

February

Southern Snow Ride

While winter ice storms in the southern Piedmont are common, and may include those that disable much of the infrastructure for days at a time, snow is infrequent. When it does come, a sifting that covers the ground, seemingly momentarily, is typical. Usually the ground is too warm to accommodate it more than briefly. One must be quick to take many pictures in hopes that a good Christmas card might be generated – hopefully with one's horses frolicking in this winter novelty.

Big snows can occur here. The Blizzard of '93 brought more than a foot of snow to much of the Piedmont, more in the foothills, and over five feet at Mount Mitchell (elevation 6684 ft.) in the North Carolina Appalachians. While that historical storm event occurred in March, probability is that if we are to get a significant snow, one more than three inches and lasting long enough for a trail ride, it will come in February – mid-winter.

The stage is set when it has been cold enough, long enough for hoar frost to be common on bare soil most mornings. The causative forces are typically a very cold front sweeping down from the northwest and colliding with warm, moist air welling up from the Gulf east of the Eastern Continental Divide. If the collision occurs when the temperatures are in the low 30s, humans, horses and indeed all nature witness and become a part of a regionally uncommon winter scene.

The human reaction is notoriously known for a rush to buy milk and bread, have numerous fender-benders and ditchings, and close schools and other public events. Northerners laugh uproariously at us – unless they have to drive in the madness. Wild animals and birds explore the new white covering of their habitat. Cattle rarely seem to take any real notice of the change. The horses seem to relish frolicking with snow flying into the air and themselves slipping and sliding as they

feign rushing collisions with each other, and then settle down as the novelty wears off. Now they are ready for a snow ride.

The perfect opportunity is created when the snow starts falling in the early morning hours before daybreak. Soon after first light the ground is covered and the snow is still coming down in large flakes, thus accumulating at a good rate. The wind is calm and the thermometer reads 28⁰F. The weather radio prognosticators promise continuation of the event until early afternoon. Tonight will be cold again, but a warm front will move in tomorrow. To experience the best of this time, a morning ride is imperative.

By the time I am ready to feed, the horses have already gotten used to the snow decorations of the landscape. As they eat, I organize my tack and make ready for the ride.

When Gus finishes his breakfast, I bring him into the barn alleyway, brush him out, check his feet for ice balls, then saddle him. Even at more than 20 years old he has experienced only a few snows and fewer snow rides. But this Saddlebred has always had a lot of good sense and an uncommon willingness to rise to every reasonable request. While not as agile as he once was, he is still sure-footed and wants to please.

We walk from the barn into the softly falling snow. My cowboy hat has a plastic raincover. My well-oiled Driza-Bone riding coat, given me by my friends in South Australia, has every button working. My chaps cover the parts of my legs that my coat does not reach. With my collar turned up and taking care not to have my right foot slip out from under me, I mount up and settle into the saddle. After reaching back to pull as much of my coat over the cante as I can to minimize seat wetness, we are ready to go.

I squeeze Gus lightly and give a redundant soft command/request: “Let’s go.” Gus moves out with that characteristic Saddlebred arch in his neck and long stride, but

with a sure foot. We parallel the pasture fence with other horses following along until they get to the corner. Gus and I keep going down the driveway noting how the snow is accumulating on the trees and underbrush.

Crossing the gravel road, now well covered with snow, we enter the big woods where we can go for several hours without human interference. Soon no houses or roads are in sight. We are finally on our snow ride.

Having grown up in south-central Virginia and spending 11 years of my early adult life in central Pennsylvania, I already know some things about snow. One thing I know is the universal feeling that the first snow of the year is always an amazing phenomenon. I know that no level of physics can explain the sense of the delicate beauty in the intricacy of a single snow flake. There is no metric to measure what is felt as one sees the branches of pines bending under the weight of new snow. No one can explain how a small stream, called a branch in the South, can be a phenomenon of rocks, sand and moving water at one time, but when shrouded in snow becomes a shadowy, titillating mystery.

Gus and I move through the woods on trails and old logging roads taking care on slopes and when crossing any downed timber. The snow is deepening, but the flakes are getting noticeably smaller. I know the end of the fall will not be long from now. I look at trees and bushes now bedecked in an effervescent blanket that will soon disappear. Leopold calls to me from an age ago: “[I]n you mind you may hang up this picture,” for it will never be the same again.¹ This picture is mine and mine alone – a unique, if intangible, possession.

The snow continues although lighter still and the flakes smaller. I feel the bite of the cold on my face, but there is a glowing warmth in the center of me. I am within a “stone throw” of civilization, and yet I am in the wilderness. There is a quietness

¹ Leopold, A. 1949 (1989). The green pasture. pages 51-52 in *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There*. Oxford University Press. New York, NY.

concomitant with gently falling snow. There is a silence for which one must listen closely to hear. When you truly hear the silence, you now experience the sense of aloneness – solitude, the quintessential value of wilderness.

Gus and I are headed back now. We have seen, felt, heard and thought. We cross the tracks of a flock of turkeys moving about and scratching out morsels here and there. We see the tracks of three deer. I guess them to belong to an old doe, her yearling daughter, likely now an expectant mother herself, and the old doe's fawn of the past season. I have seen them before. Here and there squirrels have tested out the footing on the forest floor. Birds are stirring about, some are loners, some are in pairs and others in flocks. I feel a linkage to them all.

Gus moves on. By this time tomorrow, only remnants of the beautiful white blanket will be scattered about the forest, but the picture of big oaks bracing easily against their loads of snow while small pines and underbrush give sway will remain in my mind.

As the morning ride closes, I continue to wonder.
