

Fillies and colts, moms and sons

"We have a new baby colt, do you want to see it?" asked my mother.

She moved a chair close to the kitchen window.

"Yes," I answered excitedly and ran to climb up and stand on the chair.

From that vantage point, with my mother standing beside me, I watched as Nell brought her colt (actually a filly) from her box stall in the barn to the hollowed-out-log water trough near the yard fence.

Spring rains left large puddles in the barnyard. The puddles became brackish-looking brown liquid, a mixture of rain water and animal fluids.

Nell, her filly pressed against her belly as if tied by an invisible rope, carefully evaded the dirty puddles, keeping herself between them and her baby. The filly's tiny hooves seemed to hardly touch the ground, almost dancing beside her mother.

"It's a little girl colt, would you like to name her?" my mother asked.

"Daisy," I said after some thought.

For some reason that name appealed to my 4-year-old intelligence. The white star on her forehead reminded me of a picture of a flower in one of my books.

My mother's smile, and the way she raised her eyebrows, meant she approved.

"That's a good name for her."

The same scenario repeated the next day and the next and on and on. I watched the animal love bestowed upon offspring by mother: complete, constant devotion, attention, and protection, to the water trough and back to the barn.

As early spring warmed into mid-spring, the two milk cows freshened. My mother did most of the milking and I went to the barn with her.

I always asked permission to stand outside the box stall. Nell usually stood

between me and Daisy, but the filly's curiosity sometimes brought her out where I could see her and reach out to her through the stall rails.

Nell became accustomed to the routine and gradually accepted my presence. Daisy regarded me with caution for many days, but finally

let me touch her soft, velvety nose; what a thrill!

Spring turned into summer. Nell and Daisy left the barn, and I caught sight of them in the pasture with other horses from time to time. Daisy grew and no longer stayed so closely connected to her mother.

Sometimes my father hitched Nell and Bird, her matched harness mate, to a wagon for light work, and Daisy followed along. Occasionally I got to ride in the wagon.

I liked to watch the horses and study their characteristics and mannerisms. I imitated them as they tossed their heads, pranced, and neighed.

We had dozens of horses, and I never tired of watching them while they interacted with one another in the corrals and pastures.

When days got warmer, horses worked in the fields, and I watched through the yard fence when they came to the water trough after a day's work. They drank for a long time, and their ears flicked back and forth as they swallowed.

When finished drinking, they raised their heads and looked around while greenish slobbers dribbled from their mouths as they cleaned their teeth with their tongues.



Center Stage

Duane Portwood



I breathed in the scent of sweaty horse bodies and enjoyed it. I listened to them, learned their unique whinnies, and could identify each horse by its sound.

Summer progressed into fall. One day my father announced his

intention to wean Daisy.

"What do you do to her when you wean her?" I asked.

"I separate her from her mother."

"Why do you do that?"

"Because she's grown big enough that she doesn't need her mother's milk any more. She can eat hay and grain."

"How do you separate them?"

"I'll take Nell over to Grandpa's place and leave the colt here."

That process seemed simple enough, and I didn't think about weaning anymore until the next day, when I saw my father lead Nell into the barn with Daisy following as she had done as a baby.

Presently I saw him leading Shorty, his favorite saddle horse, and Nell from the barn. He mounted Shorty and, wrapping Nell's halter rope around the saddle horn, rode toward the county road to go to Grandpa's place.

She became very agitated and ran back and forth beside Shorty as far as the halter rope would let her go, all the while calling for Daisy, her white-rimmed eyes constantly looking at the barn door.

I could hear Daisy in the barn answering her. The farther from the barn they got, the more frantic Nell's nickering became.

I went to the barn and peeked through a crack in the door. Daisy stomped, squealed and ran around the box stall. She neighed as loud as she could and then stood quietly and listened for her mother's answer.

Between episodes of calling and listening, she tore around looking for a place to escape. After a time, I could no longer hear Nell, but Daisy apparently could and kept up the noise, endlessly circling the stall.

My mother saw me at the barn door and called me back to the house saying she didn't want me near the barn. "Can I go with you to milk tonight?" I asked.

"Yes, but come in the house now, your dinner is ready, come and eat."

My after-dinner nap failed because I couldn't get the vision of Daisy rampaging around the stall out of my mind. Her crying penetrated the house logs. I wished my father would bring Nell back home. Of course, he didn't.

At milking time, the poor filly went wild when she heard the barn door open, obviously expecting her mother. Her frenzied behavior scared me, and I didn't go very near her.

She reared and plunged her front feet into a tub of water in one corner and upset it backing away.

"She wants her mama," I started to cry.

"I know," soothed my mother, "she'll settle down in a little while. Your dad will fill the water tub again, and pretty soon she'll get hungry and thirsty and eat and drink just like a big horse."

In due time, that's exactly what she did.

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.