

The "Horse Guy" goes to Town

A story by LF Lavery

Sharon Center was what you could call a "sleepy little town" in 1974. About 1200 people lived in the Western Reserve style village, most of them involved in farming. The town square was actually a circle with a gazebo and majestic Oak trees giving it a park like atmosphere. There on the circle you could find the US Post office, the Baptist church, the tiny bank (once robbed by the Dillinger gang in 1933 and still talked about on a daily basis...this was big!) Brownie's Grocery (Brownie was also the town Sheriff and head of the volunteer Fire and Rescue), a tiny combination beauty and barber shop, the feed store, the town hall which hosted the Friday Fish Fry, with proceeds going to the Fire and Rescue, and the most successful business in town, Stauffer's Hardware. At Stauffer's you could find anything needed to fix, build, remodel, plumb, wire, tune up, tighten up, tear down, paint, paper, insulate and even redecorate as they sold some furniture on the second floor. If you can understand that 3 people together was like seeing a "crowd" in downtown Sharon Center, then know that the hardware store was always "crowded". Farmers came and went from the minute the store opened until it closed. Since Sam Walton had not invaded the North yet, Stauffer's served many communities and really was the only game in town.

Although I had lived there nearly ten years, I was still considered a "newcomer". In a small town like Sharon, where everyone is virtually related to everyone else, strangers had a very difficult time breaking into their exclusive club. I had heard the whispers. When I first moved there and had started building the barn, the talk was it was going to be a factory for remaking the Edsel car, a chicken ranch for KFC, a building for growing mushrooms. When it finally became apparent it was going to be a stable, a great honor was bestowed upon me. I was from then on to be known as the Horse Guy. Only about three people in Sharon knew me by my name. To the others I was, indeed, the Horse Guy. One day, early in December, the TV and Radio started warning us about a possible snowstorm to hit that afternoon and night. We lived about 100 yards from the barn, the help, in an apartment attached to it, so the warning about travel meant little to us. We just went on working horses in our heated barn and occasionally commented about how hard the rain was coming down on the roof. Around quitting time,

what we thought was rain had stopped, leaving the sidewalks, driveways, trees and shrubs blanketed in about an inch of sparkling ice. The walk to our house was an extremely cold and very slippery experience with the drooping branches of the trees adding an obstacle course feeling. We were glad to shut the door to mud room and get into a warm house. With boots and heavy coats off and having changed into some comfortable attire, we settled in for a cozy evening at home. Some large snowflakes began to fall, the wind was picking up and the temperature was dropping.

The first clue I had there was something wrong came the next morning. For several minutes I had been awake waiting for and staring at the electric alarm clock that normally would sound at this time. It was now very much past 5:00, I was certain, the time I usually got out of bed. The light had gone out on the clock. I threw the covers back and immediately became aware of yet another problem. It was very cold! It was extremely bright outside for this time of day and as I exhaled, I could see my breath. I fooled with the lamp for a time before it occurred to me there was no electricity. I quickly threw some clothes on and went to the basement of the 140- year old house to check on the fuse box. There was always something in these old houses going wrong, wiring, plumbing or something. The old basement was a good deal warmer than upstairs so I spent quite a bit of time with my flashlight checking each fuse. Nothing. My next thought was an ugly one and I went to use the phone to call the GD electric company to find out why they had cut my power off! Five AM or not, I was going to raise some hell with someone there. There was no dial tone, even after I slammed the phone down on the receiver several times. I walked over to the television, like horses we are beasts of habit. Of course it would not come on and I was secretly very happy no one was awake to see me do such a stupid thing. I did catch myself before trying to brew coffee in the Mr. Coffee. I walked to the front door, opened it and then tried to open the storm door. It would not budge. I then heard an explosion of some kind or if not an explosion a bang loud enough to wake the dead and Renee and our sons and the dogs. Before my very eyes a giant branch from one of the huge Elm trees that bordered our front yard came crashing down with powdered snow and splinters of ice flying everywhere. It was at least two feet thick where it had snapped from the trunk. As I looked to see where it had landed, I noticed it was resting about eye level to me. This seemed odd but as I looked closer I saw why. It had landed on every bit of 3 feet of snow. I now

understood why there was no power and why I could not get the storm door to open. I moved to a larger window and saw branches down everywhere along what was, yesterday, our road, which now was indiscernible because of the deep snow. Wires drooped everywhere as well. I got the sinking feeling the four of us and our two dogs, an Irish Setter and Whippet, were trapped in the frozen house by the largest snow fall I had ever seen.

