



Patridge Ranch, foothills on the left, ranch buildings on the right.

Chapter 5

Breaking Pony

Summer, 1959

Boys, maybe you've already heard the old saying, when you get thrown off a horse, you've got to get up, dust yourself off, and get back in the saddle. I learned that lesson literally, working on a ranch, breaking a pony. Here's what happened.

One summer, Mr. Patridge bought his granddaughter a pony, but the pony earned a reputation for being mean and hard to ride. Some of the ranch hands put their kids on the pony, but they were small and light and were tossed off shortly after being put aboard. Mr. Patridge needed the right person to break the pony, so it would become a fine ride for his granddaughter. (Boys, breaking a pony means teaching it to be ridden.)

In addition to being president of the First National Bank of Golden, Mr. Patridge owned a large ranch on the north side of town where he ran a herd of cattle, kept a dozen horses, a few goats, and even two peacocks. He said the peacocks were better than watchdogs when it came to keeping guard. They put up an awful sound whenever a stranger came near his house. And, he said, "Those damn birds eat rattlesnakes. You never saw anything like it," he went on. "They go out looking for rattlers. When they find one, they wait until it strikes, then pin its head to the ground with their talons and peck it to death. Then they eat the whole thing, headfirst. Damndest thing you ever saw!"

I was in fifth grade and still wearing Husky jeans when Mr. Patridge bought the pony. I probably weighed 140. One Friday, Mr. Patridge saw me in the bank waiting for Mom to make a deposit. I'm sure he thought I was the answer to his pony problems.

"Hey young man," he called out, walking toward me with an extended hand. "I'm Fred Patridge," he said shaking my hand. I replied that my name was Jeff Waters and that my mom used to work at the bank. "I know your mom. She's a great lady," Mr. Patridge added. Then, looking at me slightly sideways, he asked, "Doesn't your family call you Choppy?" There was no escaping that name.

At that moment Mom came into the bank lobby from the back room where she had been visiting friends. Mom worked at the bank for several years and had lots of friends among the operations staff.

“Jerry,” Mr. Patridge began. Mom’s real name was Mary Jane, but her friends had turned that into “Jerry Mane” and “Jerry” stuck. She was Jerry to everyone in town. “I have a round-up this weekend at the ranch. We’ll be branding and vaccinating the cattle, and I need some help. You have a fine, healthy-looking son here. Would you mind if I offered Choppy a job helping out?”

Always looking for ways to put me to work, Mom thought this was an excellent plan. Arrangements were made for me to be at the ranch at eight the following morning. “Don’t forget to wear boots,” Mr. Patridge shot over his shoulder as he headed back to his office.

The next morning promptly at eight, wearing a brand new pair of high top, lace-up Red Wing hunting boots, Mom delivered me to the large and imposing Patridge house. The house sat a half-mile from the barns, corrals, and ranch house that formed the working ranch. As I opened the car door, the peacocks sounded the alarm that a stranger was on the property. Responding to the alarm, Mr. Patridge joined me in front of the house, and after saying hello to Mom and confirming that I was ready to work, he walked me to the barn to meet Randy, the foreman. I was introduced as a new ranch hand and, after being introduced to the other ranch hands, I was put to work shoveling manure from the horse stalls in the barn.

Most people have no idea about much manure a horse can produce, but that morning gave me a very clear idea. Randy asked, “Do you know how much manure a horse produces in a day?”

“Well, no Randy, I don’t,” I replied. Until that very moment, knowing how much a horse shits in one day was not on my list of important things to know.

Randy, full of useful ranch facts, told me that a horse produces about 35 pounds a day. There were 12 stalls. I quickly did the math, 420 pounds. Randy told me to load the wheelbarrow then dump the manure in a gully behind the barn. After several hours and countless trips, I had the stalls shoveled clean. The term “full of horseshit” had suddenly become meaningful.

At about that time, I heard a commotion in the corral. A cow was mooing mournfully, standing over a calf lying motionless on the soft corral dirt. Randy and several of the ranch hands got a rope around the cow’s neck and pulled her into the barn, where I was standing and watching. They tied her to a stall.

“Her calf’s dead. No idea what happened.” Randy explained. “We got ‘nother calf whose mother won’t nurse him. We’re gonna make this momma think her calf came back to life. Come watch.”

Boys, Here's What Happened

Fascinated, I followed Randy and the ranch hands back into the corral where they skinned the dead calf in no time. One of the ranch hands carried off the carcass. Nothing was wasted on a ranch. They caught the motherless calf, wrapped the skin over its back, and tied it on with some rope. Randy went into the barn and led the sorrowful cow into the corral to the motherless calf. The cow sniffed the little calf and pushed it away with its head. The calf bawled but didn't leave. Again, the cow sniffed the calf, and then slowly licked its face. A second later the calf was nursing hungrily. "Success!" Randy exclaimed.

