

28SHORTGRASS.DOC

Big problem writing articles alone on a ranch is being unable to rehearse. The privacy allows for plenty of opportunity to talk to myself without some busybody neighbor reporting the peculiarity to the police.

Once the gray horse I earned working for this newspaper listened to previews of the first draft material. Blucher was his name. My editor then, Stanley Frank, named him from a medieval legend that's forgotten now.

Blucher wasn't the best horse I ever rode, but he trotted easy and fast. Butterflies or moths flushed from flowers didn't cause him to shy like a lot of lamebrain sapsuckers. His record crossing slick rocks and over chug holes drew a high score. Blucher never fell once, and he never left me on foot to walk to the house.

Now, don't be misled, this is not going to be a tired rerun of a sentimental coverup for all the dead and living hammerheads that tried to cripple or kill a lot of cowboys. The Big Boss and his cronies are the ones who loved horses from on the ground and the porch chairs under a shaded arbor.

Grooms and trainers congregated at the old ranch in seasons. Polo guys and race horse fanciers made themselves at home at the bunkhouse kitchen to late hours in the

night. Chukkers and laps started and finished across the oilcloth-covered table.

The host, the Boss, presided in the end cane-bottom chair, using the bottom of a green bottle of Cutty Sark Scotch whiskey for a gavel to emphasize the topics. They were always close to the same: "Stud, remember, all them 'May Do' colts ran holes in the winds." Or, "Stud, turned down sixteen hundred for ol' Caesar. Never been sorry one day since, even after he got crippled in San Antonio."

The horsemen are bound to have laughed at the sight we made climbing the trail to the rim of the Round Hill Trap to jingle ranch horses: Blucher's long stride in climbing gear; myself leaning forward, belly close to the saddlehorn for the short space over the washed part of the trail.

They couldn't have overheard with me so far forward, I talked in a soft voice close to Blucher's ears, saying, "That's my man. Keep all four moving, and under us. Son of a bitch! Those grasshoppers scare me every time they fly. Sound just like a snake."

Once we reached better ground, I'd dismount and reset my saddle. The story at hand might be a roundup over at Uncle Goat Whiskers' outfit. No matter how much I repeated myself, he stood quiet, not even fighting flies or shifting his weight.

Blucher and I allowed – and you have to, also – that the round hill wasn't a mountain peak. The important part to us, in darkness or daylight, is that we spotted the horses or the milk cow real easy from on top.

Also, down on the ground cinching the saddle, I'd hold his full attention by pointing way, way across the western horizon, saying or writing in my head, "Blucher, Granddad Monte and Uncle Tom once ranched all that country from the East Pasture clear to Barnhart. Someday, we are gonna ride from the outside east fence clear across until we can see the shipping pens at Barnhart like those two partners once did so many times."

Blucher was the only horse gentle enough to be caught on the whole ranch without a bucket of oats. Keep in mind, the ranch only bought oats for the polo horses. Winter or summer, six horses made a mount for one cowboy. Our horses lived on grass. If they got weak, six more grazed a pasture away.

I don't know whether the Big Boss knew I fed Blucher milk cow feed in the winter. All he'd had to have done was walk by early of a morning and overhear recitation of the story I was going to send Stanley on Saturday.

Blucher made a lot of noise chewing the cow feed, yet he stayed up with the story in spite of the challenge. We

were so absorbed, we'd never have known the Boss or anyone else was around.

Sentences came hard to form in the cold milk pen. I had to wait for the calf to finish sucking. Sometimes the foam settled on the milk before a composition was completed.

Blucher cracked every last piece of cake. Jose, forever impatient to start a feed run, brought a hot flour tortilla smoked on a wood stove lid to remind that we had other work to do than waiting on an aspiring writer to recite to a gray horse.

Late yesterday in present time, after everyone helping ship calves had left, I dipped a coffee can of sweet feed from a barrel for my dun horse. He spills lots of grain. Yet I told him that someday he and I were gonna ride from the east side of a ranch I no longer operate until we can see the site of the Barnhart shipping pens.