

January

An Early Winter Ride

Early January in the Piedmont of the Carolinas is cold enough to invigorate the horses and warm enough to comfortably accommodate appropriately dressed riders when the weather is dry. Winter rain, particularly when mixed with sleet, changes everything. Trees and bushes drip cold droplets that seem inevitably destined for the rider's collar and to warm themselves inside clothes closest to shrugged shoulders or a humped back. Even a good poncho is not 100 percent efficient; ponchos and cowboy hats never quite fit together.

When the rider glances down at a soaked mane, possibly flected with ice, he or she knows the horse is the one with the most common sense. A good trail horse knows the shortest trail home or to the trailhead. Even the best are reluctant to take any diversions under these conditions. Except in emergencies, few riders are apt to ask a horse for anything else. The best that can be said of such rides is that they make good tales to be told in times and places of dry, warm comfort.

But then, in the "average year," there are many winter days from which the sunny South possibly gets its reputation. Clear, cold nights give way to frosty mornings with the late rising sun ascending quickly into a bluebird sky. Like a worker late for work it rushes to its task of traveling from horizon to horizon. In these days, its task must be completed in a short time as it now resides in the southernmost part of its realm.

If the night was truly cold and the winds were calm, by morning all things grassy are covered with a heavy frost as are roofs, decks and windshields. My wife looking at the scene through bedroom patio doors calls it a baby snow. The horses standing in this southern winter wonderland have cleaned up the previous night's hay fed on the ground in the pasture. They stare at my backdoor expecting me to emerge and head for the barn there to serve up morning rations.

As I exit the house and head for the barn, I hear a short nicker and see heads and tails up as powerful equine bodies stimulated and delighted by the low temperature and sunshine head for the barn and their individual stalls there to await their breakfast waiter. All will eat, but one will eat and work today. His gate to the pasture is closed as he eats. He seems not to notice the first steps in preparation for his first ride of the new year. When the other horses have finished their breakfast and begin to return to the pasture, he takes notice and stands at his pasture gate calmly accepting that today he will earn his keep.

Today, my seven year-old Danny and I will ride alone. He is brushed out and saddled. We head for the stock trailer I hooked to my truck before dark last night. He wears the halter part of his halter-bridle. The bit has been lying by the truck heater warming as the motor warmed and the windshield defrosted. Lunch is in horn bags already on the saddle. Water is in a bottle hanging from a dee-ring at the front of the skirt.

As we walk on to the trailer, the advice I often give others to always ride in pairs, and threesomes are even better, echoes in my mind. But I rationalize that I am getting old, and have long fantasized myself as the cowboy alone with his horse on a trail “far from the maddening crowd.” And besides, I am leaving at home information on where I will be and when I should return. Danny is a good, steady horse. I will indulge my fantasy once more.

It is 9 o'clock when we reach the trailhead. The sun is high, half-way to the meridian, but the air is still crisp and some of the frost is still left on the ground. I slip the warmed bit into Danny's mouth, tighten the cinch, and mount up. Danny stands calmly as every good trail horse should.

We head out with our long shadow silhouette gliding softly over the ground. Danny's breath fogs in the cold, morning air. I exhale deeply just to see my breath do the same. I am deep in the saddle; feeling the very center of him. We are one. We

are alone. We are in a beautiful and magical place in time and space. I pray a prayer of thankfulness for being alive in this moment, in this place, with this horse.

The southern Piedmont woods in winter are rarely draped in snow. Even when the neighboring mountains, only a few miles away, are white, more often than not the Piedmont is snowless. But these woods have their own allure in winter, particularly on sunny days. The forest stands quiet except for certain sounds of birds at work or play. On some dead tree restaurant the staccato of a woodpecker serving himself at a buffet of ants, grubs and beetles echoes through the forest. Here and there a squirrel chatters its pride at finding its store of hickory nuts or acorns, or possibly the delight in just being a squirrel on this beautiful morning. Sometimes the quietness is shattered by a tumultuous cacophony of angry crows as they mob an owl that thought it had found a restful roost and solitude for the day. Soon the endlessly taunted raptor takes flight with the mob in hot pursuit until it has moved well out of the crows' area of interest, then silence once more.

Unlike spring when the birdlife is more heard than seen, in the winter it is more seen than heard. We encounter winter flocks of sparrows, chickadees and juncos here and there, although mostly in openings. We surprise a flock of robins feeding on whatever robins find edible on the forest floor. When a cardinal is spotted, a mate is nearby. Seven species of woodpeckers winter in these woods. We see only two on this particular ride. We don't see him, but the loud cackling of a pileated woodpecker rings through the crisp air. Danny pays none of them any attention. This gives me the opportunity to be smarter and enjoy more than my horse.

When I look to the sky, I see a large hawk that is circling on an air current. When he turns just right and the sun glints on his rusty red tail feathers there can be no mistaking his identity. Some member of two species of vultures and five species of hawks or a bald eagle might be seen circling over these woods in winter. I often hear the high-pitched screams of a red-shouldered hawk or the guttural cries of a red-

tailed hawk as they attempt to provoke a squirrel into revealing itself, thus setting up a chance at dinner on the ground or a big tree limb.

Riding near a slow moving stream or wet weather pond, I sometimes startle and am startled by wood ducks. They love these places when they are surrounded by big oaks that have produced large quantities of acorns. To these birds, my horse does pay attention.

Danny and I have been going for almost three hours now, stopping here and there to look more closely at some abnormality in growth of a tree or shrub or one that has grown so magnificently, some notable change in soils or rocks, some signs of animal activity, or simply to take a rest after a significant uphill climb. We are approaching a nice ridge point where we can stop, loosen his girth, drop the bit, and he can rest while I eat dinner and possibly grab a quick snooze. With Danny tied between two trees that he can not reach to bite or paw, I open the southerner's canned delight of Vienna sausages and a package of saltine crackers. My water bottle offers moisture for the meal.

Danny settles into his break and as I leisurely take my dinner I stare downslope through and out across the tops of trees that were seedlings and saplings when I was born almost 70 years ago. I know that in this place many of them will outlast me by a very long time. I am glad for that. It teaches me humility. I know that nature does not measure time in human life spans, and that is okay.

Beyond the trees I see the quiet waters of a man-made lake now blue in the noonday sun. I was a young man in my twenties when this lake began to fill and bury forever all traces of the labors of early white settlers who came here more than 200 years ago and the thousands of years of Indian life that the white settlers displaced. I can only ponder how the idea of white supremacy so powerfully overwhelmed the idea of Indian-land mutuality.

A white-breasted nuthatch descends in upside down fashion the trunk of a tree near me. He is carefully searching for morsels of a nuthatch's meal. He takes note of me, but likely finding me rather boring, moves on with his more serious, and possibly more enjoyable, task. He thinks neither of time before now nor time after now. It is now that really matters to him. Does he possibly know the expression "Carpe Diem?"

"Well, Danny, are you ready to go?"

Back in the saddle, we take the leg of the loop that heads back to the trailhead.

The woods in the afternoon are even quieter than in the morning. Sounds of animals preparing for the coming night will pickup again as sundown becomes eminent. By then, Danny and I will be home making our own preparations for the night. The afternoon sun is warm even as it is broken up by the tree crowns. I loosened my coat at dinner and it remains open. Danny is moving easily beneath me with a ground covering gait for which the Tennessee Walking Horse is well known. The forest surrounds me and touches me. I touch it back and feel it deep within my heart and mind and me within it. Why?

Danny steadily carries me towards our waiting trailer.
