

The Horse and Pony Tales of Harold Paul Wright

By Kathy Wright-Wainer



A Cowboy and His Pony

Twinkle received her name because of the white star on her face. She was not an endearing pony that loved to affectionately nuzzle her rider. Instead, Dad said she lived to terrorize him...*daily*. Based upon the stories he told, I would say the two of them definitely had a love/hate relationship so to speak.

Each morning played out the same as the day before. After Twinkle was saddled and Dad mounted up, she exerted maximum effort in an attempt to buck him off. This was her way of telling him *Good morning, glad to see you too*. From the corral, they usually proceeded off to town or school. Rather than follow the road, Dad preferred to go through the lush green rolling Missouri hill country which was covered thickly with the maple, oak, cottonwood, and dogwood trees as well as briars and burrs. This was no ordinary pony as she knew the difference in the bark of the trees and other fauna. In a devious endeavor to knock him out of the saddle, Twinkle made sure she rubbed him up against a tree with rough bark or tried to take him under a low hanging limb. Sometimes as he flinched from rubbing the tree or ducked to avoid a branch, he shifted within the saddle. Most times he wouldn't fall out; other times not and Twinkle did all she could to help him dismount! At the least, he received a nasty scraping or bump to the head.

If none of the above accomplished her maniacal motive, she had another trick. Once clear of the forest this prankster pony left no time in breaking into a full on gallop leaving Dad clenching the reins and clamping his legs around her as tight as he could to thwart what he certainly knew was about to take place. He could command her to, "Whoa, pony. Whoa!" or "Twinkle, STOP!" all he wanted, but terminating this mad dash was totally up to Twinkle's discretion.

Continuing, he added that when she determined she had toyed with him enough, "She would stop dead in her tracks hoping I would fly off." Yes, she was more often than not successful and reveled in her conquest whereupon she would stand over him, look him in the eye and give him a few snorts while pawing at the ground with a front hoof. After composing himself, Dad would gather the leather reins; and, while climbing back in his saddle, give her the affirmation she sought, "Ok, girl. You won. Now let's go." With a pat or two to her neck and a tickle of his heels to her ribs, they strode toward their destination.

Dad always commented that it was Twinkle's goal in life to toss him out of his saddle each day. Surprisingly enough, "Once she accomplished this, she settled down and was a great pony for the remainder of the day." It was during the aftermath that the two of them enjoyed their time together. As he would whistle or sing his cowboy songs, Twinkle settled into her gait quite enjoying the serenade. But then the next day always came where a new battle of the wills ensued between pony and rider with the bumps, bruises, and scrapes awarded to this cowboy.

One of Twinkle's other passions was to stomp on Dad's feet. Her timing seemed to be impeccable because just as one bruised toe nail grew out to the point that it was "all healed and new," she would step on that toe again resulting in a whole new bruise taking almost a year to grow out! Yes, he had his boots on at all times around her too...well, mostly!

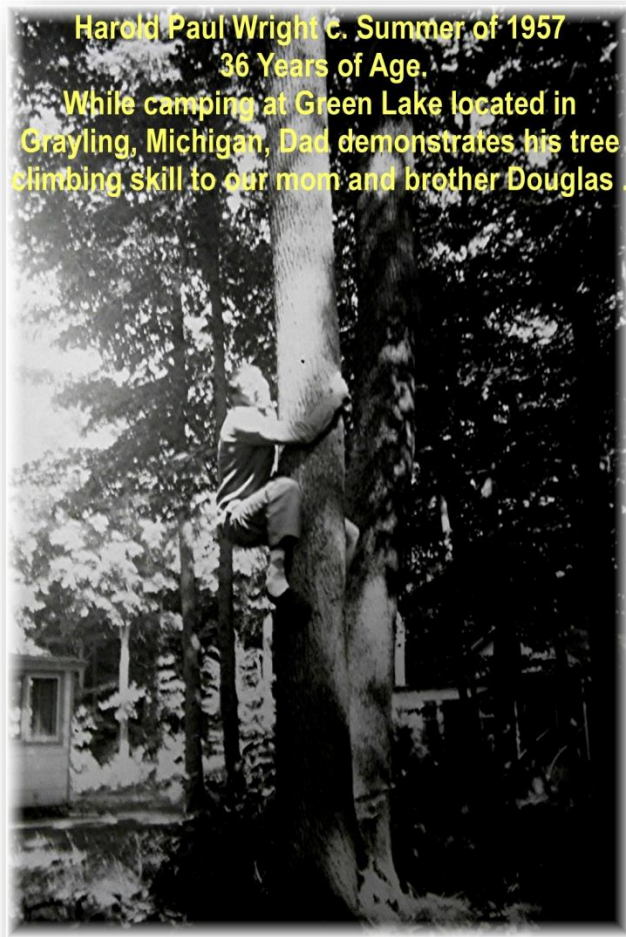
Dad along with his local pals and cousins were very fond of riding their ponies and giving chase to each other around the dense woods of Mill Grove and Princeton as well as the surrounding areas of Morgan, Washington and Ravanna Townships. Outside of the roughhousing Twinkle dished out day by day, Paul (as he was called as a lad) had a genuine admiration for his mare of mayhem's agile and cunning skill at playing hide and seek which was their favorite game.

