

Keno Springs Ranch and Wild Horse Roundup of 1952

In the fall of 1949, our family moved from the Crawford ranch near Hildebrand, Oregon, to Keno Springs, a small mountain ranch north of Bonanza, Oregon. The lease my folks negotiated with Charlie Crawford in 1946 had expired and we needed to move our horses, cattle, my two magpies, and all our other possessions to their new home. We rode, led, or drove the stock and loaded the magpies and their cage, together with many other items onto our rubber-tired hay wagon for the 25-mile move. In addition, after multiple trips in the “Candy Wagon”, a 1938 Chevrolet ¾ ton truck with a stock bed, we finally got settled. In addition to the Candy Wagon, we had the Cletrak, a small crawler tractor, and our 1947 Jeep, the family’s main transportation.

The ranch at Keno Springs consisted of some 3,900 acres of meadow and sagebrush in a basin of privately owned land within the Fremont National Forest (now called the Fremont/Winema National Forest). It was owned by Harold Mallory, the owner of the Big-Y, a supermarket near Klamath Falls. I don’t know the agreement my folks made with Mallory. We ran our cattle and his cattle, but I don’t know how the cattle increase or the crops harvested on the property were divided.

The Keno Springs ranch was even more isolated than the Crawford ranch. The nearest (as the crow flies – or the horse trots) year-around neighbor was the McCartie ranch about 10 miles away near Bonanza. At that time, driving to school in Bonanza involved some 10 miles of Forest Service dirt road followed by 5 miles of the graveled Bly Mountain Cutoff connecting Bonanza to the main southern Oregon highway, OR 170, running east from Klamath Falls to Lakeview. In the 1950’s, a time of lots of snow and water, Keno Springs Ranch was a beautiful place for cattle, horses, and cowboys – but not a good place for farmers because, at an altitude over 5,000 feet, it was very frosty.

Along the north edge of the property lay a string of springs that watered the meadows and provided grass for the cattle and horses. There was a very good spring near the barn which flowed into a small man-made reservoir in front of a dirt dike. My mother raised ducks and geese on the pond while migratory waterfowl made occasional rest stops on it. Some of the corrals around the barn ran down to the pond so we did not have to pump water for the horses or other stock kept in the corrals. The barn itself was large with a central hay mow, stalls for horses on one side, and a milking room with two stanchions for milk cows on one back corner.

Remembering the “milk room” reminds me that “milking” at Keno Springs was not the heartwarming and bucolic Norman Rockwell-esque picture typical of the *Farm Journal*. Instead of the gentle Jersey cow with her big and friendly eyes, our milk cows were Herefords off the range that had too much milk for their calves. They may have had a dairy cow somewhere in their ancestry but that didn’t alter their view of who should have access to their overly full udders. While oats and meal could entice their heads into a stanchion, it took more than that to convince them that human hands should relieve them of half their milk. We had the usual hobbles for milk cows, but they weren’t intended for half-wild range cows. To get our share of the milk it required a rope from an overhead beam to the near hind leg hoisted well off the floor. While, undoubtedly, uncomfortable for the cow it did provide some security for the milker, who still needed to dodge the cow’s efforts to jump and kick with her off hind leg.

The house was small with a one-story kitchen and enclosed porch built out on the south side of an older two-story building having a living room and two bedrooms downstairs and two more bedrooms upstairs. Now, in the 21st century, our life then would be judged very primitive. Except for our internal

combustion engines, battery radio (with a 5-pound battery), and kerosene refrigerator there was little difference between our life at Keno Springs in 1950 and ranch life in 1900 (or even 1850). We sometimes had small army surplus “light plants” which, when running, could support one or two 60-watt bulbs. My father would brag that he could turn off the light and be in bed before it got dark. Of course, “turning out the light” meant going outside and shutting off the gas on the generator, which continued running until its carburetor was empty. He wasn’t “so fast” when our light came from the more common kerosene lamps, Coleman lanterns, or the fancy Aladdin Lamp.

My mother cooked on a big Atlantic wood cookstove with a water reservoir beside the firebox and a “warming oven” extending above the cooking surface. There were no quick cups of coffee in that house. Winter mornings were very frosty until the fire was well-started and the stove began to warm. The only other source of heat in the uninsulated old house was an “airtight” stove built out of light sheet metal which would, on very cold nights, be glowing red from burning the pitchy pine knots that had turned out to be too big for the cookstove. The “airtight” stoves were very cheap and probably not efficient as they rapidly cooled down when the fire went out. The house burned down sometime after we left and, after the experience of living in New Hampshire, I expect it was due to a chimney fire resulting from the burning of resinous pine – but we certainly heated it up enough to minimize creosote accumulation in the chimney while we were there. It took a lot of wood to keep the cookstove going all year long and the heating stove going in the winters. We sawed and I split many big dead pine trees into small sticks for the cookstove while keeping a stockpile of un-splitable knots in a corner of the woodshed for the coming winter.

