

## Chapter 1

### Life With a Horse Trader

Sometimes trading a team of horses can upset a family more than almost anything else. Especially if the father is a horse trader by trade and is married to another horse lover who gives birth to sons also destined to be horse lovers.

Such was the case with the Rouse family a long generation ago in the Gallatin Valley of Montana.

Clifford Rouse and his older brother Floyd arrived home from school one spring day to find their mother in tears. She was not one to cry easily; and Cliff, who entered the kitchen while Floyd headed for the barn, was alarmed.

“What’s the matter, Mama?” he asked softly. “Is something wrong?”

She brushed away wisps of blond hair that strayed down to mingle with her tears.

“Oh, no, she said. “Nothing’s wrong. Not really. It’s just that your father has traded off our beautiful team of horses for a no-good team of bays.” Quietly, almost to herself, she added, “Fox was such a beauty. Why did I ever marry a horse trader?”

With a sinking heart, Cliff thought of the reddish-gold gelding with the white-stocking feet and a blaze on his face.

After drying her eyes on a corner of her apron, Mama looked at Cliff. “I shouldn’t have said that. I really do love your father.” Without further comment, she busied herself in the kitchen.

Bewildered by this sudden development, Cliff stood before the kitchen window reflecting on this new situation and gazing across the green pastures and fields to the snowcapped mountains in the distance. He knew that the team of trotting horses had been his mother’s pride and joy.

Floyd’s voice suddenly interrupted his thoughts.

“Hey, Cliff! Come out and see the new team Papa just bought.” Reluctantly Cliff joined his brother, and the two boys headed for the barn. “One of ‘em’s an outlaw!” Floyd added, nearly bursting with excitement.

“Really?” Cliff asked, showing new interest in the situation.

“Sure enough. She kilted a man. That’s how Papa got ‘er so cheap.”

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Their father met them at the barn door. "Don't you boys go near those horses," his stern voice warned.

And there, in the same stall where Red and Fox had so recently stood, was a team of bays. One mare was very gentle, father told them. But the one called Topsy carried a reputation like the gunmen of Grandpa's day: she had killed a man.

"So that's Topsy," Cliff mused, folding his arms over his chest. "She doesn't look mean to me. I'll bet her owner had been mean to 'er," he reasoned.

"Just the same, you keep away from her," his father ordered. "She just might kick, or she could strike quick as lightning with her front feet." He picked up a pitchfork and tossed the horses some hay.

Cliff dared not say anything about it, but he had a hankering to help Topsy adjust to her new home. He decided to start with a few acts of kindness.

In the days that followed, when no one else was around, he would scoop up a handful of oats and toss it into her feedbox. Topsy responded at once. Whenever she saw Cliff coming into the barn or approaching the corral, she would give a soft whinny\* Love gradually begat love, and in a very short time she came right up to the gate to see if he might have a carrot or a piece of bread to share with her. Then he stroked her soft neck gently.

Later in the spring, Father won the bid on a job to gravel the streets of the little Montana town of Three Forks near the headwaters of the Missouri River. With three teams and wagons and two hired men, he prepared to set off, leaving Cliff and Floyd to take care of things at home. Of course they were eager to go along and assured their father that they were big enough to shovel gravel.

"Well, let's see," he responded. "If you both went with me, who would help at home?" That made them feel they were needed, and it was a nice way of saying No. There wouldn't be any shoveling of gravel by hand, anyway, he assured them. It would all be hauled with dump wagons, and a road grader would spread it on the streets.

But Cliffs disappointment soon turned to pleasure at the thought of looking after Topsy. She would be lonely when all the other horses were away. His mother also shared his devotion to the horse, and he noticed the little attentions she gave Topsy.

Mother had established an early reputation as an expert horsewoman. Prior to her marriage she always drove her own horses.

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The single harness which she had used on Belle, her driving horse, was carefully stored along with her own buggy in the barn.

One day while Father was away at Three Forks, Mother found she needed some things from town. Of course, whenever she needed to run errands or wanted to shop, Grandpa Rouse, who lived nearby, would take her. But this time she had other plans. Perhaps her cowgirl upbringing led her to believe she could handle Topsy for herself for this trip. She told Cliff she had decided to hitch Topsy to her buggy. She was satisfied, she said, that Topsy had proven to be a gentle and manageable horse. Besides, she added, her trip with the horse would be a surprise to Father when he came home. Why bother her in-laws to run errands for her?

Fearing that Topsy would become excited, Mother would not allow either Cliff or Floyd to help her harness Topsy or hitch the horse to the buggy. So Cliff watched silently, his eagerness dampened by his mother's caution.

"You boys stand back while I hitch Topsy. She has never been driven single before, and I don't know what she might do."

"Mama doesn't act excited or talk scared," Floyd whispered.

"I know," Cliff agreed, "and Topsy listens to her. She knows all that Mama says." He wasn't too sure of Topsy's intentions, but he admired his mother's ability to handle the horse.

