

5SHORTGRASS.DOC

Last year, a Wyoming herder empathized with the story on saddles becoming heavier as the whiskers gray and the eyesight weakens to the point the sense of hearing and taste diminishes from the loss of bone marrow and hair follicles. The gist of the contact listed the steps of taking off the flank cinch and toe fenders, buying lighter stirrups, and going to the extreme of adding thinner cut cinch straps.

The second part to clear is not to fool the reader into thinking the writer and the rider (me) is still tearing through the brush mounted on four, chousing some old sister off rim rocks in the peak of the insanity of being a cowboy. Frame instead the image of a graybeard decked in togs ancient as the craft, mounted on a dun Mexico bred gelding, scouting the horse trap in the fall to bring in 20 or 30 gentle first-calf mothers to spend the night close to the calving chute.

But to refocus on saddles, the only way left to lighten my rig is to drop 28-odd feet of nylon rope and the horn string holding the coils. Nature has helped by the rawhide covering cracking off the stirrups last fall and the rats gnawing the strings from the skirt in the winter.

So on this occasion, I went to the barn before a witness arrived to feel sorry for a graybeard unable to sling his saddle high enough to keep the offside stirrup from folding under the skirt. (If you can't understand this, stay away from horses and cowboys. Live in civilization; depend on Zane Gray and Elmer Kelton for western flavor.)

My dun horse knows to stand. I won him over years ago when he first came on the ranch. He had never tasted oats. Masa flour sprinkled on his feed oriented him to this side of the River. His name is "Shine-man," to commemorate my past - not his. We were compadres from the start; I can catch him in the pasture with a coffee can of feed.

I brushed his hair extra long to curry off the winter pocks and untie witch knots from his mane. Took extra time putting on the hair pad over a blanket. Braced, I slung the saddle. The right stirrup hung under the skirt, but straightened quickly once I reached the other side.

Across the fence, watching, stood my pal's sorrel horse Bugs of some 30 winters old. We are the same age translating horse years to man-years. The ranch has been pasturing and feeding Bugs since last fall. With winter coming on without a steady hand, she didn't need to be racing back to the ranch to feed her horse after nightfall.

Feel free to stop the story here. For a glimpse to decide: after I saddle, and as soon as the horse and mule specialist from Sonora arrives, Bugs is going to be led on Shine-man over to a playa lake for a terminal injection.

Don't expect the trip to be an end of trail scene. Once the edge of the lake is reached, I pitch the cotton lead rope to Doc, then tap Bugs on the rump with my reins passing by, and turn toward the house without looking back.

Two things left out go in the story. Before she called the doctor, I offered to take care of the problem the old way. Not from being a killer, but wanting to be a friend willing to soften her problem.

Down at the old ranch around enough horses to mount several regiments of cavalry, plus provide polo ponies for the officers' team, I officiated at numerous terminations, ranging from severe wire cuts to broken limbs to one mysterious drowning of an outlawed sapsucker in a dirt pond still filed under "top secret." In short, were all the time I spent holding a cotton rope lead snapped to a Johnson halter over a polo pony's ears refundable, listening to horse fanciers talk, I'd be casting my second vote for president this November.

Next, go back to the part of saddling Shine-man - find it? What was most on my mind was wishing the doctor

prescribed placebos for euthanasia, instead of a big syringe full of the drug to end Bugs' life. Also, fragments of anger roamed in my mind at the humane human parade for dictating whether horses stayed around to be stumbling wretches, half-blind, or were shipped at an earlier age.

The tin on the saddle house reflected dim shadows of lots of old skates leaving via the loading dock, instead of being sentenced to die here at the ranch. But Bugs' death is the first scientific one performed on the ranch. Painful or painless, he's gone – that's enough to say.

Alone at the barn this Sunday morning, I tried to remember a contribution crusaders had made to running a ranch easier. The thought wandered off to how much had passed by without being caught.