



“Blessed Be the Horses!”

A Rare Glimpse into the Heart of a Cowboy

By: Sherry E Engler

His old dingy straw cowboy hat, boasting a few dents here and there and a few long term unidentifiable stains, rested gently on a make shift “doo rag” of an old worn red bandana, faded through years of wear, tied haphazardly on the upper back of his head in a knot to keep “the sweat from stinging his eyes.” His sunglasses, somewhat bent, crookedly graced his nose as he peered out over the Rye Creek Valley, just southwest of Oxbow Trail. He turned to me, his leather brown skin wrinkled from sun baked years in the Arizona sun, a smile flashing white as he threw his head back and shouted, “Life doesn’t get any better than this!” He sat in the saddle of his equine companion, Sissy, surveying the peacefulness of the jagged junipers and oak brush in the valley below; miles and miles of peacefulness. And I too realized the magnitude of this moment, being able to converse with one of the most talented cowboys who has ever ridden the vast lands of Rim Country. Shifting a bit in my saddle, I began my interrogation of interest in this curious cowboy.

Being respectful of his wishes to remain anonymous because he doesn’t like to be “pestered,” I will call him by his sometimes name, Ole Spec, and thus, I have also given his horse the alias of Sissy. Because we are so very blessed in Rim Country to be granted the privilege of exploring our amazing forest service lands, mountainous terrains and majestic valleys through riding trails, I wanted to ask this remarkable man, an overflowing fountain of equine knowledge, for some of his suggestions for being a successful horseman. I too ride horses but am far from being the horse expert he is.

“What have you gained most from riding horses?” I asked.

Surprisingly, his answer was unexpected. “The feeling of being wild and free!”

I thought maybe he would answer the typical answer of finding the inner strength to mount a horse after a bad horse wreck. (I’ve had a few of those and I can attest to the fact that it does take a MIGHTY HUGE amount of inner strength to put your foot back in the stirrup when you know your thigh is bruising and you’re pretty sure your leg may just fall off after landing on the granite rock.)

Ole Spec continued, “When the wind is rushing your face and you and your horse are at full gallop, running fast, as fast as the steed wants to go, there is no greater freedom and wildness than that moment when two crazy creatures work together simply to enjoy the speed of the wind... just because.”

Wow! That’s deep! Deeper than I imagined this conversation would go.

And here are some of the tips he gave me for being a successful horseman.

Learn the name of the equipment. Very important to know the difference between a bridle and halter. Learn what a stirrup, breast collar and bit are. Learn the equine equipment vocabulary.

Pick your horse carefully. Look into the eyes of the horse. Does it look scared? Does it seem tense? Are its ears lying flat on its head, with its lips pulled back to get a better bite of your hide with its large teeth? According to Ole Spec, it is very important to spend time with the horse and to bond with this large God given creature.

Always brush your horse before saddling up and, in his words, “For Heaven sakes, check the dang saddle blankets for fox tails and stickers! No dang horse likes a thorn sticking in its back!”

Always respect the size and temperament of these magnificent animals. He stresses that an animal of this size is only ridden because it decides it is okay to bond with humankind and, in order for that to happen, the horse must trust the rider. Trust is very, very important for both the horse and the rider. Horseback riding is teamwork between man and animal. When the horse bonds with man enough to want to please his human master, this is truly a cherished gift for the cowboy or horseman.

“One of the most important lessons for the cowboy to learn is persistence. You need to respect the horse but you can’t let it rule the roost. You must have patience to keep making the horse perform the task it needs to do and a determination bigger than that of the horse or you will sure regret it later.” Yeah, I can attest to this as well. I once had to walk four miles leading a horse because I thought the horse’s hoof was sore. Nope, just didn’t want me to ride him. Next time, it was very hard to get him to complete the ride home because he had tricked me once and maybe, just maybe, he could do it again.

In summary, Ole Spec urges anyone interested in learning “the ropes” of riding horses to talk to horse owners and professional cowboys or horsemen before making the considerable investment of an equine friend. Or perhaps try a riding stable. Horses do require daily care and attention which is a very important consideration. Also, the care of horses is financially demanding but, as Ole Spec says, “Who can put a price on heaven on earth? No cell phones! No stress! Just you and beautiful scenery throughout God’s country.”

Another interesting perspective from Ole Spec: “Horses have good days and bad days. They are just like us. They are just like people. And they have their own personalities. Some horses are sociable and like human friends. Others don’t. If they don’t, they may be more than a handful but they can be managed,” he declared as he lifted the sleeve of his shirt to show me a prominent scar from “managing a crazy headed demon.”

If you are already a horseman, there are quite a few trails in the Rim Country area to ride. The High Line Trail travels from the base of Pine to Highway 260; the General Crook Trail stretches on top of the Mogollon Rim; the Arizona Trail leads from Mexico to Utah and there are also the Horton Creek Trail and the Deer Creek Trail which boast beautiful paths, traveling by the creek side. Closer to Payson, there is the Boulder Trail, traversing from East Phoenix Street to the old Fox Farm.

For more experienced riders, the Barnhart Trail is located south of Payson but is very steep and difficult in very hazardous terrain and requires a very, very skilled rider as do other trails in the Mazatzal Wilderness. Ole Spec suggests checking with forest service officials to ensure horseback riding is permitted and to find if there are special regulations or concerns, as well as letting someone know when you are departing and will be returning for “good safety.”

Not being able to resist, I asked him, “Why do some people call you Ole Spec?”

Laughing very loudly, he responded, “Because most times, I wear spectacles, but sometimes, I am the spectacle!” And as they say in Hollywood, he rode off into the sunset laughing and laughing.

In closing, wishing you and yours a very blessed and Happy Thanksgiving. Be safe, God Bless and safe travels in cars, planes and on horses. As we partake in our Thanksgiving tradition of recognizing what we are thankful for, I will be thinking of Ole Spec and him declaring in cowboy tradition, “Blessed be the Horses!”