

“Whitey’ The Wonder Horse”
by Michael “Hawkeye” Herman

In the summer of '65, during summer break from going to college at the University of Iowa in Iowa City, instead of going home to Rock Island, IL and seeking summer employment while staying at my parents home, I went to the Chicago area to be near a girl I was dating who lived north of Chicago, in Waukegan, IL. I managed to rent an apartment on Sherman Ave. in Evanston, IL, on Lake Michigan just north of Chicago, and I started looking for a summer job in the area.

I got hired by Kelly's Day Camp, located in the countryside near the northwest suburb of Wheeling, IL. I drove a Kelly's Day Camp GMC Travel-All van and I picked up/dropped off campers on a local route from Evanston to Wheeling, as my job included driving the kids back/forth/morning/late afternoon to/from the camp. Because I had some experience in recreational horseback riding, I was hired to teach beginning horseback riding for the camp at a 'ranch' near Palatine, IL, about 15 miles from the camp. Throughout the day I drove the camp's Travel-All van to/from the stables loaded with the campers' for their horseback riding lessons at the 'ranch' near Palatine.

A huge stallion named 'Whitey' was brought out of the barn and into the corral by the ranch owner and she assigned the impressive equine to me as my 'personal steed for the summer', for me to ride while teaching the classes and trail rides.

On the first day of my teaching at the stables, after I'd helped each child into a saddled horse, I then lined up all the campers on their horses facing me so as to give them initial basic instructions on how to relax in the saddle, hold the reins, and control their horse.

As he stood motionless in the center of the corral, I mounted the huge stallion 'Whitey' to illustrate the basic riding instructions to the campers by my example. I got up in the saddle on 'Whitey' with no trouble, and I immediately took note of how tall horse was, and how high off the ground I was in the saddle. The minute I got settled and comfortable in the saddle and I'd started to quietly and patiently explain to the campers how to hold the reins, to my great surprise, 'Whitey' took off running and he jumped a nearby 5 ft. corral fence, with me hanging on for dear life in.

After jumping the corral fence, 'Whitey' stopped short, and without a lead/run up, he turned around and jumped back over the fence, he pranced proudly back to the original position in front of the kids, then front hoofed the ground a couple of times with one foot, he bobbed his head/nodding three times, the he bowed down low, he held that head-bowing position for a few seconds, and then he stood up stone/statue still at attention facing the campers on their horses who lined the edge of the corral.

My heart was pounding out of my chest while I caught my breath, I was an experienced recreational horse rider, but I was NEVER a horseback fence-jumper, nor any kind of jumping while on horseback, fences or otherwise, just quiet trail and pack riding was my experience.

As I caught my breath, I wiped my brow with my handkerchief, and I tried to compose myself. I could tell that the kids, each of them on horseback for the first time, were silently looking back and forth at each other with mouths agape in wide wonder and most likely all thinking to themselves; "Holy sh*t! We've got Roy Rogers for a riding instructor!!!"

At the end of that first class session, as the campers were loading into the van for the ride back to camp, I discreetly took the ranch owner aside and quietly asked the her about Whitey's spontaneous jumping habits and fancy maneuvers, and she responded, "Oh yes, I forgot to tell you, 'Whitey' is a

retired former circus trick-jumping stallion. Sometimes, out of boredom or for his own enjoyment he likes to show-off for people of his own volition, he jump fences and goes into his old circus tricks or routines. Don't worry, just hang on tight, and you won't get injured. He eventually settles down and behaves."

Throughout the summer 'Whitey' was generally very well-behaved and responsive, but sometimes, as I led the group on trail rides 'Whitey' would spontaneously start prancing, or turn around and go backwards on the trail for awhile, or turn and spin in place in circles. I always acted nonchalant about Whitey's antics, but all the while I made sure that I relaxed in the saddle, tried "not to worry, hung on to the reins," and I thankfully never got injured.

Needless to say, the camper-kids were very respectful, well-behaved, and attentive throughout the summer of riding lessons, and we all had a wonderful time.

'Whitey' made sure of that.

And thanks to 'Whitey', I learned, by default, how to jump a fence on horseback, whether I want to or not.

=====

=====