

HORSE PLAY

By Janet Herring-Sherman

It was in the parking lot at the bank on a hot August morning when it dawned on me: I was back where I'd started.

I'd driven to town to cash a birthday-gift check from my godmother; a generous tradition she began when I was in high school. I was planning to use the money to help pay for my new used saddle. Which was exactly what I'd used her birthday money for the summer I was 15. Chuckling to myself, I gave a prayer of thanks that, at age 57, I'd been led back to the things I loved most in my youth: horses, country living and time spent with really good friends.

I grew up in 1950's suburbia when the concept of creating neighborhoods out of pastures and orchards was still new and charming. The backyard at my folks' home was large, but not roomy enough for the horse I longed for my entire childhood. Fortunately, at the requisite summer Red Cross swimming lessons of the era, I'd become friends with another horse-crazy girl. My new friend lived on a small apple ranch and had horses of her very own.

That was where I rode a horse for the first time. I was awed, and grateful, that she would share her sweet, sorrel horses, Trinket and Nancy, with me. We rode bareback, and falling off was like earning bragging rights or a badge of courage. We spent many summer days astride for hours, sauntering along country lanes, skirting apple and cherry orchards, careful not to raise dust. Sometimes, we stopped in the shade and ate our saddlebag picnic at the still-standing one-room school house my father and uncle had attended in the 1920s and '30s.

When I first learned Dad and Uncle Bob had grown up out there in the country, I sulked for days: I could not believe these two men, who I worshipped, had sold the land where I could have had my very own horse! I was 10 or 11 at the time and had no understanding of how much those two Depression-era farm boys longed for a life different than hard-scrabble farming.

My folks built us a good family life in their little hometown. It was just that we lived in

town rather than out. The summer I turned 10, Mom and Dad started the tradition of an August vacation in a cabin on a river in the woods and wilds of northern California. We called it Trinity, and we've returned to the same place at the same time every one of the 47 years since!

Trinity was Paradise to me, because it meant I could rent and ride trail horses nearly every day. When I got a little older, my dad would arrange for he and I to accompany a "wrangler" when he packed up his mules with supplies and rode them "in" to foresters working deep in the mountain wilderness. Sometimes, Dad and I helped lead Boy Scout troops to a high-up camp for their own week in the woods. These were some of the best times I ever spent with my father. They also shaped my career.

The fall I was 12, school began with an assignment to write a story about our summer. For me, that was easy. I wrote about what I loved: horses, the woods, my dad. When my teacher returned the story with an "A" and the comment, "You made me wish I was there," I was hooked. I wanted to be a horse writer.

I came to know my subject even better when I finally got my first horse at age 15. I wove horses into my school work whenever I could, comparing their gaits to humans' for an anthropology project; penning poems about them for English classes. When high school graduation neared, I found a college that had its own on-campus stable and a program where you could actually earn credits for training a horse! Oh yes, they taught journalism there, too.

In a college magazine writing class, we had to submit a nonfiction article to a magazine in order to pass. I wrote a piece about packing mules and wilderness riding and submitted it to my favorite horse magazine. I checked the mailbox in my dorm twice a day, waiting for some sign my article had been received -- or rejected. What I got instead was a check. They were going to publish my mule article, and they paid me for it, too! (And yes, I used that money on something for my horse.)

I landed an internship with a regional horse magazine, which led to a big city ad agency

job, corporate writing and finally, a newspaper. College degree in hand and off on my own, I managed to keep my horse for awhile. Each job took me further from horses as my subject and farther from my horse back home. Caught up in career building, I barely had time to water my apartment house-plants let alone tend a horse. I sold my buckskin gelding that I'd raised from a foal and trained at college; then my horse trailer, my saddle, my tack.; my collection of horse magazines. For the longest time after, I felt off-balance, as if my stirrups weren't adjusted right.

I married, became a mother, and horses became part of my gilded childhood.

Sometimes, I'd see a girl loping around a roadside arena or through a pasture, and I'd drift back to the days of Trinket and Nancy. I'd sigh and smile at the days gone by. Getting older, stiffer, heavier, I quit thinking about ever riding again.

Now here I am, at the bank getting money to buy a saddle, so I can ride the horse I just bought. A little red dun mare named Callie. She is unlike any of the \$100 horses I could afford to buy with my "ironing" money back then. They were usually horses with a problem: They reared at the slightest excuse; fought loading in a trailer; would flee full-tilt when spooked; had to be chased and cornered to be caught and haltered. They taught me a lot, especially patience. Now Callie's the patient one, putting up with me as I re-learn horse handling and riding techniques that once were second nature to me.

Why a horse again? We returned to the countryside. My son is raised up, my work schedule is light. I've had the career. Much like my Trinket-and-Nancy horse pal, two girlfriends conspired to get me back in the saddle. A year ago, one invited me to ride her tall reddish-brown-and-white paint horse, Tucker. The thrill was still there.

I've changed, the world has changed. (Trinity no longer employs wranglers or offers horses for hire.) But horses have remained the same. Except for one thing: Callie's as perfect as they come. When I call her name, she nickers, ambles to me, and offers her head for haltering. Then she gently sniffs the pocket of my jeans for the apple or carrot she knows she'll find there. Callie is helping me feel young again. My horse is teaching me to play.