The boys loved to hide with their ponies behind trees or large brambles. Many fellas experienced a disappointing defeat when a position was exposed by a whinny or jingling of tack as a pony fended off a biting fly. Conversely, Twinkle went into stealth mode by remaining calm and quiet in helping evade discovery. Both Dad and Twinkle relished the game especially opportunities to break off in a gallop to dart away from being tagged. Together, they basked in victories of not being tagged out and successfully tagging another cowboy out.

Twinkle also was a huntress and applied this same calm and quiet while Dad was in the woods hunting small game such as squirrels, turkeys, and rabbits. While he often commented about how fake the Western movies were when it came to a cowboy shooting another person while bouncing up and down in the saddle on a running horse, he did say it was possible to shoot from a standing horse. This required a real camaraderie between the mount and its rider. Dad told us how this was no easy feat and was laden with obstacles.

In order to be successful, it was necessary for Twinkle's breathing to be quieted to a slow steady pace. As an astute horseman, Dad learned the rhythm of her breathing and would line up his rifle sight to time a shot with his rising and falling within the saddle. Sometimes he dismounted and leaned his rifle against the saddle. During the midst of all this, he hoped that a fly would not land on and bite her or that she would not twitch because of an itch; or, sneeze! Nonetheless, even if every variable lined up and he hit his mark through his sharpshooter skills, it was not guaranteed that a squirrel would automatically drop to the ground.

On a rare occasion, one would fall into the crotch of a tree which meant he had to climb up the tree to retrieve it and hope that Twinkle wouldn't become surly and decide to run off. Other fluke endings included the squirrel being so close to its nest when it was shot that it actually ran inside prior to dying. Because squirrel nests usually are built on narrow branches high in a tree, retrieval in this circumstance was not a viable option and resulted in a regretted loss of life and food for the table.



Dad and Grandpa Eldon were not in the practice of breeding Twinkle. She was my dad's saddle pony and not a work or plow horse as were the others. Whenever she was in season, she was corralled in a pasture close to the house to keep her away from the other horses. Well, one time a neighbor's stallion literally caught wind of her and breached the corral.

I'm pretty sure Dad and Grandpa saw a glimpse of the horse impregnating her because I know they took the horse back to its owner and told him what took place. This farmer then had the audacity to demand a stud fee for his horse's service albeit unwelcomed. Whew, boy, the heat was on! This neighbor was serious and would not listen to reasoning that Twinkle was confined to a penned area minding her own business on their property with the horse trespassing. I seem to remember that it went to court or else it was settled prior to. Regardless, Eldon actually received compensatory damages for what transpired. This was because of unexpected current and future animal care costs incurred (such as any medical care, additional feed, etc. both for Twinkle and a colt) through an unplanned and unwelcomed pregnancy. Later, the neighbor begrudgingly paid.

Time passed and soon a new foal would arrive. Very early one cool dewy morning Dad was awoken by Twinkle calling for him. He knew her time was near and jumped out of bed to run outside. There was Twinkle standing at the fence nearest the house magnificently displaying her new baby. Dad said this was the only time she voluntarily came to the gate. Every other morning he had to call and call her or she would make him come out to her. Also, this was the one and only time that she actually exhibited affection to him by nuzzling his head, shoulders, and chest while simultaneously making all sorts of exuberant proud mama pony vocalizations. As he lovingly congratulated her and admired her newborn, Twinkle let him give warm embraces and rub all over her as well as the colt. He said after

enjoying this brief encounter of tenderness and love, she walked the colt back out into the pasture and that was the end of the love fest whereby she wasted no time in going back to being a feisty filly.

According to my big brother Michael, Twinkle was still alive and on Grandma and Grandpa's farm in the mid-1950s. She was sold around that time in order for them to obtain the money to treat Michael's spotted tick fever.

