

Growing Up With Major

Baby Doll and the Ponies

Sometime around 1950, we moved from DeSoto Manor in Bynum to our new house out in a cornfield next to the Bynum Elementary School. At the time, we were one of the first people to move out that far so we had plenty of elbow room.

My dad had a love for horses that went back to his childhood on a farm in the Arkansas Ozarks. My grandfather's memoirs describes how he would hunt razorback hogs on horseback because that was the only safe way to be around the hogs.



Shortly after we settled in, Dad bought Baby Doll, a small, red Tennessee Walker mare. In the winters, he would take in a pony for me from a pony riding amusement park in Birmingham. He built a stable behind the garage with a large room for Baby Doll and a smaller room for the ponies. It also had a hay loft and a chute to throw down blocks of hay. Since we had an acre and a half, we had plenty of room to fence in a lot for the horses.

Dad tried for several years to make Baby Doll work, but she was just mean. If you got within range, she always tried to bite. She was difficult to ride, and Dad would use a crop to try to keep her under control. Once, she threw him near Doc Stevens' house and broke his arm at the elbow. She was worse when we tried to put her into the horse trailer. It took at least three people to get her in: one leading her head and two crossing long ropes across her hind legs. She was not much better once she was in the trailer, once she reared up in the trailer, caught her front legs over the side and turned it over.

The ponies were also a pain; they had developed a lot of bad habits at the amusement park and it would have taken longer than one winter to train them. One pony even rolled over on me while I was trying to ride him.

Finally, after a couple of years, Dad got rid of Baby Doll and we stopped taking in ponies.

Major

All I know about Major's purchase is that Dad paid a couple of hundred dollars for him and that he came from a farm. The previous owner had tried to hook Major to a plow, but that was a disaster. Can you imagine trying to plow with a large high-spirited horse who loved to run?



Major had a totally different personality than Baby Doll; he was gentle to handle from the ground unless you jerked him or acted like you would hit him; then he went berserk. We learned quickly that Major required firm but steady handling. Once you got on Major, it was a different story; he wanted to go as fast as he could and his favorite speed was a dead run. We quickly got the longest curb bit we could find because that was the only way we could hold him back.

It took us several years to train Major to respond to neck reining, changing gaits, and other fine arts that any Tennessee Walker should know. Dad and I were the only people who could properly ride Major; and we each had our own style. Dad never let Major go into a cantor or a gallop or, heaven forbid, a run. He loved Major's running walk. A running walk is the same speed as a trot, but does not beat you to death like a trot. In the running walk, it feels like you are in rocking chair with its back and forth motion verses the bump, bump, bump of the trot. I loved to let Major canter and even let him go faster, but I learned quickly that the faster he went, the faster he wanted to go. The only way to keep him under control was to pull back on the reins as hard as I could against the long curb bit in his mouth. For a skinny kid, that was a pretty big job.

At the time, there were many places to ride around Bynum. We would ride around DeSoto Manor, down Shotgun, into Terrace Homes, up to the McKendree's and through Dewey's pastures. The only restriction was to minimize the time on pavement since it wore out the horse shoes and it was easy for the horse to slip on pavement. Dad took some long rides and explored the mountains on the other side of Coldwater Creek. I spend more time going around Bynum and showing off for the other kids.

Dogs

In the South, every home in the country had a couple of dogs as their low budget alarm system. When Major came by, the dogs would come out barking, growling and snapping at his feet, which Major hated. There were two options: one, keep riding until the dogs are out of their territory or two, turn Major around and escort the dogs back home. It was amazing to see how quickly a dog that was so brave chasing a horse running away from him turned into a chicken when a half ton horse came after him!

One of our neighbors had a little Chihuahua dog that loved to harass Major. He would come into Major's lot yapping and chasing Major around. One day the dog was chasing Major and the kids thought it was great to see an eight pound dog chase a huge horse. Finally, Major got tired of the game and gave the dog a smack with his back hoof, killing the dog instantly. The oldest son of the dog owner's family ran home to get his rifle; he was going to shoot Major for killing his dog. Dad put a stop to the incident by pointing out that Major never left his lot; the dog had come onto our property, therefore the dog was in the wrong.

