

To Winter Ground – Kelly's Story

by Bob Jamieson, rev. August 2008

She was a fat old buckskin butterball, bone-faced and ugly as sin, but better schooled than I in the mountains and life in general. I was a whipper-snapper in those days, not green, but certainly a little short of horse smarts. Now, most of a lifetime later, there isn't a bunch about horses or mountains that I don't know. And it was that ugly old mare that taught me every single lesson that mattered.

Kelly was her name. She was a kind old lady, but that ain't the same as saying that she was going to put up with any nonsense from me. When I packed here, she would twist her head around and watch my every move, then nod if I got the boxes balanced right. If I cinched her too tight she would grunt and lie down. If I packed her too heavy she would shake her head and then bitch and moan all the way to camp. And I swear that when I threw a diamond hitch that wasn't quite centered, she would shake her head and snort in disgust.

Our first year was a little hard on the old gal. I was wrangling then for Doris Riddell, another grand old lady of the mountains, in the Bull River country of southern B.C. I got that horse and myself onto goat trails where neither of us had any right to be. I jumped her across logs and into boulder strewn rivers that I would go around today. A young fool and a horse in the mountains. But we survived. We covered a lot of miles, down long lonely valleys and over windy passes. She is bones now and I am finding white hairs where they ain't supposed to be, but the memories of the times we shared are like pools in the river of time that takes each of us slowly down toward that ocean that, in time, contains us all.

There were three of us in those years; a man, a dog and a horse. I had few human friends and I shared the mountains with them rarely. I lived and worked in high and empty mountain places and that horse knew more of me, and I of her, than any of the two-legged sorts that I passed the winters with. On frosty mornings when I was splitting wood she would come into camp and stand watching me; and if you ask me, it was company, not oats, that was the reason for it. And if she wandered off into the tiny mountain meadow that was her pasture and after awhile, I could no longer hear her bell; I would go to find her. The chance of her wandering off was a fair excuse but if the truth be known, I needed her company also. When the dog arrived, Whiskey, for her color and my downfall, it only changed a little, for they would both go to the meadow, she to feed and the dog to sniff under bushes, pouncing here and there after imaginary mice. If I did not come for them they would return at last light and the three of us would dine; oats, a dog bone and elk steak by the river. And I swear the pale green horizon glow and dark mountains affected all of us as we sat there quietly chewing on dinner and life in the fading light.



Over the years I bought her several friends, fourteen in all. They were good tough mountain horses and we served each other well, I think, and in the spring of '78 I took Kelly to a gentleman of large proportions and one year hence found a stubby, long-legged colt in the meadow. He came into life during a wild spring thunder storm so we called him Stormy. On the mountain grass he grew like an equine weed. With some oats and simply time together in the meadow he took on the manners of his mother. By the late summer of his youth he was a huge-footed gentle soul that romped with Whiskey through the river and meadow like some equine Thumbelina. Once, sweaty from building a cabin, I went out to the meadow, an excuse for a rest and in the insect drone and among the droop-headed horses I fell asleep beneath a tall spruce at the meadow's edge. A minute, an hour later, who knows, I jumped awake with a huge chunk of horseflesh collapsing with a groan beside me. I moved over a foot, then after a snort or two and a butt wagging greeting from the dog, the three of us subsided into the warm mountain grass.



We travelled many miles in the mountains and saw a lot of fine and wonderful places, but the middle fork was the best of all. There was a special place there, a mountain meadow butt up against the continental divide. The meadow was cut by a twisting little river that, if you listened hard, played Mozart in its riffles. The grass was rich, the trout deep and fat, the mountains crisp and steel grey against a blue and sailing sky. Whiskey had grouse and squirrels to chase, the ponies had grass aplenty, I had solitude enough for a dozen lifetimes. In the morning I would get up early and go out in the frosted grass and listen for horse bells. That was for me the best time of all; the mountains still grey and distant in the early light, the meadow part lost in mist, the soft silence broken only by the murmur of the river. I would bring Kelly in, once I had found her by the soft clang of her bell, and saddle her. Then I would take my rod and go horse-fishing. We would start at the bottom of the meadow and by the time I got there, the sun would be gold and bright on the peaks. At the first pool Kelly would put her head down to graze and I would try to tie a fly on. She would move just enough to make it a challenge. She would prick her ears as I began to false cast and turn to watch the line and rod a moment. Then she would return to her grass. She had seen it all before. Then a trout would rise at the head of a pool and I would toss a fly toward the receding circles. A tiny splash and we would feel the tug of a mountain fish. When it jumped before us Kelly would snort in mock terror and dance away. I would have to urge her forward into the pool to where I could take the fish by the gills. Enough fish for breakfast would take about two hours; by then the sun would be on the meadow, the dew glistening in the grass. We would sit a moment, letting it warm us, watch a cow elk cross the meadow or listen to a rock tumble from some distant ridge. Back in camp I would pull the saddle from her, put the bell back around her neck and then watch her trot off toward the other horses, the clanging of her bell forming a tiny dimple in the silence.



With good advice from the horses and the dog, I built a guiding business out of two cabins and a wild valley. The carcasses of sheep and elk, sometimes a bear, paid the bills for gas and vegetables and oats, the rest was for the taking. We dined on trout, eating out meant taking your plate down by the river at sunset; the ravens and the river in lieu of Pavarotti. We needed little more than what we had. They were good times; parties with happy dudes that over the years went from clients to old friends, the kind that when they called, asked first after the dog and horses before bothering to inquire as to my own condition.

