

## TALES FROM THE WASTELAND

# Two Horses & Elvis

Born in the '50s but raised in the '30s.

By Barry Perryman, Ph.D.

Once upon a time I had a 14-year-old Welsh gelding named Rowdy. He stood about 14.3 hands and had the best feet I ever saw on a horse. He was smart and learned fast. In fact, when it came to riding on the edges of mountains he was smarter than me. He had a choppy gait and had to walk around things, but he was a good one.

I also became the owner of a six-year-old roan thoroughbred-cross mare around that same time. She wasn't quite as easygoing as I would have liked. She would occasionally jump out from underneath you while you were sleeping on the way back to the barn. But she was a long-legged gal and, boy, could she step over downed timber. She stood 15.3 hands and had the most comfortable gait. At first I thought she was just a little short in the smarts department, but after a couple of years of riding alongside ol' Rowdy, she sort of caught on to things. I don't know for sure, but maybe they had conversations at night. Anyway, the point is that she learned things because she was mentored by an older companion. She watched ol' Rowdy and paid attention.

Now keep that story in mind as you read the rest of this opus. For my exams I have always included a couple of bonus questions scattered in the middle of the test. My purpose is to throw students off their concentration a little bit, like real life. They are not serious questions, and I give them credit, right or wrong. Here is an example: True or false? Little Richard invented rock and roll, but Elvis was the King. I have had that question on an exam every year since 1991. Everyone except a couple of international students got it right, until four years ago when at least half the class missed it. Three years ago, three-quarters missed it, and two years ago, only one got it right (an older, nontraditional student). The correct answer of course is true.

I polled the class as to why this might even be possible. I'll give you that a lot of folks don't know about Little Richard Penniman, but what floored me was that in a class

of 32 junior and senior university students, minus the one I mentioned, no one, not one of them, had ever heard of Elvis Presley! (I know this is a moment of shock for some of you, so I'll give you a minute to stop hyperventilating.) I kept the question on the test last year and again no one got it correct. It

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seemed impossible just by the percentages. I polled the class again, and no one had heard of Elvis. I just polled my class last week before the exam, and again 32 students had never heard of Elvis Presley. It was during this lecture period that I also learned not one of them had ever heard of the Great Depression or the Dust Bowl!

Okay, we are living in a different century. I get that. It was 75 years ago, yeah, yeah, whatever. After a few more questions, I found out these two major historical thresholds are not on the history curriculum in K-12, at least for the schools my students came from. What else are they leaving out of their education that we don't know about? The Revolutionary War? People walking on the moon? I asked a few more questions and here is what I already suspected but confirmed: My 20-year-old students in general don't read newspapers or magazines, don't listen to the radio, watch very little television, don't read Internet news or anything that looks like learning may be involved, essentially don't use email, and for all practical purposes don't talk on the phone.

They do, however, text. They only use the Internet when they have to for class or

when they are using an alternative social media conduit (they don't use Facebook because there are too many parents using it). Regarding the Internet, with a portal like a smart phone or computer, in minutes you can access all the knowledge in the known universe. Ponder that...30 or 40 years ago it was unthinkable. We have all this technology and knowledge at our fingertips, and what do we do? Like my brother says, we use it to post pictures of food and watch cat videos. (I do like the cat videos.) We have the technology to convey information like never before and yet a generation has never heard of Elvis Presley, the Dust Bowl, or the Great Depression.

Back to my horse tale. Young folks must learn from older, more experienced folks. We have an obligation to teach them important things. Societal upheavals like the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl still have impacts today. They are critical events to know about. Ultimately, the entire responsibility of passing on history falls on us old folks. I knew about the Depression before I started school. I have said it many times: I was born in the '50s but raised in the '30s.

Let's make a pact, you and I. Let's find some teachable moments for our children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, nieces, nephews, and any other kid we can find. Let's tell them real stories about how we all came to be. Tell them you were so poor the hog only got a biscuit and a bucket of dishwater to eat every day. Tell them how your family picked up and moved across the country when the dust started to fly. Tell them how Grandpa stood in a breadline to get through the day. Explain why Grandma was loath to throw away quilting scraps and buttons, and why you had to straighten nails to mend the corral because there wasn't 25 cents to buy a pound of them at the hardware store. Tell them why Grandma at age 10 had to cook supper for the family of eight that went to the field to chop cotton and Johnson grass all day.

Everyone has a story to tell about significant events that have shaped our lives and our country. Let 'em learn from you. ■

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