

Breaking Bobby's Horse on a Wedding Day

I had forgotten this story until I ran into Bobby at another wedding. There was a forty-five year gap between the two weddings. I do not believe I had seen Bobby for at least forty of those years. He and I had gotten old, well sixtyish, not real old. We were boys at the time of the first wedding. Off hand, I do not recall who got married at the earlier event. Probably a mutual relative. It does not really matter anyway, as far as this story goes.

In those days, weddings were an all-day-Saturday affair. Ceremony at 10 am, lunch and reception to follow with keg beer, dinner about five pm, then a three hour break until the dance started at 9 pm. We wore suits, boys and men. The three-hour break was so we could go home, feed and milk the cows. Everybody had milk cows back then. Well, not the town folks but I never gave a thought to what they did.

This was a German Catholic wedding and it was ok to drink beer at any age. It would not have been ok to get sick or to drink too much.

Bobby was (and still is) a couple of years older than me. His folk's farm was just south of my Uncle's farm. Folks worked together at harvest times so I was at my Uncle's a lot in those years. That is how I got to know Bobby and his family. I was probably seventeen. I had a reputation for working with horses. Sometime during the afternoon wedding reception, somebody suggested that I break Bobby's horse. I think alcohol was involved.

The wedding was in St. Michael. Our farm was about 12 miles away. Bobby's farm and the unbroken horse were between St. Michael and our farm. The general plan was that I should stop at Bobby's on my way back to the wedding after evening chores. Breaking this horse before the dance seemed like a simple matter. Upon reflection, I am certain alcohol was involved.

It was June and the evenings were long. The weather was pleasant. I got to Bobby's about 7:30. There was no corral or holding area of any kind. Such things did not really exist back then on dairy farms. There was a barn, a barnyard, pastures and fields. The horse was pastured with the cows.

He was small and rough looking. His hide had a lot of scars. I do not know where Bobby got him but he was a fighter. He was at least middle aged. This certainly was not going to be his first rodeo. A horse that had not been trained by his age would know many tricks. The horse was a bad case.

I figured he would try to wipe me off on any tree, fence, or barn wall he could reach. Considering the possibilities, I decided my best chance would be to ride him in a large open space. He would run for sure, but if I stayed on, and if he did not stumble, I could wear him down. At least then, it might be a fair fight.

The farmstead was on the south side of a paved county road set back about 100 yards. The fenced pastures were south of the farmstead. To the east was about 40 acres, maybe more, of open, flat fields.

We caught the horse, tied him on the northeast side of the barn, and put a saddle and bridle on him. I do not recall that I was the least concerned or anxious about the situation. Freedom from fear is one of the benefits of being a seventeen-year-old farm kid. I assumed I was invincible. I mounted the horse and we cut him loose.

He bucked and he kicked, but that was no surprise. I had the reins in one hand and a handful of mane in the other. He was not getting me off that easy. I used my spurs to irritate him and muscled his head toward the east. As soon as he realized I was sticking with him he took off to the east at a hard run. That was just as I planned. The terrain was level field and planted in sections of corn, alfalfa and oats. The corn and oats were both only a foot high and the alfalfa had recently been cut. It was all pretty clear sailing. I figured I could turn him enough to cover a large sweeping arc that headed us to the north before we hit the fencerow on the east end. Then continue the arc until I had him headed west before we reached the county road on the north side. He covered the entire field and the turn at a dead run.

Things went almost as I planned, except I let him make the arc a little too large. By the time I had him turned all the way toward the west he was running in the bottom of the road ditch. He must have figured he had a better chance to get rid of me in the rough terrain of the ditch. He rode down all the brush and small trees he could hit but I stuck with him. I did take a few hard whacks. I was lucky because there were no fence posts or wire in the ditch. He would have gone right through those. The ride was about to get a whole lot tougher, however. In farm country, road ditches are crossed by driveways every 1/8 mile or so. The first driveway was coming up fast.

I worked the reins hard and brought his head well over to his left side. The principle of the bit & bridle is simple and in general works incredibly well. A trained horse will respond to gentle pressure from the bit. A trained horse will move his head to relieve the pressure and his body will follow his head. An untrained horse may not like it but if the rider can turn the horse's head, the horse is strongly inclined by nature and balance to follow his head. But this horse had done it all before. He had no intention of following his head. I held his head facing south but he kept his body running hard to the west. I should have let him have his head before we reached the driveway but I did not. At that point in our lives he knew more tricks than I did. The driveway had a steep embankment and the top of it was about chest high to the horse. If I had released his head, he might have turned left, turned right, or jumped the edge of the driveway. But I held his head hard to the left and he simply hit the driveway chest high, at that dead run. We rolled of course. This was not my first rodeo either. I knew enough to get out of the saddle and to keep hold of the reins. Momentum took us across the driveway and back into the ditch on the far side. It was all quite spectacular according to the observers.

The horse and I were side by side in the ditch. He was on his belly facing west. I still had the reins in my hand. In the instant it took him to get his bearings I was back on the saddle. He jumped up and continued his run to the west. Apparently, it all looked good from a distance because the observers believed I never left the saddle and rode him through the roll. I did not of course. What the observers did not know was that both the horse and I had taken a hell of a beating in that roll. I was hurting and I could tell from the feel of the horse under me that he had his regrets too.

He was still running hard though and in no time we were closing in on another driveway. This was the driveway into the farmstead. I had learned something. I gave the horse his head. He had learned something too. We both wanted to finish this ride and the sooner the better. He bounded up the bank and turned left, down the driveway toward the farm buildings. His pace slowed and he was obeying the bit. He was hurting and tired. I took a few wide victory loops in front of my admirers. The horse would now move at the pace and speed I wanted. I rode smartly up toward Bobby, brought the horse to a sharp stop, stepped off and handed Bobby the reins.

I do not recall saying much or listening much either for that matter. I just wanted to be alone where I could deal with my wounds. I suspect the horse felt the same way. I walked to my car trying not to limp, drove to my Uncle's farm, cleaned up and went to the wedding dance.

In case you are wondering, I am sure nothing good ever came of that horse. If I did anything, I just taught him another trick or two.