By this time, the entire family was awake with Renee and the boys shivering as they peered out the windows and the dogs just looking a little confused. Mark, the youngest at that time, was really excited to see so much snow and was already begging to go sledding. Renee was concerned about the cold and was lighting the burners and oven of the gas stove. Why hadn't I thought of that? Joe was barely visible wrapped in the blankets from his bed looking very much like some kind of sleeping or comatose Indian. The dogs were now looking at me and then at the door, not knowing that a huge snowdrift had made it impossible to open. They were like a pair of large spurs on my heels as I walked to the mud- room to see if that door would open. Fortunately, it faced east and gave little resistance as I pushed it open, the bottom moving only about 6 inches of snow as the door opened across the porch. The Whippet was about to treat me to one of the most astonishing magic tricks I had ever seen. The ground was usually about 18 inches down from the level of the porch with a wide concrete step making the trip a bit easier. On this day, the ground, I mean the snow, was about 2 feet higher than the porch. "And for her first magic trick, the amazing Rowdy the Whippet, will now jump up on to the snow." Her leap was exceptional. She hit the snow about 6 feet away from the porch and promptly disappeared without even a "now for my next magic trick." Kelly, the Setter, took a different course and direction. More from Army Tank School of transportation, she simply plowed her way through it for about ten feet. Her head would be visible every three feet or so as she made her way to wherever. She stopped and appeared to gather that, not only was this a futile trip to nowhere but also turning around was going to take some serious thought. Fortunately, she had long hair to keep warm and was capable of getting her head above the snow so I turned my attention to Rowdy, the vanishing Whippet, still no where to be seen. I called, nothing. I whistled, nothing. I certainly wasn't looking forward to my next move. I really didn't have a choice. I lifted my leg high in the air and stepped down, up, whatever, from the porch

My left, bedroom slippared, foot plunged through the snow and finally hit something semi solid. I raised my right leg and put it into the snow a little ahead of the left. It too plunged until it finally found something solid. I was off the porch but was now standing up to my waist in very cold snow. Attempting to lift my leg to make some forward progress towards the magical Rowdy only produced two revelations, I was only able raise it up enough to have lost the slipper and there would be no forward progress. In a futile and not very brilliant attempt to improve my situation, I placed my hands ahead of me to help me extract my leg. They were not long enough to find anything solid. The instant I was left "kissing" the snow with my hands touching nothing of substance, I realized it was a dumb idea and now understood how people often die in a snowstorm in Montana or somewhere out west. I was only inches from the porch and had gotten myself in a situation where it was nearly impossible for me to move in any direction let alone raise my face out of the snow. I should have been terrified but was only mortified at how ridiculous I must look bent over with my face and arms in the snow. It would be very embarrassing to be found dead in the spring frozen in this position...especially only inches from the porch! Much like not stopping to ask for directions, pride and vanity prevented me from calling for help. "I got myself into this, I can get myself out", I thought. Suddenly, much like Moses and the Red Sea, the snow to my immediate right was parting and there like a beacon of hope was Kelly's red head. Finding it near impossible to turn around in the deep snow, she had made a circle back to the porch and there, in her wake, was Rowdy the Magnificent. Both dogs were now on the porch looking like they were more worried about getting into the house than concerned for me. Fortunately, the Kelly "snow canal" was so close to me I was able to wriggle my right leg into it where I sort of laid back removed my left foot and then was able to raise my head and torso up turn slightly and crawl to the safety of the porch. I stood there a moment, no slippers, shivering and thinking how oddly we sometimes learn a life's lesson. Sometimes you get the dog.... sometimes the dog gets you!