When we moved in there was no running water in the house and we had to haul water in 10-gallon milk cans from a boxed-in spring about 100 yards from the house. We heated water in the cookstove reservoir and on the stove for washing. In the first fall, 1949, we began to dig a trench from the spring to the house using the ranch’s big RD7 Caterpillar tractor with its bulldozer. That was a difficult job because it turned out that there was either a little dirt over big rocks or bottomless mud under a carpet of grass. I managed to get the tractor stuck in the mud the first day. It was a discouraging sight – that great big tractor with its nose down in water and its heavy bulldozer blade keeping it there. There was not another tractor that size anywhere near us and, if there had been, we wouldn’t have been able to afford the cost of getting it to where we needed it. It took over a day of very hard work to finally get it back on dry land. We started by chopping up 4” – 6” diameter trees into 2-foot pieces (no chainsaws then) and letting the tracks pull them under the tractor. After a dozen or more such trees were chopped down and chopped up without any observable success, we decided that there really was no “bottom” under the tractor that we could “fill up” with logs. Finally, we decided to leave the logs long enough to chain to both tracks so the whole 8 or 9 feet of the log could be pulled under the tractor. That eventually worked and the knowledge gained saved us a lot of time the next time the tractor got caught in a soft spot.

The “Day Book”

Someone gave my mother a “Min-Max” thermometer for Christmas in 1949. She decided to keep a record of the temperature and expanded this by adding a barometer reading and a brief (really brief) description of the day’s events. She kept her “daybook” from January 1, 1950, until her death in 1979. While the cryptic entries are difficult for a naïve reader, they are full of meaning and memories for those

of us who can decipher them. My brother and I would spend hours reading and remembering -- of course, they also help constrain our stories to a modicum of truth.

We know when the pipe from the spring to the house was finally laid in the trench and we had running water to the house. (from the Daybook, 1950)

Wed. April 5 34° to 50° 29.32F

Is now 40°. Cloudy and windy. Loren and Dave filled the pipe ditch. Art and I went to town. Mary and kiddies came home with us. Had a flat at Dairy. (Dairy is a very small town between Klamath Falls and Bonanza where we picked up our mail.)

Then, the following

Sat. April 8, 22° to 40° 29.25R

... Loren says he is the first man to take a bath at Keno Springs.

So, we had water to the house and later in the spring and summer of 1950 my father managed to install a large water tank within a tank-house insulated by foot-thick walls filled with sawdust. That was a big job and I'm not sure how it was managed. I was in school during the day so did not help significantly in the project. The pipe ditch zig-zagged up to the house as it dodged around rocks too large to dig out with the dozer. It was deep enough that the pipe could be covered with dirt but not deep enough to shield it from winter's frost. After filling the tank during the winter, we would use an air compressor to blow the water out of the line. My dad, who had done a lot of plumbing, ran water from the tank to coils in the firebox of the cookstove and back to a hot water tank on the porch. From there the hot water went to a shower in a corner of the porch (where the 10-gallon cans had been) and to the sink in the kitchen. As there was no bathroom, water to the kitchen sink and shower was all we needed. The running water was a great addition to the place. In the winter I could shower at school after PE classes but, in the summer, taking a "bath" while standing up at the kitchen sink after a day driving a tractor in a dusty field or hauling hay into a hot barn would have been awful.

I graduated from Bonanza High School in May of 1950 and then, in August, started a two-quarter course in Farm Mechanics at the new Oregon Technical Institute in Klamath Falls. There I learned a lot of very useful knowledge and skills -- automobile mechanics, automobile tune-up, arc and acetylene welding. At the end of the two quarters, in the late winter of 1951, I moved back to the ranch and worked with Dad and other ranchers in the area.

On Sundays in the spring of 1951, if there wasn't work to be done, I would saddle up to explore the country around the ranch. According to the "daybook" I soon found evidence of one, or more, herds of wild horses.

Sunday, March 25, 1951

26° to 56° 29.40 M

Partly cloudy, Pumped water. Dave located a band of wild horses. Clyde's left and Riley's came.

The horse I would usually ride, a chestnut gelding we called "Gibson" because we got him from Dad's friend, Art Gibson, was a great "mustang hunter". I would notice him nodding his head from side to side

Started out to chase wild horses again this morning but they got past Loren and Paul before they could get placed., Sunday, July 29, 1951

We scattered the bunch of wild horses but didn't get a one inside the fence. Loren couldn't get his rope down – Dave hooked on a snag and has a sore leg. Sunday, August 5, 1951

We went horse chasing this morning. Had fun but didn't capture any. Sunday, August 12, 1951

We got up at 5:00 to run horses but they cleared out before we got down there. Sunday, August 26, 1951

As is clear from this summary, we were not too successful as “mustangers”. The horses were wary and if one couldn't get a good run at them in the meadow behind the dam they would run into the surrounding brush and trees. In that case, it was difficult to get within roping distance let alone to have a chance of really catching one. I rode Gibson and he loved the chase. He was good in the brush as he was very responsive and quick to turn, dodge, or jump as required. He was better at that than I was at roping and occasionally got me within throwing range but never within “catching” range.

