

Remembering Cheyenne

IN PRAISE OF THE DUDE STRING HORSE

by William C. Reynolds

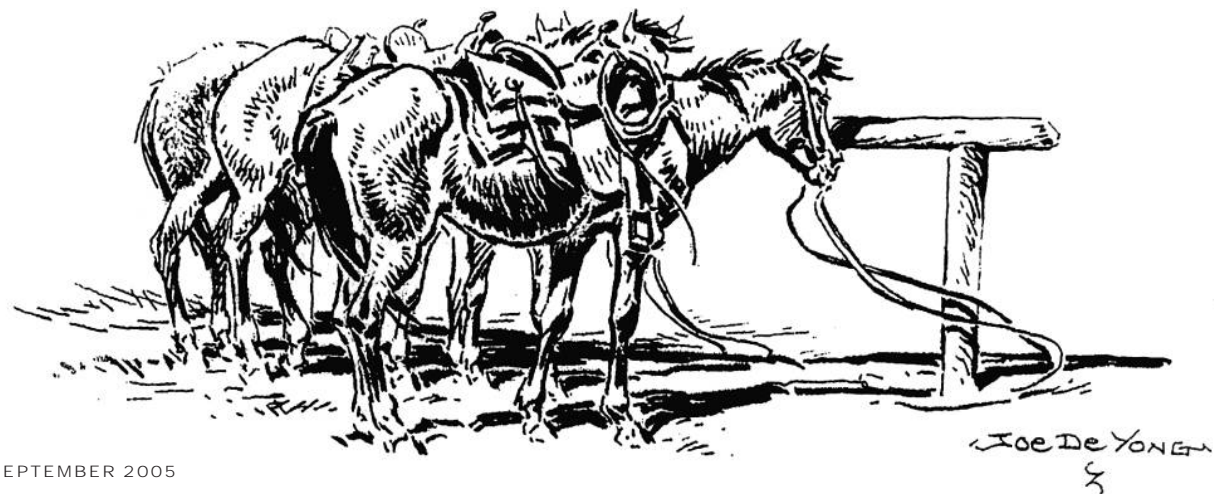
As a kid of the early 1950s, wrapped up in all things cowboy, my idea of heaven was getting to go to a dude ranch for spring break. Back then they were called “dude ranches,” and for some very good and obvious reasons—mostly with regard to their guests’ riding skills. Those reasons still exist today, of course, but we now call these places “guest ranches” in deference to those dudes among us with questionable self-image issues. The one thing that hasn’t changed, thankfully, is the quality of the horses. In fact, in many cases, the horses on guest ranches today are even better. Unless you were as horse-crazy as I was—or as my 11-year-old daughter is today—it’s difficult to describe to someone afoot the true wonder and joy of a kid’s first ride on one of those great dude string horses.

It’s a guiding rule of guest ranches: great horses = great ranch experiences. Of course, the food has to be good, the view a knockout, and the bed so comfy it lulls you into the sleep of angels. Still, there’s no greater asset that ensures a wondrous ranch experience than being assigned your own personal Trigger during your stay. Those “assignments” remain among some of my greatest memories.

Most guest ranches serve meals family style in a main dining room. Long tables with benches or grand tables with silver settings—back then it didn’t matter to me. The moment of truth came for every young buckaroo during dinner when the wranglers roamed the dining room, clipboards in hand, sizing up each and every little waddy with care and humor.

“Hello, cowboy. How’s your ridin’ this year?” asked Jake, the ranch’s head wrangler, as he stood over me next to our table. My voice shaking, I looked up with a mouth full of lima beans, grabbing for a napkin. “P-P-P-retty good, sir,” I managed. “You ready to ride ol’ Cheyenne tomorrow?” Jake asked with a steady eye on me. “He’s been waitin’ for you to come back since last year. Hasn’t been the same horse. He’ll sure be glad to see ya.”

“You bet. Gosh, can I see him now?” I asked, barely able to contain myself. “You hold on, son,” Jake said with a serious look. “You need to finish supper. A good cowboy always finishes his supper. Cleans his plate, too. We’ll see you in the mornin’.” I sat there aglow as Jake went on to the next table, making another little cowboy’s night. I was at peace as Jake walked away, safely carrying my name next to Cheyenne’s on his clipboard. He was my horse once again. Sleep was tough that



Wranglers bringing in the dude string, circa 1950s.

first night at the ranch as I waited to be reunited with the horse of my dreams.

Now I may have added a little icing to that story, but I can tell you with great certainty that Cheyenne gave me a lifetime of memories that to this day can bring a smile. That little horse was no great performance horse and probably was not even that well-bred. There were more than likely no files of breed certificates carrying his name in the ranch office or ribbons hanging in the tack room from wins of his youthful days. At 20 years old, Cheyenne was on the ranch because he had a special capability that went way beyond lineage or breed. It was a special skill, one that’s always been treasured out West: He could take care of a little kid on his back.

It’s said that great horses are made, not born. In Cheyenne’s case and in many other dude horses’ cases, I don’t think that’s correct. Forgive my sentimentality, but I think great kid and dude horses are handpicked by God before they are born. They may not start out to be dude horses because many come from backgrounds where you wouldn’t in your wildest dreams think you could ever put a child or an inexperienced rider on them. Stories are told of some of these horses, many considered to be outlaws, that bucked wildly in their youth, yet by some circumstance ended up as dead-broke dude horses. Not all of them, but some. These are the great horses that no matter what the distraction

remember above all else that they are charged with the life of someone or someone’s child. Bags flapping, cars racing by, deer leaping from brush—things that happen along a trail that would test the best-bred horses seem not to faze this special temperament.

It’s why the great guest ranches of the West continue to value their dude strings beyond almost anything. For an inexperienced rider or a little kid, there is no greater reward than a great ride on a horse that cares. And some do care.



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I have seen it. I have felt it. The fact that these special horses—animals that typically protect their lives by fleeing danger—stand still as a young boy loses his hat to a tree limb or keep their footing on a narrow trail when a new rider loses her balance proves they have a concern above and beyond themselves. They are not simple fear-flight animals. They have attributes deeper than instinct.

What makes a great dude horse? It’s not breeding or origin. More than anything, I believe, it’s a lot of heart.

So let’s tip our hats to the great dude horses. Let’s raise our glasses high in honor of those treasured ones long gone who carried us to grand adventures, even if it was just a little trail ride. Today, luckily, there are even more great horses out there on great ranches, ready to be ridden; horses safely showing whole new generations the world of the West. As for me, here’s to the greatest of them all—here’s to you, Cheyenne.