

## **Wild Horses and the Five Mile Chute by *David Meeker***

My mother kept a “daybook/diary” from January 1950 until her death in 1979. In December of 1949, perhaps for Christmas, she obtained a “Min/Max” recording thermometer, it was not electric (we were at least 15 miles from a power pole) and had to be reset with a magnet each day. Since she was to keep track of the temperature she decided to add the daily barometer reading and a short note of the day’s events. Though very sparse her comments are great source of memories for my brother, Art, and me and they help to keep our stories of those times somewhat close to reality.

In the fall of 1949 we had moved our horses and a small herd of cattle to



Keno Springs Ranch looking north toward Yainax Butte.

the Keno Springs Ranch, a small mountain ranch that the folks leased on shares from Harold Mallory, who owned the “Big Y” supermarket outside Klamath Falls, after the similar lease on the Crawford ranch expired. The ranch consisted of some 3,900 acres of meadow, farmland, and sagebrush lying in a mountain basin at about 5,000 feet in elevation. It was named for the many springs on its northern side

which ran down into the meadows and provided lots of water and grass for the cattle and horses in the years we lived there.

The ranch was surrounded by the Fremont National Forest which leased the land adjacent to the ranch to Charlie and Jerry McCartie of Bonanza for sheep range.

Mom’s daybook entry for February 4, 1952, reads:

*16 to 40                      29.8 R*

*Fair. Spike & Herb came up in the Station Wagon. After lunch they & Dave on snowshoes and Loren on the tractor brought out 5 head of half dead horses from Seven Springs Reservoir.*

As usual, this short note represents a much longer story.

Spike and Herb were F. H. Armstrong and Herbert L. Hadley. Spike (we never knew the “F. H.”, which I just found on the web) was District Ranger at the Bly Ranger Station and Herb worked for him. They had taken a flight over the area looking for wild horses on January 29. I’m not sure what instigated the flight but it could have been complaints of the McCarties that the horses were competing too much with the sheep for grass. I doubt that, however, as there weren’t that many horses and there was a lot of land and we had never heard the McCarties complain of them. It could, also, have been humanitarian (but see below), that winter there was a lot of snow – some 3 feet on the level at Keno Springs – and horses on their own at higher elevations would be having a hard time. However, more likely, Spike and Herb wanted an adventure and the horses provided the excuse.

A group of horses was found isolated around a spring near Seven Springs Reservoir about five miles from the ranch. They had come to ask us if we would help them move the horses to Keno Springs where they could be gathered and later trucked to Klamath Falls for sale. In the 1950s wild horses had yet to assume the romantic “wild west” identity they now have and, if they did not seem “good enough” for saddle stock or “bad enough” for rodeo bucking stock, were sold to slaughter houses to become, most likely, cat and dog food. So, it wouldn’t be truthful to call our trip that afternoon a “humanitarian rescue”.

After lunch we started on our wild horse hunt. It was decided that Spike, Herb, and I would go on snowshoes and Dad would break trail with our Cletrak, a small crawler tractor (a “baby Caterpillar”) that would not be stopped by the depth of snow we faced.



1: Dave on the Cletrak and Loren on the grader.

As soon as we got outside our gate and Dad started on the unbroken snow covering the road a need for a change in plan became obvious.

Going forward the tractor assumed a slant which was very scary if you were on the seat at the low point and the front of the tractor was heading toward the

sky. Consequently, Dad turned around and backed up all five miles to the horses. That put him on the high point of the tractor which, because of the

weight distribution, was much less scary. The result was great for our purposes – we had a trail from our 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 at least three feet high and 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 and 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 they had no alternative but to head toward the ranch.

Near home the road looped around a small hill and I was able to go 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 fed them some hay and later saddled our saddle horses and moved them into a corral to await transportation to their destiny in Klamath Falls. 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.

I don't remember when the horses left Keno Springs – as it turned out I only had two more days of wild horse hunting but that is another story.