

## What We Could Learn From Horses

David Edmundson

4/25/05

One evening last November in these rooms, after the significant conversations had been held, plates emptied, mugs and schooners too, I mentioned to the table, a propos of I don't remember what, that I was off on Wednesday to announce a horse show. Someone may have mentioned Massachusetts, or the Connecticut valley, or Hartford Bradley Airport, or maybe just air travel in general – whatever it was I came out with one of those conversational non-sequiturs produced by those who are more absorbed with their own thoughts than the table-topic. I was in fact preparing to go to the Eastern States Expo in West Springfield, Massachusetts for a four-day show. By intent or otherwise the conversation turned to me. “Horse shows?! How long have you been involved with horses?”

I replied that I had been doing these horse shows for ten years or so. But in fact, one way or another, horses have figured in my life as long as I can remember.

As a child, I recall my father chiding me at the table for drinking noisily by saying I sounded like Maude and Topsy at the watering trough. Even though I knew I was being scolded, I also knew he enjoyed the reminiscence. Maude and Topsy were the half-Belgian mares who were my father's special charge when, as a boy, he worked the family farm with his father and brothers. Brother Bob liked to tinker with engines and he did the work a tractor could do. Dad liked to work with horses and did what a pair in harness were good at, teamwork. I imagine him in that timeless pose, reins over his shoulder, the

team dragging the doubletree back to the barn after a day in the fields. And with Carl Sandburg...

I shall remember you long,

Plowboy and horses against the sky in shadow.

I shall remember you and the picture

You made for me,

Turning the turf in the dusk

And haze of an April gloaming. (from the "Plowboy" – Carl Sandburg)

There is something in the bite of a northerly wind with the tang of the tundra blown in from Canada that transports me to northern Indiana and the farm where my father was born and grew to manhood, a little place near the headwaters of the Mississinewa River on the edge of the Loblolly Swamp. This ground remained untouched by the plow until 1912 when the Lob Ditch drained it, and my Grandfather gave up his one-room school house for a quarter-section of black muck and yellow clay. It had in my youth a twenty-acre woods that still held a few forest giants from one of the last stands of virgin timber between Chicago and Cincinnati.

It was here in December we gathered to be, for a few hours, a family in fact as well as name. As soon as decorum allowed, my cousins and I would line up opposite a row of innocent tin cans and show our skill with whatever ordinance we had, .22 rifles usually, with the occasional .410 shotgun. After blamming away long enough for the uncles to be satisfied with our fire-arm safety, we would head for the woods and form a line, sometimes 20 abreast, grandpa, uncles, cousins, and start through the woods to see what game we could scare up. My excitement kept me warm and my determination not

to be the one who drew a reprimand kept me focused, so much so that I can still see clearly the woods and pond, the fields and fencerows.

Here was where my father and his brothers had grown up, and these were the fields they worked. In those days when farm work was a blend of the industrial and the traditional, the plowing and planting might be done with the tractor, but the harvesting was still done by hand. Grandpa didn't like to shock the corn; he said it was too slow and you had to handle everything twice. So he built corn cribs large enough to hold the harvest and he and his boys picked it by hand. They built a big tailgate for the wagon, hitched the team, and started down the edge of the field.

The pickers walked along beside the wagon, Dad, the smallest boy in the closest row, Bob then Bill then Grandpa, each in his own row. The horses started with an easy Giddup, and Grandpa and his boys would walk along pulling and shucking the ears and tossing them in the wagon by bouncing them off the extra large tailgate they referred to as the backstop. Grandpa told stories to make the time pass more easily. At the end of the rows, the horses would pause until everyone caught up and then turn and go back down the field with hardly any direction. And the plodding and pulling, shucking and storytelling would begin again for another pass of the field until, by the end of the day, the corn was in the crib, the best places to fish and hunt, gossip, local and national, and family history, had been brought out, held up for inspection, and discussed thoroughly. And Maude and Topsy, unhitched and curried, noses buried in grain, consumed noisily their just rewards for teamwork well accomplished.

