

Title, "About Hay Reserves and a Fine Horse"

This was our third consecutive year of late summer drought.

The year before that we got fifteen inches of rain in August.

I mentioned to my daughter that it would be nice to have a normal growing season. She replied, "Maybe this is normal."

Maybe it is.

Complaining about the weather does not seem to contribute to farming success. Useful coping tactics might.

At our Annual Conference last spring, Dale Rengstorf mentioned that he was building up a one year reserve of hay. The ranchers farther west build hay reserves every chance they get. A hay reserve is necessity in regions where the annual rainfall is highly variable.

Our rain has sure become highly variable.

A hay reserve seems like a sensible idea.

All of our land is pastured. We buy hay from a good neighbor. The price is always fair.

For years I have ordered 250 big round bales. That used to be enough. Recently I feed 100 bales or so before winter even starts.

Then, when spring comes, I find myself scrounging for more hay. That tempts me to put the animals into pasture too early.

Dale's idea made sense. This spring I ordered 350 bales, 100 more than "normal" to start building a surplus.

I needed that reserve hay sooner than I expected. We started feeding supplemental hay in late August. There will be no surplus left from those 350 bales come spring. I intend to keep buying 100 extra bales each year until I build a reserve.

I do not intend to have a full year reserve but enough to feel free to start feeding hay early or to continue late. If I have enough hay on hand, I believe I am more likely to make the correct feeding decisions.

My horse died in August.

I wrote a story about him for my kids. I suppose it is an obituary of sorts.

I hope some of you enjoy it. At least it is not about weather.

The Gruella Died.

The Gruella had been rapidly losing weight for six weeks or so.

He was extremely thin but he was not wobbly weak.

He was at my daughter Sarah's farm. He was keeping grandson Saul's new pony company.

I took him there a week or so ago. The pony needed company until Sarah got a second horse. Besides, I thought it would be easier for Gruella to be away from the main herd for a while.

I had the veterinarian out Tuesday.

The Gruella walked right over when I called him for the vet.

He did not have a fever, moved well, was not stiff, ate well, had good teeth and was not physically depressed.

That ruled out many things like infection or Lyme's disease.

The vet suspected either cancer or organ failure.

We took blood samples.

The results, which I got today, did not indicate anything in particular.

My son-in-law, Jordan, found him dead Wednesday afternoon.

I think he died Tuesday night or early Wednesday morning.

His eyes were closed. That is unusual.

It is nice to think he died while resting.

Dave Tucker and his son helped me dig the grave.

We buried Gruella on the hill where the other horses are buried, except not too close to them.

About the distance he would have preferred.

He was a leader and had a strong sense of dignity and place.

For example, when the horses were called he would not walk up until all the others were tied and fed.

Then, on his own time, he would make an entrance and allow us to feed and tie him.

He is buried on the south side, between two beautiful savanna oaks.

Gail took his name board from the hitching rail and placed it as a temporary headstone.

In time, I will make a concrete marker for him like Nevada's.

I have buried many good horses in that hill over the past forty years.

Nevada was my boyhood horse. He is buried at the north slope.

My Pa bought Nevada for me when we were both twelve. Nevada was 34 when he died.

Gruella was 25.

I had figured on him living ten years longer. He was robust and strong yet last spring.

Life is short. Shorter for some than for others.

Gail, Sarah, Jeannette and I traveled to Windom in late 1993 to get two wild mustangs and two wild burros.

Sarah was a high school senior. Jeannette was a foreign exchange student from Venezuela.

It was a chilly, raw day.

Jeannette experienced a cold, drippy nose for the first time in her life.

She kept saying, "Dad, there is something wrong with my nose".

Jeannette is still part of our family. An American now. Married to a linguistics expert and living in Indiana.

That was also the day Sarah, coined the "damn fine" phrase.

She was referring to wild burros at the time but the expression works for horses too.

I use that phrase on the entrance sign to the farm, on my business cards and on the farm letterhead.

The full caption is, "Bison, Cattle, Hogs and damn fine Horses."

Gruella was a five year old stallion when we bought him.

He was a fighter and covered with wounds. Many healed over, some fresh.

He handled himself as if he had won most of those fights.

When the BLM wranglers were loading him into my trailer The Gruella tried to escape over a seven foot fence

There were 125 wild horses at auction that day. Gruella was the only one to attempt a breakout.

He was almost over the top before they were able to beat him down.

Jeannette named him. "Gruella" is her spelling of a Spanish word for grey buckskin.

He was classic Mustang. Stocky and muscular with a proud, arched nose.

I tamed him that winter.

Wild horses that are one or two years old are easy to tame. This Gruella was too old and willful to tame easily.

He would have preferred to kill me.

We settled that issue one day in a struggle that exhausted us both. My lasso held.

Horses live by their rules. After that he did just about anything I ever asked of him.

The Gruella was still a mustang stallion, though.

In 1995, he broke my pelvis. He wanted to buck me off for a mare in heat.

We were having a nice ride until he got downwind of that mare, then the wild stallion returned.

Gail drove me to the hospital when she got home from work. They kept me for a few days.

Eleven months later the red quarter horse mare gave birth to a red buckskin colt.

The Gruella was smooth and steady to ride. Strong and willing to drive.

He was a great helper when I trained new work horses.

He would hold a green horse back if he moved too fast, drag him along if he refused to go, look at him as if he was an idiot if he misbehaved.

If the horse herd needed fresh pasture or feed, he would nicker to me from a distance. He did not beg.

He was aloof about it. Just reminding me of my responsibilities.

The Gruella was a damn fine horse.

Tom