By then, it was time for lunch, and I was hungry! We headed for the ranch house where lunch was waiting. Mom grew up on a ranch, so with her stories about making big meals for the hands in mind, I expected a real spread. And what a meal it was, fried potatoes, canned corn and green beans, fresh-baked rolls, and for the main course, liver. Liver! I couldn't believe my eyes; I hate liver. To be polite, I took the smallest piece available and tried to hide the taste with lots of ketchup. Despite those measures, I could not bear to eat it. Randy saw me fiddling with the liver. "You don't have to eat it. I don't like liver either," he offered. Fortunately, there was banana cream pie for desert.

After lunch, Mr. Patridge met me in the barn. His horse was saddled, and he had one of the hands putting a saddle on the pony. He explained that the pony was for his granddaughter, but that it needed some breaking.

"You ever ridden," he asked?

"No," I replied looking a little sheepish. "This is the first time."

"That explains the boots." Cowboy boots don't have laces, hooks, or anything to get caught in the stirrups if you get thrown. You don't want to be dragged with a boot caught in a stirrup. Well, no matter. She's a small pony, and you're a big boy. I don't see you getting thrown."

She doesn't look so small, I thought. "What's the pony's name?" I asked.

"She doesn't have a name yet. My granddaughter will give her a name when she's hers. Pony will do for now."

I wasn't sure what was involved with breaking Pony, but I had been to the National Western Stock Show and Rodeo at the Denver Coliseum with Dad to watch the saddle bronc riding. Images of horses bucking and cowboys flying through the air filled my mind as I put my left leg in the stirrup and pulled myself into the saddle. Pony raised her head and turned to look at me with one eye as if to ask, "What do you think you're doing?" I could feel her tensing beneath me.

We started out of the barn and into the corral. No sooner had we gone ten feet into the corral than Pony reared up. I was just getting settled in the saddle and wasn't expecting this. I slid off the saddle and came down on my butt. The ground was soft, so I wasn't hurt, but my hand came down in a fresh cow pattie. Mr. Patridge asked if I was OK, then after determining that there was no permanent damage, directed me to the horse tank to wash my hands. "Get back in the saddle," he ordered.

I looked hard at Pony, then climbed back aboard. She walked off behind Mr. Patridge's mare as if nothing had happened, but I could tell she was not happy with me on her back. "Keep the balls of your feet in the stirrups and your toes pointed in. That will help you stay on if she rears again," he suggested. We rode away from the barn and corral and into the hills and gullies full of sage, prairie grass, and cactus.

About five miles later, Pony decided she wanted a snack and started eating the grass that grew alongside a small creek. "Don't let her do that!" Mr. Patridge yelled. "Pull her head up!" So I yanked hard on the reins, which startled Pony and she reared again, this time sending me into the creek. Then off she galloped with Mr. Patridge in hot pursuit. The cold water broke my fall.

I sat on a rock on the bank of the creek trying to dry out. About the time I was ready to start walking back to the ranch, Mr. Patridge rode up with Pony in tow.

"You OK?" he asked. I said I was while doing my best not to let him know that I was tired of being thrown by his little horse. "You're doing fine. She'll be better this time. Let's try it again."

So, back in the saddle, riding with the balls of my feet in the stirrups and my toes pointed in, we started back to the ranch. This time, I was going to show her who was boss. I tightened the reins in my left hand so that my hand was resting on her neck, which kept her head up at all times. When she started to head in the wrong direction, I pulled hard in the opposite direction to keep her headed where I wanted her to go. When she started to gallop, I pulled back even harder, slowing her down. Eventually, just as the ranch came back into sight, she reared again. But this time, I was ready for her. I leaned forward in the saddle and squeezed with my legs around her. I stayed in the saddle. After a few small hops and snorts, she settled down and started following the mare back to the ranch. I could sense a change in her; she was no longer fighting me.

Boys, Here's What Happened

We rode into the corral just as the sun was starting to drop behind the purple foothills that formed the western edge of the ranch. I led Pony into her stall and followed Mr. Patridge's instructions for taking the saddle off and brushing her. I rubbed her neck, fed her an apple, spread fresh hay in her stall, and then filled her bucket with oats. As I turned my back and was walking out of the stall, she put her head on my back and gave me a shove. She was happy to see me go.

Walking out of the barn, I saw Mom's '52 Chevy pull into the drive at Mr. Patridge's house. He threw an arm around my shoulders as we walked to the car.

"You did good today," he said with a smile. "That pony finally respects you, and I think she may be ready for my granddaughter."

As we came to the car, Mr. Patridge said hello to Mom and told her I did a fine job. He came around to my side where I was sitting and looking forward to going home. He stuck his hand through the window to shake my hand and said thanks again. I felt something in my hand and looked down. I was holding a folded crisp ten-dollar bill. "That's for doing good work," he said as he walked back to the house. "And wear cowboy boots next time."