

The Horseman's Guide to the Meaning of Life

Chapter 1. The Way I Remember It

Since I could walk, the longest time I've ever been without a horse of some kind was about three days. This occurred when I had to sell my horse in order to buy my first car. Not wasting any time, I went to the next auction, did some wheeling and dealing, and came home with a horse, which I traded a couple of days later for one that I really wanted. Even when I was serving my time in the U.S. Navy, I always had a good horse somewhere to ride.

When I was little, I don't remember anyone who didn't have a horse. A native Californian, raised in Burbank, California, the horse capital of the western United States, I thought everyone had horses. Burbank was the hub of the horse business; every lot was occupied by one house and a two- or three-stall barn or corral. Known as the river bottom, along Riverside Drive, it was the home to great horsemen. On one end of the mile-long row of stables was the Hitching Post Saloon, once owned by actor Hoot Gibson, a home away from home to actors and stuntmen. On the opposite end was the Amble Inn, owned by rodeo greats Jerry Ambler and Wag Blessing. This area was my playground, and virtually every great horseman of that era, whether Hollywood actor or professional, put in some time there.

Even today, amidst the sprawling metropolis of Los Angeles, Burbank has remained virtually intact. The Los Angeles Equestrian Center

occupies most of the old stable locations, including my father's and grandfather's. The Center has become a drawing card for the many Hollywood personalities who embrace the show world of horses, and Riverside Drive is still a place where you buy a house because of the stable in the back yard. I remember riding across the swinging bridge spanning the Los Angeles River into the vast trail system of Griffith Park when I was about five; it is still used daily for trail rides. Though not as frequented as it once was, the Pickwick Coffee Shop remains open, offering the echoes of trainers, shoers, movie extras, and rodeo greats. A few lease and boarding stables and tack shops remain next to the Center, along with condos that are equipped to take care of your horse too.

My father and grandfather were both horse trainers, and I had envisioned myself carrying on in their footsteps. Of course, my mother had other ambitions for my career, but I was also a little headstrong. She once told me, "Son, you'll either be president or a janitor ... I only hope it isn't the latter." I, of course, knew she was comparing horse training to a janitor type of existence, but I paid little heed to her words and persevered in my love of horses. With an angel on each shoulder, I seem to have moved through life and its plateaus with a new adventure at every turn. Even when faced with adversity, another door would miraculously spring open for me, even though at the time I thought my life was over.

Having grown up in the arena surrounded by shows and chaos, it took many years to start to appreciate a more relaxed life that wasn't governed by a time schedule. My twilight years have allowed me the

freedom to take the time to trace the steps of the Indians and study how they lived and traveled. I've discovered a great interest in the large ranches that use horses in their daily operation, which made this country what it is. Having grown up where movie sets were the norm, I'm learning the real stories behind covered wagons, chuck wagons, and roping your horse from the remuda—true-to-life cowboying up. What I always thought were ponds (no matter the size) have instead become troughs, tanks, or lakes (in Texas, that is). I've formed a new appreciation for forgotten sayings like "As long as the grass grows and the wind blows." As I look back, I've seen many changes take place in the horse industry throughout my career. I've survived over three-quarters of a century and played cowboy all my life. I don't feel like I've ever worked a day.

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