After Major killed the Chihuahua, we would catch him letting a dog come into his lot, getting comfortable and then Major would come out with both front hooves flying as a message to the dog to never return.



We owned a small wire haired terrier named Corky. Corky was an outside dog; he was welcome around the house, but could not come inside. Often Corky would disappear for a couple of days and then show up with a bite marks all over his body and fall asleep for a few days. Several times, on a cold morning, I would open the stable door to find Major and Corky curled up together on the stable floor. Of course, Major would immediately jump up and Corky would disappear. Maybe Major did not want me to know that he actually liked some dogs.

Chores

Owning a horse means constant chores. Every morning Dad or I took care of the morning chores of feeding and watering Major. We fed him sweet feed that we got from Dewey Holmes; it was a mixture of cracked grains and molasses and had its own tangy sweet smell. Major loved it and always cleaned his trough. We threw down hay from the hay loft and filled the water bucket. In the winter, the water froze, so we had to break the ice and take the bucket into the house to fill.

Once a week, we cleaned out the stable and put in new hay. Since Major peed in the stable, the ammonia smell would almost knock you over. We took the mixture of urine, poop and straw out to the compost pile in the lot. Luckily, Major generally pooped in the corner of the lot that we made into a compost pile, so he made our jobs a little easier. We let the compost pile grow all winter; you could see steam rising from the pile on cold days as the bacteria did its job of turning everything into good old rich compost. In the spring we spread the compost on the garden area and plowed it under. After a few years, the soil became very rich and the red Alabama clay developed a darker loam color and texture. Now this would be called “organic farming”, back then it was just smart.

Major had to be curry combed and brushed almost daily, especially in the spring when his winter coat began to shed. He also loved to roll around in the muddiest spot he could find and the curry comb was the only way to get the mud off.

Dad insisted that Major had to be exercised daily. If the weather was good, we took turns riding him around the neighborhood. When it was too cold to ride, we got him to run around the lot. Major loved the cold and got very energetic on brisk days. I stood in the center of the lot and coaxed him on. One time, he came at me rearing up and pawing the air with his front hooves. You can imagine how big a horse looks to a kid when he rears up; he must have been ten feet tall. I stood my ground and raised my fist and Major backed down. Dad had taught me to never show fear; if I had run, Major could have hurt me.

Horse Shows

I won a blue, first place, ribbon the first time I entered Major in a horse show. The horse show was a local affair off of Highway 9 near Heflin. I entered him in the Western Pleasure Class and he sparkled that day. Dad and I entered him in other horse shows and won ribbons, but I never won another blue ribbon.

Before a horse show, we gave Major a bath with the hose, without a nozzle because the sound scared him. We brushed him until he shined and sometimes even braided ribbons into his mane. Major seemed to know when he was on stage and loved to perform. In front of a crowd, he held his head higher, put his ears forward, pranced a little and just showed off.

Some of the pleasure horse classes required a horse to trot and I could never get him to trot while I was riding him. When he was exercising in the lot, he always trotted, but he was so well trained as a gaited horse that he always went into the running walk with someone aboard.

Several times, I borrowed an English saddle and entered Major into gaited horse classes and won a few lower level ribbons. In the top end of the Tennessee Walker classes, they broke and reset the horse's tail to make it stand up and put heavy weights and shoes on their feet to make them pick up their front feet in the running walk. My dad thought that was inhumane and would have nothing to do with those horse show classes.

Proper Riding Form

Dad insisted on the proper form when riding, especially in horse shows and public appearances.



The proper form meant sitting straight in the saddle, feet in the stirrups up to the balls of the feet, reins held in the left hand with the forearm parallel to the ground and the right hand down to the side. It was never permissible to hold onto the saddle horn, but it was ok to use both hands on the reins if necessary to hold major back.