He watched as the shafts were raised and fastened and the tugs hooked. Topsy stood motionless, just like an experienced horse, and when Mother picked up the lines and stepped into the buggy, the mare moved off with ease, as if she had done that sort of thing all her life. Cliff followed the buggy to the hitching post at the front of the house and waited while his mother went inside to change her clothes for town.

"Mama, may I go with you?" Cliff asked politely, as she took the reins and settled herself into the buggy seat.

"No, Son. I want you to stay here and help take care of the house while I am gone. If you will help Floyd take care of the younger children, I will bring you something from town."

Cliff knew better than to beg, and as Topsy left the yard at a brisk trot, he turned away quickly so Mother would not see his tears of disappointment.

It seemed like a long time before Topsy wheeled into the yard again. Mother stepped down from the buggy with several paper-wrapped packages in her hands and then unloaded a huge box of

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groceries. She hadn't forgotten the treat she had promised. Soon the children's mouths and faces reflected their enjoyment of the licorice she had brought them.

Then she told them about her trip to town. Everything had gone well with Topsy until they descended a hill, crossed a little creek, and started up the other side of the grade. When Topsy began the pull up the steepest part of the hill, the buggy shafts dropped down. Mother at once drew up the lines and called, "Whoa!" Topsy stopped at once and waited calmly while Mother blocked the buggy wheels with rocks so it could not roll backward.

Then she commanded Topsy to back up a step or two so the shafts could be put into place again and the tugs tightened a notch. She sighed with relief at the mare's obedience, realizing that if the horse had become excited there could have been a serious runaway.

"Bless old Topsy," she said, as Cliff listened solemnly. "That's what I call horse sense."

Cliff gave a sigh of relief also, proud that his mother had handled the situation so calmly and determined to be as good with horses as she.

When Father returned home from the graveling job at Three Forks, he was indeed surprised when he found that Mother had been driving Topsy hitched to the buggy. As soon as he could spare a little time, he saddled and rode Topsy. She seemed gentle and well behaved. Before long he allowed Cliff to ride her, and she was a joy to ride. Cliff wondered how it happened that she had come to the ranch with a bad reputation that seemed to follow her everywhere, in spite of her good present behavior.

One day not long afterward, Father needed a team of workhorses from the pasture. "Floyd - Clifford - I want you to go out to the pasture and get Deck and Don. Take their halters and some oats, and they will come right to you."

"May we take Topsy?" Cliff asked, hesitating. "It's at least a mile to the pasture."

"If you hitch her to the buggy, you may, but I don't want you riding that mare and leading horses behind her. If a rope should get under her tail, you could have a Wild West show right quick; and somebody might get hurt."

Always glad for the opportunity to drive Topsy, the boys quickly harnessed the horse. With the halter ropes and a few oats in a bucket, they started for the pasture with Topsy and the buggy. After tying her

to a fencepost near the gate, they went up the hill looking for Deck and Don. Soon they found the horses and led them toward the pasture gate. There the boys' grandfather met them.

"Where's your father?" Grandpa inquired.

"He's at home," the boys replied.

"Who drove that horse?" Grandpa asked, motioning to Topsy.

"I did," Floyd answered.

"Well!" their grandfather answered in surprise. "Your Pa should know better than that. She's not safe for boys to handle." He paused. "Get in," he motioned toward the buggy. "I'll drive her home."

Cliff hopped on the back of the buggy, holding the team's halter ropes in his hands. Floyd untied Topsy and quickly stepped into the buggy. Before he could sit down, Topsy took off like a racehorse at the shot of a gun, with a burst of speed that amazed even Grandpa. He braced his feet against the dashboard, his face grim as he took a viselike grip on the reins, and away they dashed for home.

Cliff, sitting with his feet hanging over the endgate of the buggy and his hands holding the halter ropes for Deck and Don, was yanked off the buggy with Topsy's first leap. The slow-paced workhorses were not ready for a race and needed more time to get under way.

A few minutes later Mother looked out the kitchen window and gave a little gasp. Topsy raced into the dooryard with the buggy careening on two wheels. The plucky little bay drew up to the hitching post, a cloud of dust following her, as she skidded to an abrupt halt.

"Where's Clifford?" Mother called anxiously.

"I don't know," Floyd exclaimed, turning around on the buggy seat. "He was on the back of the buggy when we started home." He jumped to the ground, walking back to the yard gate, and looked down the road toward the pasture. There came Cliff, plodding along, leading the two workhorses.

"I tell you, Pearl, that horse is plumb dangerous!" Grandpa almost shouted. "I don't know why in the world Lee ever let those boys drive her. He ought to know better than that." He shook his head and started walking toward home, mumbling to himself.