So, the various small herds of wild horses continued to thrive and run free on the surrounding national forest -- much of which was leased to the McCartie brothers, Charley and Jerry, where they grazed several bands of their sheep in the summers. Although we, in our riding around the country, did not notice any sign of over-grazing, the Forest Service may have considered the horses as being in competition with the sheep for the grass around us. The first indication we had of the government's interest in the wild horses occurred in October.

Friday, Oct. 26

18° to 54° 29.70R

Spike Armstrong was here this P.M. about corralling the wild horses.

F. H. “Spike” Armstrong” was the District Ranger at the Bly Ranger Station and in charge of that portion of the Fremont National Forest. I don't think any of us knew even the “F. H.” let alone what it might signify as he was just “Spike” to us. I had to rely on “Google” to confirm his position in the Forest Service hierarchy (and find the “F.H.”). He was a slender, wiry man with a small mustache. He had been in the area for a long time and had earned the respect of the ranchers.

As far as I know there was no other consideration of the horses until mid-winter when the Forest Service took the initiative. Evidently, they had been discussing the question of the wild horses with the McCartie brothers and Dad and I happened to meet with both parties when we moved some cattle off the ranch.

Monday, January 28, 1952

18° to 42° 29.62F

Men took the cattle to McCarties' where Mallory met them with trucks. Left here at 8:00 and got back at 7:35. Didn't have trouble, but visited with Spike and Herb, too.

We were so late getting home because the McCarties invited us to stay for supper. We put our horses in their barn, loosened the cinches, and left them to eat their “dinner”. Clearly, the brief note shows that

gate all the way to the spring where the horses were stranded. As the snow depth continued to increase that trail formed a chute about four feet wide with walls of snow more than three feet high and extending some five miles in length. That was a situation every wild horse hunter could appreciate.

When we reached the horses, we found them in really bad shape. In searching for something to eat they had pawed the snow around the spring in search of any bush or root they could eat. There were chewed roots and sticks as big around as my thumb, much too big to swallow, scattered all around. The horses were so weak that when they tried to escape us by running into the surrounding snow we easily caught up to them on our snowshoes. It was easy for Spike, Herb, and me to head them into the “chute” and with the tractor following them they had no alternative but to head toward the ranch.

Near home the road looped around a small hill and I cut over it to get into the “chute” ahead of the horses. I opened the gate and our wild horse “catch” went right inside the fence. We saddled our horses and moved the mustangs into a corral where they could be fed and await the move down to the valley and their destiny. The poor things were so small, thin, and weak that feeding them through the winter to break to ride in the spring was not a viable option.

The horses stayed at Keno Springs until February 9 when they and others were driven down to the McCartie Ranch for later transport to Klamath Falls. I wasn't in on that for, as it turned out, I had only two more days of wild horse hunting that winter.

My Last Mustanging

I'm not sure of the arrangement my folks made with Spike and the Forest Service for their help with the wild horse roundup from the National Forest. It may have been a daily wage, a share in the horses, a combination of these, or something else. Nevertheless, the roundup continued and the next day's events, February 5, are described in unusual detail in the daybook.

10° to 42°

29.67F

Fair, Spike & Herb snowshoed from RP (Round Prairie) to McCartie's after herding horses around for hours. Loren & Dave rode down and Leonard Schooler and I rode out from their place. We put in the corral Mrs. Vinson's white mare with a new colt and an old sorrel mare with two colts. Spike & Herb stayed at McC. Tonight.

To add a little detail: Spike and Herb with their dogs were counting on the deep snow to permit them to drive the horses out of the high country and down to the valley that led to the McCartie corrals. The snow in that area was not much more than a foot deep and so the snowshoes did not give them much advantage over the horses. But, with their dogs, Spike and Herb could get them moving approximately in the right direction. Dad and I were waiting on the far side of the valley, at least a quarter mile from the rim rocks on the opposite side, where we could watch for some sign of horses being driven into the valley. Finally, we saw the horses coming and tried to run down, across, and up the opposite side of the valley to head them toward the south and McCartie's. Gibson made a great run but, unfortunately, we were too late to head the bunch and they scattered all around me and most headed north at a long trot. Gibson and I were above them and tried to head them but he was tired from the run across the valley and I soon gave up. Dad, Mom, and Leonard Schooler (a son-in-law of Jerry McCartie) must have caught the two mares and three colts Mom mentions.