After having a semblance of a breakfast, I dressed in more appropriate winter clothes and footwear, found a snow shovel and began my excursion to the barn. The hundred-yard trip took about one hour and a half. Had Mark and Joe not helped, I probably would have made it a little quicker. Though the work was tiring I was very proud of our two- foot wide superhighway! The dogs liked it as well. The boys at the barn had already shoveled their

way to the stable with their engineering efforts on a much larger scale than mine. The five foot wide sidewalk was completely clear, as was the thirty-foot front porch along with a wide path to their apartment and one to the back barn. Well, there were four of them! The rest of the morning was spent getting grain out of the oat bin, thawing snow to water the horses, making certain all doors could open, checking water pipes, changing tail sets, hand walking and fooling with some of the old kerosene heaters I had had from years ago. The barn was tight and with 30 horses in it, it was actually quite comfortable. The back barn where we kept the School horses and broodmares was in pretty good shape as well. The arena, on the other hand, was like a Maytag Deep Freezer, with the footing frozen solid. As I went down to the house that afternoon, I surveyed the situation. The horses have water, grain and hay. We could get them out in case of a fire. Water pipes are covered. The boy's apartment was holding it's own with the gas oven and stove on. I was taking a small kerosene heater with me to the house. I had about 20 gallons of kerosene as aside from heaters, I used it to wash clipper blades, as an ingredient in "Lavery" brace liniment, in my special tail conditioner, in a hoof grease I made and even to wash windows. They say my Grandfather came here from Ireland with a can of Irish Reducine in each back pocket. I am certain he also had a large can of kerosene. Mark's sled was buried just about where I had been stuck this morning and he apparently felt sledding had lost some of its attraction to him. Renee had drafted Joey to help around the house, doing much as we had done at the barn. They obviously had been busy as the snow was off the porches; the house was pretty warm as was the dinner. During dinner I learned that Joe and Mark had dug a toilet for the dogs. (Why didn't I think of that?) The bathtub was filled with slowly melting snow. (Not yellow snow I was assured!) Via transistor radio we got the news that this was the storm of the decade, in fact, the worst in almost 50 years. Everything was closed for lack of power, broken water pipes, or roads that were yet to be plowed. All in all we were luckier than most, we decided, we were in good shape and ready to ride this out.

The next morning came and saw the house reasonably warm but we still could see no road where we remembered it being, only snow drifts and of course, no power. Things went much more smoothly at the barn and we were able to ride a few up and down the aisle in the stable part. All in all we were doing pretty good except we were using a lot of kerosene what with the lanterns,

lamps and three heaters. I was certain we would be okay till they got us plowed out in the morning. That night, the transistor radio, now our only link to the civilized world, told of super highways with only one lane clear, local roads that were impassable, thousands still without power and more snow to come that night. We were young and tough, we were up to the challenges and decided to have a bit of a "snow bound" party and we invited the boys from the barn down to a really wonderful dinner that I had no idea how Renee had prepared it. As I got the last beer for Remundo and then poured the last of the Jack Daniels for myself, reality sank in! I would be needing supplies shortly!! Surely they would have the road plowed by tonight.

The third morning all was pretty much the same. No electric, no road, cold with about 2 more inches of snow. Not to mention how the situation had drastically deteriorated since last night, as there was no more Jack Daniels, Renee gave me another grim report, we were out of milk, eggs, cereal, coffee and of course everything else that had been in the Refrigerator. With 3 and half feet of snow and temperatures in the low 20's, frozen food was still abundant. We also were out of kerosene and would need some tonight before it got dark and even colder. The report from the guys at the barn was very similar. Drastic action was needed if we were to survive! Well, to at least be reasonably comfortable. There was no getting around it and I was the guy to do it. I would save the day! I would provide, I would suffer the hardship, brave the freezing weather, put my life on the line.....I would ride to town for supplies!

His name was Dude. He was about a 12 year old Quarter horse gelding we were then using in the lesson program. He had come to us by way of Tommy Manion, one of the top quarter horse men in Texas at that time. He had been Tommy's young daughter's horse and he was broke to death. Before Tommy had got him he had been through the typical Quarter/ Ranch horse regime of the day and had all the old war wounds to prove it. Healed tongue, basal dents on his nose, old rope burns on his legs, accented by a bad wire cut, tack scars on his neck and chest, a lot of white hair on his wither and near the cinch. That was how they did things back then and although not very pretty his "school of hard knocks" had really educated him. You could rope from him, herd with him, drag a log with him, capture another horse with him, trick ride on him, spin him a little and slide a pretty good stop with him. At that time I couldn't think of anything you couldn't do with ole Dude.