His whole family seemed to revolve around horses, and for Cliff to dream of the horses in his future came quite naturally. Cliff often heard his grandfather tell how he had spent much of his first thirty years in the West on horseback. Cliff's father later went into partnership with Grandpa, and together they bought and sold horses. Cliff could not remember his first horseback ride - he had been too young.

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Before automobiles and tractors, all farm work and transportation was horsepowered. Automobiles were just coming into general use when Cliff was a boy. Occasionally a car would drive past his grandparents' house. If he happened to be visiting there, Cliff would run out to the road and smell the tracks, like a dog sniffing a rabbit's trail. He was intrigued by the smell of the exhaust, thinking it came from the wheel tracks.

About that time Cliff's Uncle Claude bought a Maxwell touring car with jump seats. Cliff marveled at it. The driver sat on the right side, and the gearshift lever was outside on the running board. It had a shiny brass radiator and carbide lights.

Even so, nearly everyone still had driving horses and work teams. Most of the horses that traveled the hard roads were shod to keep their hooves in good condition. Many of them were brought to the blacksmith shop owned by Cliff's Uncle Claude to be shod. Cliff loitered around the blacksmith shop whenever he could, helping with things that a boy could do.

Working at the blacksmith's shop one day, resetting the iron tires on the wheels of his wagon, Father looked up from his work to see Cliff lugging an old saddle toward the shop. Just then Uncle Claude stepped to the door, and the two men watched the boy struggling along with his oversize load.

"Where do you suppose the saddle is going with that boy?" Uncle Claude asked with a grin.

Then father recognized the saddle. "What are you doing with Grandpa's old saddle, Son?"

"Grandpa told me I could use it, so I want to get it fixed up," Cliff answered.

"It needs a lot of fixing, all right," his father observed. "No cinch, no stirrups."

"Grandpa said it had a lot of 'sentimility,' but I couldn't see anything about it that looked so bad," Cliff replied.

The two men smiled at Cliff's misunderstood word. Cliff remembered that Grandpa had said he had used the saddle when he worked as an Indian scout for the U.S. Army along with Jim Bridger - an old frontiersman and trailblazer of the West.

"That old leather needs some limbering up," Uncle Claude commented, rubbing the stiff straps with his strong hands.

Cliff looked up at his uncle. "Do you have some leather limberer?"

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"You just take some mutton or beef tallow," Uncle Claude instructed, "and rub it into the leather. Work it in with your hands till it feels soft again. It will take a lot of rubbing," he warned.

"I think there are some old stirrups and cinches in the harness room," Father added. "Go find Grandpa and see if he will help you find the right parts."

It wasn't long before Cliff returned to the blacksmith shop with his hands full of saddle parts that Grandpa had given him. Grandpa donated the tallow. Floyd came along too, carrying some of the old cinches and straps. Since they were fixing up Grandpa's saddle so they could use it, Floyd said it might as well have two cinches on it, like all the Montana and Wyoming cowboys used on their saddles.

Several days later, while his father was plowing and Floyd was away helping Grandpa plant potatoes, Cliff took down Grandpa's saddle and put it on Topsy, not noticing how she humped her back during the process. After tightening the cinch straps, Cliff put his foot in the stirrup, grabbed the saddle horn, and swung up into the seat.

Then, unexpectedly, Topsy began to buck. It happened so fast that Cliff, taken by surprise, went sailing over her head and landed on the ground in a heap. He lay there, shocked and humiliated, with the breath knocked out of him. Soon he saw Mother coming on the run, calling, "Are you hurt?" Then he began to cry.

After being so shaken up, Cliff felt sure he had a serious injury of some kind. But when his father examined him, he could find no damage.

"Aw, you're not hurt," he told Cliff sternly. "Topsy just crow-hopped a little. Now get up and quit your bawling. The best medicine for you is to get right back on that horse and ride 'er."

Cliff dusted off his overalls and cautiously mounted again. Topsy seemed jittery but she calmed down as he sat on her back.

"I wonder what was the matter with her, Papa?" Cliff asked.

"Twas probably that double cinch you boys put on that saddle," his father observed. "Topsy isn't used to it. When the Montana cowboys used to go to Pendleton in the early days, they would buy Oregon horses to use on their cattle drives. When they put their double-cinch saddles on those horses, they expected to have a Wild West show."

"Even broke horses?" Cliff wondered.

"Sure - at least they were sold for broke horses," his father said with a chuckle.

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“Did the Oregon cowboys use single-cinch saddles?”

“That’s what I’ve been told.”

Cliff hesitated for a few moments.

“Do you think I should take that back cinch off?” he asked.

“That won’t be necessary now that Topsy has become accustomed to it. She won’t buck with you again,” Father told him. But next time you saddle a horse, you better watch out for warning signals.”

“What do you mean by warning signals?”

“Oh, like when she lays her ears back or humps her back or dances around.”

“Well - she did act kind of strange,” Cliff admitted, looking away sheepishly. “I should have known. Wow! She sure did surprise me.”