

Becoming a horse rancher

At a very young age, I started begging for a pony to ride.

My request fell on deaf ears; my father became stone deaf at about age 6, likely because of child abuse.

One of our closest neighbors raised half-Shetland ponies. He offered to sell one or more, but my father refused his offer.

Therefore, I became a horse rancher with a large herd of stick horses. They were not shiny horse heads mounted on broomsticks like those found in toy catalogs.

I found them in an aspen grove where we pastured milk cows. I selected sticks of proper diameter and length in order to get the best stock.

I had favorites. Some of them were gentle and easy to handle; others were not. My herd contained both workhorses and saddle horses.

I broke them according to size and strength, some to ride and some to drive. A few of them worked well under either saddle or harness.

Each horse had its individual temperament. The meanest ones kicked, struck, and bit me if they got the chance. I had to be ever-watchful around them.

Regardless, they still kicked me or bucked me off from time to time. Runaways happened often with young

draft horses, and nearly always wrecked fences and equipment.

My saddle horses were great for bringing milk cows from the fields and pastures to the barn.

Binder twines worked well for bridles and harnesses.

I tied these twines to wagons or sleds and used my teams to haul wood and coal for the Home Comfort cookstove in the kitchen and the heater stove in the living room.

My horses pranced, loped, paced, galloped, or walked according to the commands given them. They whinnied, nickered, neighed, and snorted as they interacted with me and the other horses.

I took good care of my horses, fed them well, and doctored them when they got sick or hurt. I also fenced pastures for them in the hay yard where I turned them loose for a good roll and exercise.

I didn't want them to get barn sour. I converted an old station wagon body into a horse barn with grain boxes,



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mangers, and stalls.

Stallions had special box stalls. A discarded cream separator tank made a perfect water trough.

Each one of them had a name chosen from those of our own ranch horses, neighbors' horses, or found in books. I named my best team Bird and Nell. My best saddle horse was

Shorty.

I had Bess, Brownie, Babe, Queen, King, Ranger, Colonel, Dan, Tony, Muggins, Patches, Kate, Blaze, Star, Beauty, Pat, Prince and many others.

I kept my eyes open, always on the lookout for new horseflesh. My herd kept increasing until, at the height of my career, I had 48 head of stick horses.

They provided hours, days, months, and years of enjoyment and creativity. I studied live horses, learned their actions and mannerisms, and mimicked them.

A real pony would have been more fun, but I enjoyed playing with stick horses so much I raced through meals. My mother had to call me into the house at bedtime.

Shortly after my eighth birthday, my

father decided the time had come for me to learn a lesson in becoming a man. As a result, disaster struck my horse operation and eliminated my entire horse herd. In a matter of minutes, my horses were all gone, never to return.

He ordered me to gather my stick horses, take them to the chopping block by the woodpile, and cut them into stove-wood lengths for firewood. I thought about trying to hide a few of my very best ones, but I knew better than to disobey.

It felt like killing real horses as I swung and the ax bit into them. Men do not cry. I stayed on the side of the woodpile away from the house so nobody could see my tears.

I have never forgotten that tragedy. The transfer from boyhood to manhood proves to be painful at times. That day, a part of my little boy's heart was cut to pieces on a chopping block.

A writer and cowboy poet, Duane Portwood has been volunteering his time and talent at the Sheridan Senior Center for more than two years.

Center Stage is written by friends of the Senior Center for the Sheridan community. It is a collection of insights and stories related to living well at every age.