I don't really know how many miles we traveled together, I in front with the dog; Kelly and her pack just moseying along behind. She would come at her own pace, munching what grass she could find and I would have to look over my shoulder every mile or so and shout at her to keep her coming. At my voice she would jerk her head out of the grass and trot up the trail, pack bouncing, pretending she had never meant to get behind.

We each had our chores in camp. Whiskey was in charge of protecting the camp from the squirrels, Kelly ran the transportation department, I was chief cook and dishwasher. I was in charge overall, well, part of the time, but we argued rarely. Except in truth, late in the fall, when the grass was lean, the squirrels sleeping and I, just plain ornery from too much company of the two-legged kind. But one last trip over the pass, one day of frozen fingers pulling down the tents, one last trip to town and then the mountains were ours and ours alone. Twenty years hence those seemed the best of times, the horses lean and hungry in the snow, sticking close to home, the oats and hay. Then I would pull their shoes one at a time, the others horses watching, the shoes clanking together in a pile. Kelly was always last. As her last shoe would hit the pile, I would shout and slap her ass to start them on their way. It didn't take much, they knew that the fall was over and kicking high and snorting, Kelly in the lead; they would head down the trail, toward winter pasture. Whiskey and I would clean up, I the cabin and corrals, Whiskey the scattered bones that remained. A few old oranges for the jays and juncos, a bag of cans and junk in the truck, then we too would head for

winter ground, down to the main valley, out of the snow and cold and bitter early winter sun.

It was about 15 miles we had to go and the horses often beat us there, waiting impatient at the gate and old Pete Lum, my mentor, partner and predecessor would watch them charge across the field and give me hell for every saddle rub and hobble burn. Then we would sit over tea and I would recount the season, the rodeos and sunsets, the good trips and the bad. Pete was 80 then but could still whip me at chopping wood or poker; a spry, gaunt elf, half Indian, half Chinese, as tight upon the land as any elk or jack pine. He came into the country on a stern-wheeler in 1898. He watched the last of the gold rush and together, in his cabin, we watched the shuttle take off, the first of the space rush. None of it bothered him much. Sixty two years he spent on the ridges and at the old camp. I did not have to explain to him my friendship with a dog and horse.



Well, things change, and I decided that a single valley was too small for a hot shot guide like me and so I moved north, to the roadless land of northern British Columbia. Real horse country, but getting there involved four days of trucking, months of paper, lawyers and more money than I knew existed. I learned the hard way how the stroke of a pen can nail your ass to a financial post. But it was fun and a big new country for the horses, dog and I. We had company, 70 horses in all, and an avocation turned into a business. The end of the trip parties turned into major events with enough happy dudes that I couldn't remember all their names. A ranch and the sweat and mechanical frustrations of haying in the north, and then the days, five days before the season, with 70 head of

horses to shoe. But most of all it was the country, miles and miles of empty country with no one for neighbors but the eagles. We saw a bunch of it, in rain and sleet and summer sun, but what sticks from all those years is a memory of a rainy, sleety day, riding downstream on the Four Mile. Kelly was slow and hesitant, I was having to call here time after time to keep up. That is when I realized that she was getting old. A butterball for years, she was bony now, her withers high and lean; she needed oats each evening. She was perky in the morning but she would shake her head as I loaded her, not quite believing that we would demand even a light load of an old lady; and at the boulder strewn creek crossings she would look up the line at me and snort in disgust at what I put her through. I could have put her out to pasture I guess, but I needed her. Every morning she would come into camp for oats with Stormy and the others in a line behind her. She saved uncounted cold mornings in the saddle looking for horses. Besides, I think she was always, like me, happier in the mountains, no matter how cold and hard they were.



The next year she only came along for the ride. Stormy took her load and he would look at me and her, under 120 pounds and take both our names in vain. It didn't help. By October she was gaunt again and I would rub her nose while she munched her oats and sorrow over the unfairness of differing lifespans.

She died that winter. Dale found her lying down one cold morning at 40 below. He got her up and fed her some oats and for a moment she seemed just fine, then she stopped chewing the oats she loved so well, knelt down and died.

I went out into the fields that next spring to see her. Dale had slid her off the field and over a bank. The dry spring cold had sucked her carcass dry, not letting it rot and it seemed as I walked over to her hollow hide that she was simply lying down. I knelt beside her and rubbed the old hair on her forehead, like I had done so many times before. Then I sat down and looked up the valley at the river and distant mountains and for a time I dwelt of times gone by. And then I cried.

I am not sure that I was crying for her, or me, or for the mortality that awaits us all. But she had been a friend. A friend of a young man, a young man long past sentimentality one would think. But I learned that day that friendship transcends not just race, color and creed, but also species. You may call me fool, or simple if you wish, but she was a friend of mine.

Whiskey is gone now too, lost in the mountains, a wolf or cougar perhaps; all that remains of those days is Stormy, a big tough old pack horse now, and a few of the others. The business is gone, the parties, the whiskey and all of that, but there is a new dog, almost as good as the one before. And we are all getting on. I don't mind my part in the process most of the time. We live just 50 yards from grizzly country and each spring we pack up in the yard and then head up into the mountains. The first few miles there is still a spring in our trot and a song in the mottled shadows of pine and cloud. That much is as it always was, and sometimes still I turn to look back at the string and I find myself looking and hoping perhaps to see, back down the long, twisting trail of life, an ugly old buckskin mare, trotting up the trail, pretending that she never meant to get behind.