Breaking Bobby Lindenfelser’s Horse on a Wedding Day 12/23/2008 & 1/27/2010

WC 1392

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 don’t 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, but it doesn’t really matter as far as this story goes anyway.

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 wouldn’t have been ok to get sick or to drink too much.

Bobby was a couple of years older than I was. His folks had a farm just south of my Uncle Louie’s farm. Folks worked together at harvest times so I was at Uncle Louie’s a lot in those years. I was probably seventeen. I already had a reputation for working with horses and sometime during the afternoon somebody decided that I should 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 quite certain alcohol was involved.

It was June and the evenings were long. The weather was pleasant. I got to the site of this rodeo about 7:30. There was no corral or holding area of any kind. Such things didn’t really exist back then on dairy farms. There was a barn, a barnyard, pastures and fields. The horse was simply pastured with the cows.

The horse was small and rough looking. His hide had a lot of scars. I don’t know where Bobby got him but he was a fighter. He was at least middle aged. A horse that hadn’t been trained by his age had learned a lot of tricks. This animal was a bad case.

I figured a horse experienced as this guy seemed to be, would wipe me off on trees, fences, or even the barn wall if he got the chance. Considering the possibilities I determined the best place to ride the horse was in the largest open space I could find. 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. That is where I decided to ride.

We caught the horse, tied him on the northeast side of the barn, and put a saddle and bridal on him. I don’t 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 kicked, but that was no surprise. I had the reins in one hand and a handful of mane in the other. He wasn’t 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 but it was planted in sections of corn, alfalfa and oats. The corn and oats were each around a foot high and the alfalfa had recently been cut and made into hay. It was all pretty clear sailing.

I was able to turn him north in a sweeping arc before we reached the eastern border of the farm. As was always the case there was a fence and line of brushy trees on the property line. I let him make a too large of an arc however. He outsmarted me. By the time I had him turned all the way toward the west he was running in the bottom of the road ditch. I suppose he figured he had a better chance to get rid of me in rough terrain. That by itself wasn’t a problem. Road ditches are crossed by driveways every 1/8 mile or so. That was a problem.

I worked the rein 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, move his head in the appropriate direction and follow his head. An untrained horse may not like it but if you can turn his head he is strongly inclined by nature and balance to follow his head. This guy had done this before. He had no intention of following his head. He was now facing south and running hard to the west. I should have let him have his head before we reached the driveway but I didn’t. This horse knew more tricks than I did. The driveway had a steep embankment and the top of it was about chest high on the horse. If I had given him his head a sensible horse would likely have turned left or right or jumped up the edge of the driveway. With his head hard to the left he simply hit the driveway chest high and at a full run. We rolled of course. 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 resumed 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 didn’t of course. What the observers didn’t 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 his had his regrets too.

All together that was probably a good thing because in no time we were lining up on another driveway. This one was the driveway into the farmstead. I had learned something and I gave the horse his head. He had learned something too and we both wanted to finish this ride. 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 victory loops in front of my admirers. The horse would now move at the gate and speed I wanted. I rode smartly up toward Bobby, brought him to a sharp stop, stepped off and handed off the reins.

I don’t recall saying much or listening much either for that matter. I just wanted to be alone where I could deal with my aching bones. I suspect the horse felt the same way. I walked to my car trying hard not to limp, drove to my Uncle Louie’s farm nearby, cleaned up and went to the wedding dance.

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