

A Horse Story **By Sam Morton**

How horses bonded a lifelong relationship between an impoverished people and a young girl on the frontier.

The site of their father riding up the far lane sent the three young children into frenzy to relay the news. "There's daddy." Running up the hard packed Montana ground were, in the lead, Jesse Lynch 10, Carol 8, and finally JP, 5. Jack Lynch reined up his gelding and watched his children. His oldest daughter arrived first; "Daddy, you have to stop grandma! She says she's riding over to the Crow reservation by herself." "It's too far. Daddy," Carol pleaded. Jack reached down to scoop up JP, who eased up to his father's stirrup with up lifted hands and was pulled into the saddle. The gelding, within site of the barn, threw his nose foreword but stood still until given the cue from his rider. When JP settled into the saddle in front of his father, Jack gave the gelding his head. The boy looked up at his father. "Will the Crow get grandma, Daddy?" The father looked slightly perturbed. "No, but I imagine she may have some trouble with some gates if she rides across country."

Jessica Lynch now eighty, had come to Montana as a four year old girl, six years after Colonel Custer had ridden to his death at the hand of Sioux and Cheyenne warriors. Her father had homesteaded near Lame Deer in 1883. The family moved to Rosebud Creek when the Government established the Cheyenne reservation. Jessica soon became fluent in Cheyenne playing with the children. Her Cheyenne name was *Mal Wissa* which translates into Yellow Haired Girl. She was the first English teacher at the La Sabre mission on the reservation. She met warriors who had fought against the U.S. cavalry at the Rosebud and Little Bighorn battles, lived through Indian uprisings and killing winters.

The Cheyenne tribe had used Jessica, while still a young girl, to negotiate with the Government over the prices of horses sold to the Army for the Spanish American War because they knew she would not cheat them.

When she was young, there were tens of thousands of horses running on the open range in southern Montana. Some were pure bred stock imported by wealthy English sportsmen, some were ranch horses and others were wild or range horses. As far back as anyone white or Indian could remember, there had been a legend of a dominant yellow or Palomino stallions running wild in the area. Wild horses captured from the Palomino stallions herd had made names for them selves as famous war horses, buffalo runners and latter as top ranch horses, bucking horses and one had even made it to England as a foxhunter. What no one had ever done was to capture any of these stallions, though over the years every one from Plains Indians to range horse men had tried. The yellow stallion's band had eluded the great slaughter on the Crow reservation in 1926 of 40,000 head of wild horses. The Cheyenne had built up a good line of horses to trade with the whites but in 1912 the government confiscated all their horses and issued the poor ones back to them as meat. The better horses were just stolen.

Since she heard her son found the carcass of a dead yellow stallion Jessica had been despondent now everyone was giving her a wide berth. She had been testy and told the children she was leaving on an overnight ride. When her son and three grandchildren entered the house somewhat pensively she was in the process of packing. "One person tries to talk me out of this, I'll give them a crack on the head with the wooden spoon!" she said. J.P. walked over to Jessica and in as mild a voice as he could muster and still be heard said, "I'll go with you grandma. I can ride Stinker."

"You're not riding my pony, J.P. The Crow will steal him!" Carol said. To everyone's surprise, Jessica let out a great laugh. You people act like I'm crazy. I'm only going over to look at the dead stud horse your father said he saw earlier this week."

Jack looked at his mother and back at the kids. "You kids go get ready for supper, I need to talk with grandma." Jessica whirled at her son. "Jack, I don't need to make a damn circus out of this. I'm feeling pretty good now and it may be my last chance to do something like this. Besides, I may just kick my heels up and swing down and stay at the Lodge Grass Motor Court." They both knew there was no such place but there were scattered ranches along the way.

"I can pull the trailer with a couple of saddle horses. We could make a half day ride out of it." Jack offered. But she waved him off. I want to see this country from the back of a horse. It was with some trepidation that Jack watched his mother ride out the next morning leading a pack horse.

Once away from the ranch a feeling came over her she had not felt in years. In a half day she was riding into the foothills of the Wolf Mountains. Her mind began to unwind. She had seen the first trains come and then twenty years later the automobile. She had seen thousands of horses shipped off for the Spanish American War, then the Boer War and both World Wars but the pilgrimage to see the dead stallion was sad in its own way. Range horseman Tom McAllister had told her at a Forsythe horse sale that he had seen three yellow two stallions over forty years that he thought were father, son and grandson that ran bands of mares over the years. She had never seen one but if her son had seen one dead, it was likely to be the last of them.

It was on the third morning that she rode up on the decaying carcass of a horse at the foothills of the Wolf Mountains west of Rosebud Creek. His eyes were gone and his intestines had been pulled out but his yellow coat still bore its color. One ear appeared to be frost bit. Jessica hobbled her mare and sat and let her hand run over the dead stallions' hair. She thought of her friend Tanya Short Bull who had been sent off to Oklahoma in 1877 with the rest of the Northern Cheyenne. Tanya had been only seven and her sister was nine. The move did not take, and after they were treated poorly in the south and became sick from the climate, the Cheyenne became homesick and three hundred broke out and fled north. Over ten thousand soldiers were dispatched in pursuit. Tanya's band with chief Dull Knife were caught, locked up and starved during a winter storm at Fort Robinson, Nebraska. A desperate breakout resulted in Tanya's sister being shot next to her. Her sisters dying breath told Tanya to run through the snow and follow her people.

Through the snow Tanya found the Cheyenne who were given a reservation in the Wolf Mountains. Jessica had taught Tanya English. She had seen men go off to fight in the Spanish American War, the Great War in France and the Second World War. The Army buyers were through buying horses. The soldiers used jeeps to go cross country now. The cowboys used them to chase down the wild horses. She suspected they used a plane to run this stud to death.

Alone on a grass covered knoll Jessica Lynch, now in the winter of her life, let her self cry. This horse's death meant more than just a dead animal. For her it was the end of several wild eras. She cried for a full minuet like her heart would break and in a while she stopped and felt better. She took out a pocket knife and cut a strand of tail hair from the dead stallion. She unhobbled her mare, stood and brushed a gray wisp of hair from her face and under her slouch hat. She smiled at how excited she would have been as a young girl to know someday she would have a strand of tail hair from the great yellow stallion's bloodline. Instead of riding south she rode north towards Crow Agency. She would stop and have Grace Yellow Tail make three bead bracelets for her grand kids with the tail hair and spend some time visiting. Her thoughts drifted back to her youth and arriving on the frontier. There was a freedom to those times; rich or poor. She remembered the excitement of seeing her first buffalo from the rail of a steam boat on the Yellowstone...