He was just about "bomb proof" and a natural for my emergency 2- mile ride to town. Like all real cowboy heroes, I would also be accompanied by a "sidekick", Joe had his heart set on going with me. His mount would be the spotted Shetland, Merrylegs. Joe was 10 years old and had been riding him since he was a tiny child and Legs was an old pony then. There was no telling how old he was now. Surprisingly, Legs was just as capable of throwing an adult, as he was being a suitable ride for a small child. I always assumed, that because of his small stature, he had a Napoleon complex and enjoyed flexing it on large people. He would bite and kick an adult as well but for some reason he just liked children, especially Joe. Dressed in the warmest clothes we could find that still offered us a bit of cowboy flair, we threw the western saddles on our mounts and prepared to leave on our mission of mercy. Joe beat me out of the barn and said he would meet me at what used to be the road. I gathered some burlap grain sacks and a couple of gunnysacks to carry our supplies in on the ride home. I mounted and walked out the door and immediately almost ran over Joey and Merry legs as they had only gone about 5 feet before getting bogged down and stuck in the deep snow. We understood that old wild west term "breaking trail" much better now and we agreed Dude and I would ride point and Joe would sing or whistle occasionally so I could find him, as it was damn hard to see him behind me in the deep snow trail Dude was cutting. We were off!

By the time we went from the back barn up the driveway to where Ridgewood road was supposed to be, it became very clear that this was going to take a good deal of time. As stout and fit as Dude was, it was taking quite a bit of effort and time making any progress in the deep snow. In the best tradition of the old west, we had started our trek at high noon. At the rate we were going I figured it would take nearly an hour to ride up the hill to Sharon Center. Joe and Legs were fairing very well in the track that Dude was cutting and the little pony was not having to struggle and I judged would make the trip easily. Borrowing a quote from the Duke, I said to Joe, "Let's go partner, were burning daylight" and we turned west and headed down the road or at least where I thought it should be. The first mile was pretty easy as most of it was downhill and east/west roads such as this get very little drifting. The scenery with the Sun shining on the iced trees and glazed snow was pretty spectacular. There was no wind and everything was so still as to be almost surreal. At the bottom of the hill, where there had been an intersection of Ridgewood and State Rt. 94 just a few days before,

we stopped to rest our steeds and to assess our progress. Dude was not warm or blowing and Legs was pretty much the same. Joe said he was warm enough. This was the "point of no return" if you will, as we were about halfway there. This turn to the left would take us a mile up a very steep hill and into Sharon on a State route that was not yet plowed. After a few minutes we started again. State 94 ran North and South and drifting was bad in several places. Once, Dude almost became stuck in a 4- foot drift. With some effort we backed out of it and detoured around. We were forced to repeat this about three times going up the steep hill. All went well but Dude was a little winded and heated up and some steam was starting to rise from him. At the top of the hill, in sight of "downtown" Sharon Center, we stopped again to rest our horses. I had figured wrong, we had already been gone 2 hours. As soon as everyone was breathing normally we started the last leg of the first half of our mission of mercy. The "Magnificent 2" were about to enter the "pueblo." Although I could hear the theme song in my mind a bad thought interrupted the music. It occurred to me we might be entering a ghost town. How stupid I was to have thought anything would be open in Sharon with impassable roads, freezing temperatures and no electricity? What if we had made this trip for nothing? What if a horse got hurt for nothing? What if Joe or I froze to death for nothing? What about the Jack Daniels?

As it turned out, my worry was for nothing. The closer we got to the center of town the more people I could see. There were three, no five, 10, 15, 20. Unbelievably, there were at least 100 people up ahead just standing there. More than I had ever seen in "downtown" Sharon at one time, unless it was during the Memorial Day Parade! The closer we got and the more they came into view I noticed all eyes were on us. Why not? Here we were, two real cowboys, well Horse Guys, riding up over the crest of the hill with the steam from Dude rising and surrounding us like a spooky mist. As we had just come up that hill it was obvious from the pristine snow we the first to have attempted to navigate it in three days. I was starting to feel something like the conquering hero, returning to his people. Caesar returning to Rome, Lindburgh to New York, Macarthur to the Philippines, Lavery to Sharon Center! I sat a little taller in the saddle and told Joey we were going to jog a little. We picked up the pace for the last 100 yards in an attempt to look a little more fancy to the "civilians". They began to wave at us and we waved back. That day, I think we were even bigger than the Memorial Day parade,