Farm life was more a matter of brute strength in those days, and yet the brutishness afflicting many men who did that sort of work my father escaped by the

example of his father in combining the physical with the thoughtful. I almost said the intellectual, but I don't think that word quite fits the case. I imagine these men striving to meet life in all its aspects in order to keep body and soul together and the family supported so that this generation's effort would provide for the next. The life of the mind was another part of the whole, not a thing imagined or valued separately.

And what of the actual brutes themselves? There are several ways to get a horse to do what you want it to. Many horsemen inflicted pain and fear in handling their animals, and have in the process become brutes themselves. The image of the swearing teamster, whip in hand, beating his horses down the road stands for everything my father as a horseman was not. I never saw him work with a team, but I did observe his handling of several Standardbreds he trained for the county fair circuit when General Motors put him out to pasture, when he had the leisure to follow his heart. I can only suppose he was the same with his teams as he was with his pacers. I have liked to think that the patient affection he showed his children was learned with those two boyhood companions, Maude and Topsy.

Despite the changes wrought by the industrial age, the horse, or rather the intersection between people and horses, still holds great importance for us. According to the American Horse Council website there are now about seven million equines of various types in the country, with only a small percentage having any non-recreational use. The economic impact of these creatures is statistically quite impressive. Some 1.4 million Americans work in an industry that has a \$112 billion impact on the GDP and pays some \$1.9 billion in taxes. There are more horses now than at any time since World War II, and the number continues to grow.

But except for the western cattle industry, the horse has almost no essential uses left. The cavalry arrives in helicopters and humvees. The diesel engine provides the horsepower to turn the soil, to plant, till, and harvest. Most of the marvelous barns built in the golden age of American agriculture have disappeared along with the economic justification for the hay loft. The automobile or motorcycle provide more reliable transport with much less maintenance, and unlike horses or friends, one can ignore them for long periods without harm to the car or one's relationship with it.

And yet, when considering human history and culture, there is something fundamental, even mystical, about the horse. The power that lifted economics from hunting-gathering to agriculture, perhaps the development that marked the dawn of civilization, came primarily from the domestication of the equine. From mankind's earliest memories, whether as Scythians, Huns, Mongols, or Cossacks, terror has often ridden in on hooved feet. The paintings on cave walls are testament to the enduring sense that horses are, to some eyes at least, things of beauty.

Even our sense of proper behavior derives in part from the peculiar code of the horse-borne soldier bequeathed to us from the days of William the Conqueror. He earned his sobriquet by combining the Norman love of mayhem and skill at arms with the power of the horse. These and good fortune at Hastings or he might have come down to us as William the Redeless, or the William the Unlucky, or by his original nickname, William the Bastard.

Instead his legacy is linked to the mounted warrior, the chevalier, and to chivalry, and to that web of circumstance which produced the history of the British, the saga of America, and the heritage of many sitting here tonight. That these exemplars of slaughter

and plunder could have inspired that amalgam of brutality and spirituality called chivalry demonstrates, if further proof were needed, the triumph of rhetoric over sense. History is, as we all know, written by the winners.

The chevalier's American counterpart, the cowboy, as given to us by popular culture, romanticizes the nobility of the man who rides into town with his guns, shoots somebody and rides on out. He may shoot somebody who deserves to be shot, and thereby he earns the chivalrous status of the Christian who kills, but only for the good of the weak and deserving. The historic record shows him to be about as chivalrous as most of those involved in violence, that is not very, but as previously noted, romance usually trumps history.

However flawed the reality of horse-borne nobility, history and literature also give us heroes and their mounts. Alexander had Bucephalus; Robert E. Lee rode to battle on Traveler; The Lone Ranger saved the West from the back of Silver; Even Quixote needed Rocinante to face down the windmill. While we don't know the names of their horses, no Civil War general would dream of showing his face in a public park save from horseback. The horse, it would seem, is a symbol of potency and, as such, a desired accoutrement for the great and would-be great.

