

February

Winter on Life's Trail

January 2014 was one of the coldest on record in the Piedmont and foothills of the Carolinas. Uncharacteristically low temperatures in the single digits and teens alternated with cold rains and then, acting in concert, the two forces provided snow and ice. There were dry days, some very cold, others seasonal, some with sun, some without its radiant comfort. February holds little promise for a major change in riding conditions.

Stubbornly clinging leaves of the beech are already prematurely bleached from their rich bronze color. The deep green of the understory holly punctuates the dull grays and browns of hardwoods and tall pines. Here and there at old home sites along the trail, red berries of nandina bravely try to bring some cheer to otherwise drab settings.

Rides with good friends, even on cold, wet trails, have the warmth of friendship. But even in the company of riding companions as well as when my horse and I are alone, my mind slips away to old friends dealing with the severe winter of their lives. One is a woman of my age and nationally legendary in flat shod Tennessee Walking Horse circles. A life spent training, breeding, raising and showing horses is culminating with a body bent and racked with pain. The cold, wet weather exacerbate her physical pain. The mental anguish of seeing what should be done, needs to be done, once was done effectively and efficiently, but now gets done as time, ability, and help will allow has to be devastating to such a woman that can no longer even ride.

In such a winter, the cold is colder, the winds more harsh, the clouds and rains drearier. Memories of foals romping in the warm spring sun bring fewer smiles than longings for what can never be again. Pictures of finished horses are no longer aspirations for a potential future, but only images from the past. Morning chores are followed by refuge in the house, followed by trips to one doctor or another, followed by evening chores, followed by the night and wondering alone. Such winters are not followed by springs of optimism.

For another friend, Ohio's snows, which he so much enjoyed in the past, are this year seen from his hospital bed. They will be his last. He has been an outdoorsman for every season; the best woodsman I have ever known. Our friendship goes back to 1963 when we started graduate school together in Penn State's School of Forest Resources.

His adventures have taken him and his backpack through southwestern deserts, the Montana Rockies, the Boundary Waters Canoe Area, and down rivers in Ohio, Pennsylvania, Maine and South Carolina. He taught me about show shoeing, cross country skiing and canoeing. I taught him about bird dogs and horses. We have been a part of each other in true friendship for more than half of a century. God willing, when I follow him to where we are both windwalkers, we will ride on the winds together with those easy smiles

that acknowledge the pleasure of each other's company.

My winter riding is averaging about a ride each week on my two younger horses. One Saturday in January, my semi-retired 29-year old TWH, Gus, about walked two young quarter horses into the ground. Of course, he paid the price in soreness the next few days. He greatly surprised me and my friends. To this point, he has been the best trail horse I have ever owned, although not the horse-love of my life. That was my quarter horse, Snoopy.

On one of his good days, my 30-year old TWH, Blue, is probably still good for about a two-hour ride. His arthritis comes and goes. He now walks instead of runs to the barn for breakfast and supper. He still loves to eat even though one incisor is gone.

Maybe someday I will try to write down all of the memories these old partners have given me.

A few years ago I started to joke that you were getting old when you were buying horses that likely would outlive you. I have two such horses. I purchased my now 10-year old TWH Danny when he was five and barely green broke. I was guided to him by my horsewoman friend who I described earlier. He was out of one of her bloodlines on his dam's side. He was black and beautiful; 15.1 hands, and well proportioned. Most importantly, given the paucity of his training at that age, he was quiet and had a soft eye. Today, he is the quietest trail horse I have ever owned. A friend recently commented how, when asked to move, "Danny just drops that head and steps out." He is such a comfort when I just want to ride through the forest and think in the presence of a horse. Some of that thinking is about my friend who brought us together.

My 6-year old TWH, Rio, was a yearling when I bought him from the friend who had guided me to Danny. He had a different name at the time and was later renamed for the location of a couple of rides with special memories. My friend paid me one of the highest compliments of my life when she told me that she wanted me to have this horse. Now five years later when she occasionally mentions that she is glad that I have him, I am at once humbled and with a swelling heart that someone of such knowledge, experience and renown would say such a thing to me.

Rio was a big colt when I bought him, but I never expected him to reach 16.1. I get up on rocks, logs, banks and anything else I can find that will elevate legs no longer limber enough to reach the stirrup from flat ground. He is quiet and well mannered. He drops his head into the halter or to take the bit. He stands quietly to be saddled or mounted. When arriving home and I drive up to the fence, he typically stops whatever he is doing, walks to the fence to greet and be greeted and to sense my breath in his left nostril – not the right, the left.

These are the horses that will see me to my last ride. I owe my friend more than I can ever pay in any currency.

Claims that life is short, often unfair, and happens when you are making other plans are all obvious once you have experienced a lot of it.