We taught Major to neck rein which means that all you had to do to turn him was to touch the rein on his neck on the opposite side. If you wanted him to go right, you just touched the reins on the left side and the amount of pressure told him how much to turn. Over time, he got so used to neck reining, that controlling him became second nature, like steering a car at high speed; you think about turning and your hands gently follow along.

In the picture above, we were working on Major's standing posture when stopped in a horse show. Here he was not quite right; his rear leg is cocked and his ears are back. Over time we trained him to stand properly.

Other Riders

When you own a horse, everyone wants to ride him. With Major, that was not a simple request. My dad and I knew how to ride him; more importantly, Major knew us. When another adult tried to ride him, Major went into a mode of "what can I get away with now?" The first clue was if the new rider did not mount him in one smooth motion. If you did not get on first time or needed help, then Major started to dance around and became impossible to control. It was worse once the person got on him, since Major loved to go and only a strong hand on the reins could control him. One interesting note: when we put a little kid on Major, he became the most docile, plodding horse ride you have ever seen. He seemed to know that there was a precious kid aboard and he did his best to behave.

Horse Trailers



This is the fifth and final version of horse trailers that Dad built. He was constantly looking for the right design and honed his skills with each version.

Examples of details that went into building a horse trailer Dad's way.

- We bought the axles in Birmingham. They had special springs that kept the trailer level.
- Dad had the fenders and rounded corners in the front specially made at a machine shop in Anniston. Previous editions had wooden fenders.
- The frame was made out of steel "angle iron" welded together and painted with black rust prevention paint before any wood was added
- The floor and the tailgate were made out of one inch un-planed rough oak that Dad bought directly from a saw mill. The wood trim inside of the trailer was made out of the same oak, but we planed it by hand and varnished it.
- There were no nails in the trailer. Everything was fastened with $\frac{1}{4}$ inch carriage bolts, evenly spaced of course. It was my job to drill the holes though the steel and the wood for the carriage bolts. I used a powerful $\frac{1}{2}$ drill that would almost jerk me off the ground when the bit broke through the steel. Each bolt had a flat washer, lock washer and then the nut which was properly tightened; we never had a nut come off.
- The bows on top for the canvas were made out of water pipe. Dad rigged up a jig using an old bicycle wheel and bent each pipe by hand. He drew out the master pattern on the garage floor to make sure each piece was perfect
- The finished trailer was so well balanced that as a kid I could lift the tongue and hook it onto the car.

The Saddle Club had a fall campout in the woods next to a stream at Heflin Mountain. I spent the night with other members of the Drill Team trying to find the Whoop-por-wils who gave

their spooky calls all around us for the entire night, Of course we did not find them, but the night was beautifully clear and cool and we had fun.

Dad had prepared the horse trailer for mom and him for the night. First he put down a layer of hay, then quilts and blankets to make a comfortable bed. He tied Major to the back of the trailer for the night. He did not get any sleep that night because Major munched on the hay under his quilts all night. For some reason, it never occurred to Dad that the logical solution was to get up and move the horse.

Round Up

Major was probably the worst cowboy horse ever. We tried entering him in the barrel races at rodeos and horse shows. He was fast enough and loved to run around the ring. When it came time to make a turn around the barrel, he was just too tall and could not turn as fast as the short Quarter Horses.

We also make a few cattle roundups with Dewey. One time, we drove cattle out of the restricted area on the Depot. The restricted area contained acres and acres of igloos when ammunition was stored. (See picture below).



We spent a lot of time riding up and down on the igloos looking for cows in the area and driving them toward the gate.

As we began to drive the cattle out of the area, there were a few strays that left the herd, and it was our job to send them back into the herd. Major was a disaster; he was too tall to turn fast enough to turn the cows, and he got so excited about being asked to run that he became impossible to slow down.

The cows, and some of Dewey's horses, had been eating only grass all summer and began to sweat and slobber in the Alabama heat. A horse that has been on all grass diet sweats twice as much, and the sweat turns into a white lather. Major had been on a mostly grain and hay diet, so he just sweated normally.