Hell, this might be as big a moment as when Dillinger robbed the bank back in '33! As we passed closer to "my" people, a sort of hush fell over the crowd but I could hear the whispers, "That's the Horse Guy, that's the Horse Guy." They, of course, were right. I was the Horse Guy and damn proud of it! I noticed we were now leading a parade ourselves. The crowd was following us! We reined up in front of Stauffer's, I stepped down and tied Dude and Legs to a porch post, got Joey down and waved once more at our adoring fans, turned and walked into Stauffer's. As they say in show business "What an entrance!" Now to the supplies. I planned to get some Sterno, some lamp oil and I had remembered seeing a really neat, compact propane heater there several weeks earlier. The heater was about the size of a phone book, was made out of tin and it was powered by two little propane tanks. It was very light and inexpensive. I bought 4 of them along with the Sterno and lamp oil. We loaded them in one of the feedbags and returned to the horses. The crowd had not moved and when we came out, they again went hush. As I lifted the sack with the heater up to tie it on the saddle the tin heaters rattled a little and Dude gave it a funny look. I took it in front of him rattled it a little until he seemed to understand it was not a threat. I tied it on the near side cantle saddle string and elected to lead him over to Brownie's Grocery so he would get used to it being there, I was the Horse Guy, after all. The snow around the circle was pretty much tramped down by all the people so it was an easy 50 -yard walk. I tied our horses to another porch post and again waved to the crowd, which had continued to follow us. We went in and continued to fill the rest of our supply order, milk, canned goods, butter, bread, coffee, etc. I carefully loaded all into the gunnysacks and the remaining feedbag. It is important that one balances the load when packing out and I, being the Horse Guy, made sure all was right. I used the feedbag with the canned goods on the off side cantle saddle strings to balance the heaters and propane tanks on the other side. I placed the remaining gunnysacks on both the left and right saddle strings at the pommel. I had already placed the Jack Daniels in my coat. This entire procedure was being very closely monitored by the citizenry of Sharon. We were ready for the trip home!

I got Joe situated on his pony, tightened cinches and the cargo. As I turned and saw the crowd still watching us intently in complete silence, I gave some thought into the possibility of making some sort of little speech to "my" people. Not anything long and ostentatious just something simple to

commemorate the occasion. A kind of "thank you for coming out/ I shall return" type of thing. These people, most of who lived within a few hundred yards of the circle, were surely starved for any excitement and probably completely consumed with three days of "cabin fever". I had an idea of how much we had brightened their day. I thought about it and settled on the less is better approach and merely smiled and waved slightly as I untied Dude and prepared to mount for the trip home. I always say, "hindsight is 20-20". It was at this point that a little thought and foresight might have come in very handy. Had I given it any thought what so ever, I would have mounted in a normal way just like a regular horse guy and would have not thought about impressing them with a fancy, swing into the saddle, cowboy vault. What happened next still plays in painful slow motion in my mind. I grabbed the saddle horn with both hands, swung my right leg back kicked forward as I pulled on the horn and seemingly effortlessly flew through the air on my way to the saddle. Tom Mix has never done it better, with one exception. Tom never got his right spur caught in the burlap feed sack carrying the heaters. As the sack was not very heavy, I was able to take it with my spur to the complete other side of Dude where it landed against the canned goods. I myself was slowed by this and found myself only an awkward, halfway in the saddle. Fortunately, I would not be there, half on and half off, for very long. The sound the two sacks made when they came into contact was more of a very loud rattle than a thud, which would come later. However one describes it, I had apparently not desensitized Dude to it. He took a pretty big jump to the side and then both sacks hit him in the flank and the next jump was forward. I don't know exactly how far because I was no longer with him. Somewhere between the first and second jump...I produced the thud as I landed on my back, in the snow at the feet of my adoring crowd, I looking up, they looking down. I was a little stunned, not hurt, physically but what I heard from the back of the crowd caused a little mental anguish, "What happened, what happened?" The answer came....."THE HORSE GUY FELL OFF!" When I got to my feet, Joe had already caught Dude and he led him over to me. I quickly got busy rearranging everything so I could make a fast exit from town. I mounted, like just any other horse guy, and we turned to ride home. Unlike when we rode in, thankfully, no one was paying much attention as we left with the crowd now moving back towards the hardware store. Out of the mouths of babes..... Joe asked if I was cold as my face was so red. I ignored him and was thankful he was the only one to see.