Many modern men have moved on to Hummers and Mercedes to demonstrate their virility, but the horse still works. The psycho-sexual theory may also explain why many women and pubescent girls are so attracted to horses. The arm-chair psychiatrists make much of the subconscious desire of the equestrienne to have that much power between her legs. The same line of reasoning could just as easily apply to the men. The

logical extension of this argument is, I suppose, that coachmen are voyeurs. I think I'll leave it to the Freudians to work this one out.

The vision of a horse in full gallop, mane and tail astream in the wind, traversing a scene of wild beauty may explain, more than all the rest, why we still desire them. I have witnessed a crowd of 5,000 at the Ohio State Fairgrounds Coliseum gasp in awe and sit enthralled as a Friesian stallion simply ran in the arena. Ran is an inadequate word for what he did. He pranced, gamboled, galloped, frisked, coursed, and generally moved in all the ways a horse can move. And we were filled with joy and a desire to join that horse in his defiance of the laws of gravity. There may be something in the appeal of freedom and wild independence that accounts the appeal of horses to the modern sensibility, but most of us, equestrians or not, find them beautiful.

Whatever the fundamental nature of their appeal, horses do have something useful to show us. The common stable adage, "There is something about the outside of a horse that is good for the inside of a man," reflects the notion that training horses also teaches the trainer. A well-deserved sense of humility and stubborn belief in one's ability to solve baffling problems characterize many horsemen. These and what we experience as love from the animals we work with mark the equestrian community.

I like to think my father is the man he is, in part because of what he has learned around stable and stall. Even though I own no horses and ride very seldom these days, I still find his wisdom about how to act in the world useful and good. What follows is a short sampling:

You're not strong enough to outmuscle a horse; you'll have to outsmart it.

There are a number of things one can teach a horse, but no amount of instruction will enable a horse to play the piano; focus on the do-able.

Be consistent. If you want your horse to change leads for example, use the same signal every time and don't use that signal for anything else. When the horse does what you want, remove the signal and reward it with some sign of affection. A well-trained horse that receives clear, consistent cues can perform marvelous feats.

You have to maintain discipline. Horses are herd animals; make sure that you're the alpha. The alpha horse has to establish and maintain his status with the herd. None of this works if the horse doesn't think you are the boss of the barnyard.

Motivation is the key to most training. You can motivate with pain and fear or affection. Either will yield some results, but each has side effects. With pain the horse will learn to shy, from you and many other things. It will relate to the world in a fearful and eventually aggressive manner; you can only hit a thing so many times before you kill its spirit or it hits you back. With affection you may get some playful jostling, there is a reason we call it horseplay, but you will also get the eagerness to please that reduces the training problem to making your desires clear. If the horse is eager to please you, you have only to give it signals it understands to get the result you want. The horse's greatest fear becomes losing your affection. And with affection, if sometime you have a moment of vulnerability and the horse can either protect you or attack you, you are more likely to be helped than hurt.

Over the years I have seen some of the best horsemen in the country demonstrate the truth of these observations in training clinics and demonstrations. Not only is it good advice for dealing with horses, it's a good approach for people too. I have been able to

apply almost all of it to the sometimes baffling, always challenging job of teaching English to teenagers. In fact, if every time you hear horse you substitute teenager, you have a pretty sound approach to classroom management. You're not strong enough to outmuscle a classroom full of teenagers; you'll have to outsmart them, for example.

I don't expect the powers that run the educational bureaucracy to make much use of this. After all if it can't be measured by a multiple-choice test, it holds no interest for our current leadership. On the other hand, if you find yourself in a classroom looking back at a herd of teenagers or facing a difficult management or personnel problem, you may find this useful. It's yours, the accumulated wisdom of countless hours of horsemanship. You're welcome to it, no charge. And you won't even have to clean your boots.