The Drill Team



We were active in the Calhoun County Saddle Club. The club had a plot of land near Jacksonville with a cabin, ring and plenty of places to ride on the dirt roads around the club. The club had a drill team of teenage riders and both Ronnie McKendree and I were on the drill team. In the picture, Major is the first horse and the third horse, the white one, Star, is Ronnie's.

The drill team performed at horse shows and other events around the area. Major was the lead horse. We did a series of routines and ended with all of the horses galloping by Major, who was posted at the head end of the ring. The original plan was for Major to stand at attention while the horses passed in review, but that never happened. Major wanted to run with the other horses, got excited and started rearing up like the Lone Ranger's Silver. He would paw at the air with his front hooves and he looked so regal that we left his rearing up in the show. I never taught him to rear up, he did that on his own. My job was to just hold on and enjoy the ride.

Bareback Riding

I loved to ride Major bareback; it was like sitting astride a small locomotive; I could feel his power. Since he was tall and I was a kid, I had to learn to grab his mane and swing up in one smooth motion (you only got one try to get on him before he started to dance around). Once up, I held on with my legs. The sweat patterns on my jeans told the story of how I held on bareback; the insides of my legs were soaked and my butt was nice and dry. The sweat had a special horsey smell that I grew to love. Of course, Mom was not too happy since my jeans needed washing each time I rode bareback.

I could not ride too far bareback without getting blisters on my thighs. With a saddle, I would use my legs in the stirrups to give me a little cushion from the horse movement; that cushion did not exist riding bareback. The bigger problem with riding bareback is that it is much easier to say hello to the ground if Major shied or turned quickly.

One time, I was racing a school bus through DeSoto Manor. As we came to the top of the hill at the little circle, I intended to go straight toward the post office and Major decided to take a right though the area between the homes. He went his way and I went mine. Nothing was hurt except my pride. Can you imagine the embarrassment I felt walking past my neighbors asking if anyone had seen my horse? When I got home, Major was peacefully grazing in the front yard and saw no reason to feel guilty about going home without me.

Another time, I tried riding Major bareback with a just a halter (below)



Instead of the normal long curb bit that we used to control him (below)



It did not take Major long to discover that I did not have a way to hold him back, so he started going faster and faster just the way he loved to go. He ran all around Bynum from hill to hill. He would stop at the top of a hill to catch his breath and take off running again. He was in Major heaven. Finally, as he was running behind the elementary school and getting close to the house, I jumped off while he was at a dead run, dug my heels into the ground and hung onto the rope around his neck. Major just danced around me, never touched me and stopped. I walked him home, put him back in the stable before my dad found out. I never tried to ride him without the curb bit again.

The Saw

Dad still had Major after I returned from Vietnam, but Major was getting old and becoming lame. Dad was afraid that Major would get sick, lay down and would be impossible to move. Dad traded Major for a nice radial arm saw, and after that he never tried to find out what eventually happened to Major. I understand why Dad got rid of Major, but I did hate that saw. I still regret that I did not have a chance to say goodbye to Major or mourn his loss.

Horses do not really need us.

Major was an important part of my childhood. I would like to think that I could control him, but the truth is that no one could control him unless he let them. Horses are not like dogs; dogs consider us part of their pack and become attached to humans. I don't think horses need us; they are always ready to run free with their own herd if we let them. But on the other hand, they pick up our moods and understand us very well. They know if we are afraid of them, if we are anxious, if we are pleased with them. They love to make us proud of them in front of a crowd.

There was a bond between Major and me that I cannot define. When we rode together, we moved as a team; it was almost like he could read my mind. Maybe my wishes were translated into subtle hand and body movements that he understood, a language without words that we both spoke. It was poetry and elegance and we were both happy.

Sometimes people will ask me why I don't own a horse now. I never wanted to own horses again, and in looking back over the years, the reason must be "Why would I want to own another horse after growing up with Major?"

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