

On top of Old Smokey: Raising wild horses off the Red Desert

It was 1979 and we had just moved to Star Valley, Wyoming, for Dad's job as a big game biologist for the Wyoming Game and Fish Department. If you know where Star Valley is, then you know that a biologist needs horses to do wildlife surveys in that country. Although we had a couple of full-grown horses, Dad decided we needed a couple more. Money was tight but Dad had heard about adopting wild horses from the Bureau of Land Management (BLM).

We traveled to Rock Springs, where they held the Red Desert wild horse roundup; young horses that had just been weaned could be adopted for only \$25. Dad had told my brother and me that we were getting two horses and they were going to be ours to raise. I was very excited. I noticed a black one that I liked, probably from watching *Black Beauty*, but to my disappointment, Dad decided on another one.

I was only 8 years old at the time, but I vividly remember after

we got the horses loaded in the trailer, the horse that was going to be mine turned around and rode backward all the way home.

When we got them home, we tied them up in the corral for a day. We worked with them so they could get used to us. Finally, we let them go in the little corral with their halters still on. We spent a few hours every day those first few weeks just letting them get used to us by brushing them and teaching them to lead.

Eventually they would come up to us when we came out to work

with them, and we knew it was time to introduce them to more things. By this time we had named them; I chose Smokey for mine and my brother chose Duke for his.

We would tie them up and then put a saddle blanket on the corral poles next to them so they could smell it. From there, to get them used to it, we would slowly start rubbing the blanket on them, eventually getting to the point where we could leave the blanket. Next, we moved on to the saddle, doing the same thing until they would let us cinch it down.



Just home with the horses.

BLM roundups: past & present

Since the creation of the Wild Horse and Burro Program in 1971, the BLM has placed more than 240,000 wild horses and burros into private care.

Through its adoption and sales initiatives, the agency continues to work with organizations and individuals across the U.S. to place animals with qualified adopters and owners. Like Old Smokey, many adopted animals have become excellent companions and work horses.

For more information on the BLM Wild Horse and Burro Program, visit blm.gov/whb.

This all happened over several months. By that time we were back in school. When we got home from school it was our job to go out and work with them for at least 20 minutes a night.

If you are considering adopting a wild horse, I would recommend that you plan on spending a lot of time training. Like any horse, a lot of training is required to make them a good horse.

By the next summer they were used to regular and pack saddles, and to having ropes rubbed all over them. We started loading the pack saddles with light loads and leading them around. We also worked to get them used to our other horses and to practice leading. We would take all of the horses up to the mountains and lead our young colts behind the older horses, hauling light loads in the pack saddles down the trails.

There were some interesting moments when the pack saddle

would rub against something and spook them. I remember one time when Smokey rubbed a pack saddle against a tree, and you would have sworn the biggest scariest monster was after him as he took off up the trail running. We finally caught him and got him settled down.

But it was just this type of experience that would eventually pay off. The more experience they had with different situations, the calmer they became.

These wild horses ended up being great horses and I believe they had more endurance, especially in the mountains, than the average horse. I also believe that getting these horses so young made them easier to train than older horses would have been.

We used to take them down to the neighbor's place about a half mile away to graze every day in the summer. We would take them down in the morning and then go get them in the late afternoon.

Well, I had the bright idea of saving time: I would take my bicycle, banana seat and all, and tie Smokey up behind me and run him down to the neighbors.

This worked fine for a couple of days, but one day on the way home, something spooked Smokey and he jerked that bike right out from underneath me. He proceeded to drag the bike around the neighborhood until the lead rope finally broke and he could get rid of that scary bike dragging

Me and Old Smokey.



behind him. Fortunately, neither I nor the horse was hurt—though my dad was not happy. The bike, on the other hand, didn't fare too well and required some welding to make it functional again.

By then the horses were big enough that we could start riding them. We did a lot of training in the winter. The 2 to 3 feet of snow on the ground made it harder for them to buck, and provided a softer landing if they did.

I don't remember much bucking, but I do remember one time I was riding Smokey on the road and made him go over a snowdrift into a field. He lunged over that snowdrift and I proceeded to fly over the top of the saddle horn and land on his neck. Smokey just stood there like it was no big deal.

We took these horses on a lot of pack and hunting trips in the mountains of western Wyoming and even through Yellowstone Park. They turned out to be very calm and sturdy mountain horses.

Dad would even lend them out to people without worry. One time when Smokey was lent out, the rider rode him down a hill to get a drink out of a stream. When Smokey leaned down to get a drink, the saddle slid right down his neck, depositing the saddle—and rider—into the stream. Unfazed, Smokey stepped back out of the saddle and went to the side to finish his drink.

We ended up moving and having to sell the horses. Dad sold them to a good outfitter friend. They were about 12 years old when we

sold them, but the outfitter said they were two of the best mountain horses he had ever owned. Years later he told Dad a story about standing on top of Old Smokey, using a chainsaw to saw limbs off trees (not a practice any safety officer would recommend). Old Smokey just stood there, calm as could be.

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