For the next day's run I needed a fresh horse so I saddled Mac, a big ugly horse I had started breaking the preceding fall for the McCarties. He hadn't been ridden much but I figured horse running would give him some experience and not require much in the way of a "bridle horse". That, however, was not quite accurate. The daybook for February 6 reads:

6° to 40°

29.60F

Fair. Mac fell with Dave today and broke a bone in Dave's leg. We were almost down to the car which seems to me more than luck and the break, Dr. says, isn't the bad kind involving the weight bearing bone. We only got in two of the five horses he had brought down from the rim. ...

It WAS lucky, I had been miles away and all by myself hunting for the horses I'd lost the day before. I found a bunch and headed them down through the sage brush and pine trees and across the snow-covered rocks toward the corral. The wild ones were not easy to drive but once I got to the trail in the valley they followed it almost to the corrals. I met Mom and Leonard somewhere along about that time. We made it through the first gate and onto the feedground where the McCarties fed their sheep. There the horses decided they could leave the trail and get away so I kicked Mac into a gallop to head them. The snow on the feedground had been packed down by the sheep and, in places, turned to ice so, when Mac decided to start bucking, bad things happened quickly. He slipped and fell much faster than I could get away and he came down on my ankle. He got up and ran away, Mom took off to catch him, and I tried to stand up. When I put weight on the ankle I almost fainted and had to sit back down.

There is an old cowboy saying that goes something like this: "There are three things that you will not mistake when they first happen to you, they are, "when you hear a panther scream", "when you hear a rattlesnake rattle", and "when you have your first broken bone". It goes on to say, "You may think it has happened many times – but, when it really does happen you will know". I can speak for the truth of the last two. There is another cowboy maxim. If your foot is hurt, get your boot off before it needs to be cut off because of too much swelling. You don't want to ruin a good boot as well as being laid up. I took my boot off and waited. Mom caught Mac and brought him back to me and, after seeing the situation, went to the ranch house and came back with a car – that was the lucky part as I had been miles from a road most of the day. They put me in the backseat and we headed for the hospital in Klamath Falls some 25 miles away.

One of my strongest memories from the hospital visit was the doctor's frustration in giving me a pain shot. When we entered the hospital, I was still dressed, except for my chaps, as I had been when I had left on Mac in the early morning. That meant that there was a foul weather jacket, a buckskin vest, a wool army surplus shirt, and a wool sweater to get off before there was a bare arm available. I remember his comment was something like "Are you in there somewhere?". The next day I went to stay with my Uncle Joe on his farm in Midland just south of Klamath Falls. I stayed there because there was not much I could do with a cast from my toes to my groin.

The Hunt Goes On

The wild horse roundup continued through the cold and wintry month of February. Mom and Dad and Spike and Herb, were joined by George and Miller Anderson. The two Anderson brothers lived on the Indian Reservation near Beatty. They had a large horse herd and provided bucking stock for some of the

finished lunch when George and Miller came to take the 6 down. They'd rope one, tie it down, rope another and tie the first one to its tail. So they had 3 "teams". I know Loren is going to stay some place tonight so I can go to sleep okay.

This provides a glimpse into their lives at that time. My brother Art was staying "in the valley" while going to school and the folks were keeping the stock fed and still finding time to chase wild horses. It wasn't always a "stress-free" situation because of the inherent dangers of a cowboy life. In this case, I suspect she was too worried to reset her thermometer and there was no "max and min" temperature for the daybook. As it turned out her worries were not unjustified.

February 23,

Partly cloudy *29.50R*

Loren got here at 12:20 with a bad knee & ankle. Mac had stampeded with him, too. Bucked for a long way and finally fell down. George chased him from the Sawmill flat to Bechdolt flat, roped and threw him twice but finally his rope broke and the horse is loose with Pop's riggin'. He rode double with Miller to Ernie Vinson's, ate supper and Ernie took them to McCartie's. Loren stayed there last night and came up on Juniper this morning.

Mom doesn't say when they caught Mac and brought Dad's saddle home, but I suspect it was the next day. Anyhow, they were soon back after more horses.

February 29,

4° to 36° *29.04R*

Partly cloudy. ... Loren & his men caught two but the old mare with the rope around her neck was too weak to move.

March 3,

0° to 32° *29.26R*

Snow and wind. ... Loren went to town too. He and Dave went on to Bly to see Spike. Caught 71 horses, Walkers got enough to make nearly 90 out of here. ...

So, that ended the "wild horse roundup" of the winter of 1952 with around 90 horses caught. Some were kept for riding – my folks kept two of them – some went into the Anderson and Walker bucking stock, and the rest went ... elsewhere. The gather involved a lot of cold horseback miles over snowy and rocky hills, a lot of bumps and bruises and at least one broken bone, and a lot of snowshoe miles by Spike and Herb with their dogs.