

# Growing up with Old Jeff

By Martha Alice Powell

When I was seven, I rode a big jug-headed roan named Old Jeff. I spent many an hour out in the gravel drive of my parent's house, clinging to Jeff's Mane and his big withers, climbing up his front leg to get on. He never moved a muscle as I struggled and puffed my way onto his back. My mother said I stayed out there so long that she actually stopped worrying about me.

A saddle presented another set of problems. The stirrups were too far away, too high, for me to simply insert my foot and glide gracefully up like Dale Evans. I had to grab the saddle horn with both hands and shinny up Jeff's leg until I could get my knee into the stirrup and propel the rest of my little body into the saddle bit by bit. Dad always stressed keeping a firm hand on the reins "so your horse won't get away from you." We all knew Jeff wasn't going anywhere.

Our mounted drill team was the pride of the county. Our saddle blankets were green corduroy with white tassels hanging off the edges and white leatherette four leaf clovers on the corners. We wore white shirts, white hats, tan pants and green neckerchiefs. We were about a hundred strong and the drill took a lot of training.

Walt Wyman, one of our leaders, had been in a mounted drill team in college and in the army. Nothing but military precision riding would do. We did quadrilles, wagon wheel turns, thread-the-needle maneuvers and more — all at a full gallop.

"AND NOW... THE THOMAS CREEK SADDLE-ITES!" is the way we were announced at parades and competitions. We were the smartest 4-H horsemanship club in the history of the world. Or so we told our friends from town who couldn't beg, borrow or steal a horse. Any kid in Goose Lake Valley who could get their hands on a horse was one of our number.

My Dad and several other ranchers organized this equine phenomenon. My sister was one of the self-important older kids. Pat Safir and I, being only seven years old were "associate" members. This status afforded all the advantages of membership and almost all of the glory.

In the winter we had monthly meetings at the grange hall. That was the time we spent keeping our 4-H record books. We logged the miles we rode, the amount of hay and grain our horses ate, and what it cost. Parts of a horse, bridle and saddle,

care of a horse and horse breeds were our curriculum. The 4-H pledge “I pledge my head for clearer thinking, my heart for greater loyalty, my health for better living and my hands for larger service for my club, my community and my country” was our mission. We were committed.

In the summer, our activities involved horsemanship skills. We rode in parades, went on overnight rides, and took part in “character-building” contests. We learned to saddle and bridle our horses, to use a halter and to tie a half hitch for tying our horses at a post or a line.

Our riding skills were tested in an event called the Gymkhana. In that event, we had to take a letter out of a mailbox, walk our horse over poles, and demonstrate walk, trot and canter. Our greatest fear was that a judge would instruct us to “dismount and mount”, thus all the practice in my parent’s drive. No one ever asked us to demonstrate that skill so I think it was just a ploy by the older kids to torture us. It worked.

We practiced our drill relentlessly to the swelling bars of *The Stars and Stripes Forever*. After months of training and practice we were finally ready to make the trip to Klamath Falls for a competition.

The Klamath Falls Rodeo opened with an elaborate grand entry that filled the arena with galloping horses, lots of glitz, and dust. When I realized I was expected to take part in this extravaganza too, I panicked. I asked my Dad “What am I supposed to do?”

“Just follow the horse in front of you.”

That was a less than satisfactory answer for me. But it turned out to be just that easy, and FUN!

In the grand Entry, we entered through the gate on the right side of the arena. We rode a figure eight pattern with the round-up Queen, the round-up President, and a lot of cowboys. Then we left the arena, leaving the dignitaries standing in the middle and two mounted riders “rode the colors”, the American flag and the Oregon flag, fast, around the whole arena, stopping in the middle to “post the colors”.

My mom and Pat Safir’s mom were in the grandstands looking on in panic as we sailed by. Mom said that the smile on my face was only surpassed by the smile on Ol’ Jeff’s face.

A rodeo equine drill isn't like a Dressage event that you'd see at a horse show. It's big and showy and fast with lots of flags and close interval figures ridden at a gallop. We would be doing our drill just after the grand entry. Or so we thought.

But, after all that practice, since Pat Safir and I were only associate members we had sit on our horses and hold the flags in the corners of the arena rather than participate in the drill. We were outraged.

To make matters worse, Old Jeff proceeded to dance around and whinny throughout the entire drill. When it was all over I asked Dad, "Why did he do that?"

"He wanted to be out there as much as you did."