

Moonlight Ride:

It's cold tonight in New Hampshire and after dark when I went out to feed the horses. We are far enough in the country that there was no competition for the full moon and the stars above reflecting off the foot of snow covering the ground. It never fails, on cold nights like this with moon and stars overhead and snow underfoot, that I remember a night in January of 1952. We were living at Keno Springs, a mountain ranch in Eastern Oregon. The ranch was in a basin at nearly 5,000 feet in elevation. At that elevation and at that time there was a lot of snow and it could get very cold. The US Forest Service had asked us to help gather wild horses from the surrounding Fremont National Forest and my father and I had ridden some 10 miles down to the McCartie Ranch near Bonanza to arrange for the use of their corrals to gather the wild ones for later shipping to Klamath Falls. We arrived late in the afternoon and, as was the practice in the west at that time, were invited to stay for dinner. We loosened our cinches, left the horses in the barn eating hay, and sat down to dinner with Jerry McCartie and his wife.

After dinner, and now well after dark, we started the 10 mile ride home. The temperature was below freezing but we were dressed for it. My dad had his long underwear on but I, being a "young guy" did not hold with "longies". Instead I was wearing two pairs of Levis under my chaps. Above I had, starting from the inside, a tee-shirt, a wool sweater, an Army surplus wool shirt, a wool-lined buckskin vest my mother made for me, and my Navy surplus foul weather jacket. In addition, we both had "Andy Bodnars", our family's name for a silk neckerchief tied around the throat to keep "drafts out". Of course, on a cold ride the ears are in a very exposed situation. Now I see cowboys wearing caps with some type of ear flaps but, in our time, such caps were not acceptable cowboy wear – besides, they don't keep the rain or snow from running down the back of your neck. Rather, we both had the original "stocking caps" -- that is, the tops of my mother's silk stockings cut off and knotted. Being silk they were thin enough to comfortably fit under our hats while keeping our ears tightly covered and very warm.

So, Dad and I headed home at a long, "wild horse" trot* – a gait our horses could keep up for much farther than we had to go. We were miles from an electric light yet it was bright and clear -- and very cold. The light from the nearly full moon, the Milky Way, and the billions of other stars reflected off the snowy landscape and its snow-covered trees. It is nights like that, where ever they occur, that evoke in my memory an unforgettable scene.

Two big strong horses at a long trot across the snow at a loose rein – their ears are ahead and their breath is steaming out of their nostrils and freezing on their muzzles and their chests and shoulders. The riders are leaning ahead standing in their stirrups while hunched up by the cold. Occasionally, a hand or two goes to rest on the pommel of a saddle. More often a cold hand with freezing fingers goes inside a jacket seeking a warm spot under an arm. The feet are getting colder and colder and there is no similar warm place to put the toes. Under the stars the miles go by quickly and finally they reach the gate into the ranch. Someone gets off very carefully to open it – with feet that cold they feel like they could shatter if carelessly dropped on the frozen ground. Through the gate and both mounted again they trot on to the barn, unsaddle the horses whose chests and shoulders are covered with ice, rub them down, feed each a can of oats and put hay in their mangers. Those horses will stay in the barn the rest of that night. The riders then struggle with frozen fingers to unsnap and unbuckle their chaps and hang them on the barn wall. They then walk on cold feet to the house which is lighted by a gas lantern and an Aladdin lamp and heated by an "airtight" stove

glowing red from the pitchy pine knots that were too big to go into cookstove. The coats, gloves, and boots come off and soon hands and feet are warm and it's time to head to the cold unheated bedrooms.

At such a time it would not be unusual for my dad to decide "we need a sleeping potion" and some milk would be warmed on the stove and cups of hot chocolate would appear – and be enjoyed.

That is a summary of my memories that are brought back by a cold night with snow underfoot and stars overhead. I hope to never forget it.

*When you want to travel horseback you don't go at a gallop. Wild horses will run when they need to escape from something close but if they want to travel they go at a long trot and can keep that up for hours -- and miles. That is the gait we favored when we needed to "get somewhere else". Traveling at a hard trot can be hard on the knees and, most likely, is one of the reasons western horsemen often have bad knees. That mode of travel is not universally appreciated. I remember heading home after a long day moving cattle when Sharon and Sydne, my brother's wife, decided to "ride like real cowboys" and headed off at a gallop to lead us home.