have said yes, for he continued: ‘You know that unless that stallion is killed we can never corral the bunch. Use your telescope. Be careful. All right, boys, come on.’

“That half hour was a terror, but I carried out instructions to the letter. I crawled carefully to the top of the ridge; at the right moment I took the saddle off my horse and placed him where he could be seen. I rested my gun in a steady place, then I looked through my Malcom glass. What a sight. Some of the wild horses were lying down, some grazing, but that magnificent stallion was on the watch; he was a perfect picture of life and beauty, a thing that should never die, but live forever. He was uneasy; his intuition told him there was danger. He would trot back and forth, throw up his head, sniff the wind and stand listening, then circle the bunch far outside, his long sweeping tail and heavy mane shining like silver in the sunlight. He was the handsomest thing I had ever seen. Did I feel sorry for what I was about to do? Yes. Did I hesitate? No.

“He saw my horse; on and on he came, gracefully and swiftly over the three-quarter mile distance, his nostrils wide-spread, his tail and mane floating on the air, the very embodiment of power and beauty. Within a hundred and fifty feet of

## PIONEER STORIES

my horse he seemed to sense my presence, stopped instantly and turned broadside. The cross hairs of my telescope marked the vital spot, my finger touched the trigger. He reared up and fell backwards. It was done. But I could not go and look at him."

Here Mr. Witherbee tells of how the herd, now leaderless, were being driven toward the ranch and its corral when a beautiful mare with a yearling colt beside her, threatened to break through the ranks and stampede the herd, and then again rang out the tragic order from the foreman, "SHOOT." "How wonderful she is," thought Mr. Witherbee; but the thought that now steadied his aim was: "She would rather die than to go into captivity," and she fell without a struggle.

Perhaps Mr. Witherbee may have heard the distant echo of a human voice ringing down the halls of time since a day when Thirteen Colonies seeking freedom from a foreign yoke uttered the historic words, "Give me liberty or give me death."—a noble sentiment in a higher creature—but meriting a death in a lower.

But let us hear the last of Mr. Witherbee's vivid story:

"The heart-breaking pace was beginning to tell on both horses and riders; sweat, then lather, then foam stood out all over the flying bunch. It was a down hill run to the Platte and we all went over hills, through cuts and gullies, over holes and down high knobs at break-neck speed. I have seen some good riding in the movies since, but nothing to compare with what I saw that day.

"As we came out of the sand hills and struck the level ground we had the bunch well in hand; we could see the ranch and corrals about four miles away. We received orders to line up at the gate and allow none to get away, and again came the dread order to kill if necessary. But it was not necessary; the exhausted and demoralized herd all entered the corral without protest. And then it was that the beautiful yearling colt was un-animously given to me."

And the story finishes with a sequel written years later, that the colt developed the beauty of the father and the spirit of the mother and was cared for with unusual, almost remorseful, tenderness to the end of a long life by the only human owner he ever knew.