Another Mare and Her Foal

One spring a workhorse mare owned by Grandpa Eldon bore a colt. During the time of plowing the fields in preparations for planting, this mare and her weanling both accompanied the men out into the fields. The mare was outfitted with a well-worn leather bridle and a bit in the mouth. A yoke was slipped over her head and down her neck. From there she was harnessed to the single blade plow with reins leading past for either Dad or Grandpa to grasp as they took turns walking behind it. The call out to the mare would come along with a little wrap of the reins. She gave out a little, "Brrrr" and moved forward. As the blade burrowed down deep into the soil, the dirt began to turn over. The familiar fresh aroma of moist earth wafted up into the air while also exposing fresh loam and worms from within.

The foal was allowed to enjoy just being a young'un and relax in a grassy spot in the shade of a clump of trees. He often laid down to nap for a time with occasionally raising his head and opening his eyes to check for his mama's location. Other times he practiced his bucking by playfully lowering and shaking his head while jumping up and down and kicking his hind legs out in the air. Mama mare continuously was aware of her colt. She would take turns turning her gaze to her little guy and then return forward as she compliantly trod along pulling the plow.

After periods of work, the mare would be unharnessed and led to the shaded grove of trees to her awaiting weanling. Grandma Esta often brought out refreshing cold water that she had just pumped from the well for both the men folk and the mare. Along with the water, Grandma also brought a bucket of oats for the mare to eat while she nursed her little one. Other times the mare frequently nibbled at the grass while the foal nuzzled around her. After the weanling had his fill, it was time to hitch mama mare back to the plow and continue the day's work.

My dad tenderly commented about how much he enjoyed these breaks. Such moments allowed him to not only a reprieve from the hot sun, but to take joy in watching nature at its finest as well as spend time talking with Grandma and Grandpa. A rarity to just lay back in the cool grass near to this mare and colt while enjoying the clouds taking shape in the azure sky above with a refreshing breeze blowing sweet springtime scents along was all a lad needed to put a smile on his face and warm his heart; thereby, creating this memory that lasted a lifetime which in turn is shared with his future generations.

A Broken Tongue

From my understanding, not only did John Harvey Wright's property, as well as his brother Than's (Nathaniel), have the Grand (a.k.a. Weldon) River coursing through the pastureland, but so did Eldon's Mill Grove farm which is the setting for this story. As in by-gone summers, trees and brush needed clearing from the river bank which were ultimately transported to the back yard of the house where it was later split into cords of firewood and broken down into kindling for the upcoming winter season.

On this particular day, Dad and Grandpa first placed tools such as hatchets, various saws, wedges, axes and a sledge hammer in a wagon and positioned it to receive the team of draft horses. After this,

they methodically outfitted the pair of draft horses with harnesses, bridles, reins and neck yokes. Dad carefully backed the team up so the tongue of the wagon was in-between them. The horses knew the routine and stood compliantly still. Next, he and Grandpa systematically raised the tongue off the ground and used trace chains to hitch it to the horses' gear while all the time checking connections and tensions with making minor adjustments as needed. After one final check of all the equipment, it was time to head out to the river.

After Grandma Esta bid them a temporary farewell, "You all be careful now, ya hear?" they climbed onto the wagon seat. Grandpa simultaneously lifted the reins and gave a whistle. The brown leather straps came down across the horses as he called, "Let's go." Prior to turning to head back to the house, Grandma watched them disappear across the grassy meadow while hearing the familiar sounds of the horses' deep exhale against the pull of the wagon intertwined among the thudding of eight horse hooves as well as jingling tack and chains fade into the rustling leaves and songs of the birds. As Esta's husband and son rolled along over the uneven pastures and cow paths toward the river's edge, they were jarred and shaken about in their seat to the rhythmic tunes of the rattling and clanking tools making melody in conjunction with a creaking wagon.



Photo by JoAnn Wright-Wintenburg

Soon Grandpa was guiding the team down the embankment all the while positioning them for loading the wagon and the return trip. Peaceful sounds of the river's currents washing against rocks and the shoreline as well as sweet sounding songbirds were juxtaposed against the men chopping away at felling trees; then, sawing these into manageable pieces. Additional hacking and crackling of branches with rustling leaves while pulling brush filled the air. A few wagon loads had already been transported out to the wood pile and on they continued. At one point, their backs were to the team. While fully engrossed in the task at hand, the ambient nature and work sounds were shattered by a resounding sharp, "CRACK" which came from behind them; or, as Grandpa would say, "It came from over yonder a piece."

