



Up Front

Three hosses and a mule.
By C.J. Hadley

An equestrienne I am not. I am not even a horsewoman. But I am a woman who has loved a few “hosses.”

My first was a dark, long-legged thoroughbred named Fred. A \$200 horse that came off a dude outfit in Fallon, Nev., he was taken to my place in Gardnerville, Nev., in a discarded Pepsi truck. Fred had a beautiful long trot but died three weeks after I brought him home. He had cancer. That outfit in the desert must have been happy to see this twit Brit comin’.

My second was a paint mustang named Sweetpea, who had been toting dudes at Lake Tahoe for decades. She was a gentle soul with a big head, short legs and skin that didn’t appreciate sunshine (much like mine). When I asked Keith Cornforth, “What kind of horse is this?” that good vet tipped his hat and said, “Well, Ma’am, they don’t make ’em like this no more.”

I took Sweetpea on roundups and cattle drives all over the West, annually pushing more than a thousand head of John Ascuaga’s pregnant cows from summer range in Bridgeport, Calif., to winter in Smith, Nev. Sweetpea was solid, easy, and a lovely height to get on. At Ascuaga’s bull sale years later at Jack’s Valley Ranch, I saw Cornforth again and asked him, “How do you know when a horse is too old to ride?” He scratched his head and said, “Well, Ma’am, if she breathes real hard and staggers a bit it’s probably time to get off!” I guess I pastured old Sweetpea a little bit late. She was already 33. She died at 35 and I buried her under the rock where she fell.

Then came a small Appaloosa mule via Tom Marvel’s ranch in Battle Mountain. She was three years old and used to going in the kitchen. I got a britching and fit it to a saddle Tom gave me, left behind by a cowboy named Virgil from South Dakota who worked on the 25 Ranch back in the ’40s or ’50s. She was

black with white socks so I called her Sister Chicago. When I took her on Ascuaga’s cattle drives she could stampede the cattle with her energetic hee-haws! At one frozen creek which Sister refused to cross, John’s cowboss lassoed the mule and dragged us both across the ice. While I was having lunch another day I tied her to a telephone pole and have a photo of her perpendicular to the pole, butt skyward. She preferred more natural surroundings. After she bucked a few friends off (warming her up for me), I gave her to Buster Dufurrena in Winnemucca to haul salt for the sheepherders. Sister Chicago died a few years ago after a long life with Buster’s ovines.

My last horse was Gib, a three-year-old bay quarter horse from California, and I matched him with a glorious custom-made Eddie Brooks saddle that was a mix between a 1906 lady’s Garcia and the saddle I call Virgil. Gib was said to have fainting spells but turned out to be calm, handsome and true, good with cattle and tolerant of border collies. A beautiful and solid equine, he helped me see

Nevada from the saddle and spent most of his life with thousands of bovines.

After *RANGE* got going in 1991 my time was lost and I gave Gib to Terry Sullivan, a cowboy friend who used him from spring to late fall, working at ranches in northeastern Nevada. Gib was kept fit and happy and came home for the winters. I got him an aging cow-savvy partner named Big Red (that Sullivan also used), via Mike Marvel in Battle Moun-

tain and the Whitehorse Ranch in Oregon.

After shoulder surgery five years ago I couldn’t lift my Eddie Brooks saddle so I brought it (and Virgil) indoors. Gib came home to retire at age 28, died on October 5 at age 33, and is buried close to the willows of my intermittent creek where he used to shade up. I didn’t want Big Red to be alone so I moved him to Fallon to ease out his life with a submissive buddy named Charlie.

My Great Danes and I still go to the barn every day and Strider looks out to those willows looking for Big Red and waiting for Gib to come home. Cache just stands by my side, confused by the calm. Me? I still shed tears but am warmed by the gift of their time. ■



CJ and Gib in 2007. Eddie’s saddle sports sheepskin-lined bulldog tapaderos to keep the Brit’s feet warm.