

## Commentary

# Riding back in time to rodeo days

By Barbara L. Sherf



Even though he doesn't smoke, my soon-to-be-79-year-old father, Charlie, is the quintessential "Marlboro Man." Dad grew up on a farm in Maple Shade with two brothers and two sisters. There, he developed a lifelong love of horses and learned about "the power of the almighty buck."

He talks about working 60-hour weeks in the 1940s, picking tomatoes and transporting them by mule team to Campbell's Soup, where he earned \$30. He turned that money over to his mother, who gave him \$10 back.

The big bucks came on Saturday nights. Under the bright lights at Cowntown Rodeo near Woodstown, or at one of the other local rodeos that used to dot the region, he would receive \$5 for a ride of a mere eight seconds on a bull or horse. He got to pocket the entire prize!

Of his four children, I was the only one infected by Dad's love of horses. I remember many Saturdays hanging around a barn in Pennypack Park, cleaning a horse and taking turns riding the trails. I rode through high school, but became too busy with college, career and marriage to ride again regularly.

Some folks get red convertibles in midlife; I got back into riding horses. In October 2005, I joined the Philadelphia Saddle Club, where, for a relatively low monthly fee, I could ride any of five horses as much as I wanted to in Fairmount Park's beautiful Wissahickon Valley. Soon Dad was coming to the stable to see me ride. He was happy to see me back in the saddle, but he was also frustrated sitting on the fence.

I started snooping around Monastery Stable in Mount Airy and found a man who wanted his horse ridden a bit more, particularly during the week. Dad met Mark and his horse, Wyatt. They shared a few rodeo stories, and the deal was done. Since then, Dad and I have been riding together once a week, telling tall tales. After a long ride, we go out to a local pub for a beer and a sandwich and, of course, share more stories.

On one of our outings, Dad told me about the happiest day in his life. I thought it might be his wedding day or the birth of his first child, but no, it was the day he and his buddy, Charlie Pfluger, rode Pfluger's horse to a dude ranch in Camden to look at a horse for Dad.

Dad, then 15, had managed to save up \$75 - a tidy sum in the 1940s. He got a deal on a one-eyed horse whom he named Paint. He didn't even have the extra \$5 for an army saddle, so he rode home bareback. He no longer had to ride the farm horses or mules; he had a horse of his own, and he was in love with him. Still is.

I'd been urging Dad to write down his stories, and he started doing so. Here's a twist on the Paint story, one Dad shared through his writing: "After a lot of biting and scratching, it became evident to me that

we brought other things home from Ray Hinkson's Dude Ranch besides pure, unadulterated pleasure. Paint had fleas." He then detailed how he and Pfluger treated Paint with kerosene and hid him in the far side of the barn, hoping his Uncle John would not find out and "send us all packing."

The stories continued with one about how he and Pfluger went to Willow Grove Park for a week to ride in a rodeo. "I'll never forget the business lessons I learned that summer. They had a nice arena in Willow Grove Park, and the rodeo organizers promised us good money for evening performances. They even gave us meal tickets, fed our horses, and gave us free carnival rides. It was too good to be true. We were supposed to get \$300 a piece for the week, which was a lot of money in those days. Well, at the end of the week we all got nice fat checks, and they all bounced. Never did catch those scoundrels."

For his love of horses, the weekly rides, and the precious stories, all I can say is, "Thanks, Dad." Now stop your yackin' and let's ride!

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