Dropping what they were doing, both Dad and Grandpa quickly made their way to the team. To their surprise, the tongue of the wagon was snapped clean in two with one of the horses reposed atop it! In assessing the situation, they found the horses to be uninjured. The broken tongue caused considerable aggravation but they figured it had an unseen fracture or the team shifted with one falling onto it thereby causing the break. Or quite simply, "One dumb horse." Because there was nowhere for them to hook the horses to the wagon, the two of them had to empty the wagon, disconnect the tack, and push that wagon up through the steep, wet sandy embankment, through the woods, across the uneven terrain of the pastures and into the barn by themselves all the while bringing the team along with them. The day had much sunlight left along with clearing away at the river bank. Nonetheless, work at the stream, unlike the day light, came to a complete halt until a new tongue was put on the wagon.

Over the next couple of days, Paul looked on as his father and his maternal great grandpa, Emery "Pop" Johnson, fashioned another tongue using only hand tools upon a piece of timber. Now that the wagon had a new tongue (one that they knew had no defects), the pair along with the same carhorses were all back streamside in the stifling summer heat continuing their labor.

After a few wagon loads had been driven up to the pasture nearby the back of the house and unloaded, they were again busily clearing more away. An all too familiar *CRACK* was heard again with all of the same results as the first incident.

Well, that *dumb horse* had enough horse sense to devise a plan to escape hard labor for himself and his teammate. Only this time, the men had looked up at the right moment to see the same horse positioning himself to lie down on the tongue. This father and son duo took one look at each other with the same thought going through each of their minds, "That was no accident and neither was the first or second one."

For a third time, the men ran to the team to check on their welfare and that of the wagon. After seeing the horses were fine, Grandpa needed to get the one back to his feet. Grasping the standing horse by the halter, he told them both to, "Come" as he stepped backward and pulled. However, this bad boy had made up his mind that he was going on strike with no more work for the day being done. He simply refused to stand no matter what. Grandpa knew the horse was not injured or suffering heat stroke. He was so infuriated by this stallion's stubbornness that he grabbed a small club that was kept under the wagon's seat and gave his horse a good spanking along with some yelling and not so often used cursing! They had to go through the same ordeal of unloading the wagon and pushing it up and out of the river bank and back to the barn by themselves as well as go through the expense and labor of replacing the tongue for a third time. I remember that Dad commented about the financial impact this unnecessary triple expense had to the family's budget as well as upon their time management in the management of chores.

Dad assumed the horse reasoned that just as his previous lying down on the tongue and breaking it relieved them of their laborious summer work, he was attempting it for a third time. With a bit of a chuckle and grin on his face, Dad said that horse never thought to lie down on the job again! And, neither did its stable mate!

Ol' Jim

Originally Ol' Jim belonged to a nearby neighbor and was one horse from a two horse team used as work horses. His owner had enough of this devious duo and found it necessary to break up the pair because they used to run off occasionally; well, frequently to be honest with the obvious instigator being the other horse and Jim along for the ride so to speak.

Grandpa apparently needed another workhorse and saw that Ol' Jim was a fit five year old who was very smart and worked gently with just voice commands. Grandma may have been thinking *we need a horse from a runaway team like a hole in the head* but Jim had found a new home.

Paul (Dad) used to clear trees from the nearby woods and along the Grand River bank and used a wagon upon which he loaded cleared timber or lumber. Now that he had Ol' Jim, he would position the wagon in front of a tree, wrap a chain around the tree, and then ran the chain up and over the wagon. Next, he backed Jim up straight in front of the wagon. Upon securing the chain to Jim's tack, he simply said, "Easy, Jim." Dad said Jim barely moving as he gently pulled the tree up onto the wagon. Also that Jim was always very slow and steady while he and/or Grandpa were working right alongside of him.

Dad and Grandpa quickly and accurately learned to read Ol' Jim's body language. Some days they had to really keep an eye on Ol' Jim as he would become "frisky." When they saw this friskiness, they knew what was coming and tried their best to prepare for the inevitable. It was all just a matter of time . . . When . . . Where . . . And, then, there it was. The misbehavior! When they would hook Jim up to a wagon or work implement, "He shot off out of there like a bat out of h..." dragging the team off in a runaway sprint homeward to the barn all the while wreaking havoc in wrecking whatever was harnessed to the team be it wagon, chains, plows, etc. The only saving grace to these infuriating tangents was that they didn't have to chase him down through the woods and rolling fields!

According to his original owner, it was Ol' Jim's previous team mate that did the same exact thing without him and Jim would only run away while no one was on the reigns. Boy, what one animal (or person) can learn from another! My, how true it is that bad company corrupts good character and life without God at the reigns leads to destruction.