



# FAHLEEN — THE CLOWN

By Heather Smith Thomas had her for only seven years, but in that short time she changed my life. She was a chestnut Arab-Thoroughbred mare named Fahleen. A clown, a sassy, naughty redhead, she had a unique sense of humor and tremendous athletic ability; she was one of the best range-riding, long-distance horse I ever owned.

She came into my life on a cold day in March, 1967 (exactly a year after my husband Lynn and I were married), a wobbly-legged filly with an irregular marking on her face. She was very independent and often exasperating to handle. Her Thoroughbred mother, Nell, came from a long line of very independent equines and Fahleen was a challenge to train. I had to earn her respect. In reality, she was training me.

As time went on, she came to accept and tolerate me,

and then to think of me as a second mother, trusting me as completely as I trusted her. After I'd ridden her for two years, our relationship was well grounded in trust. I could do anything with her that she considered reasonable, and we were a team.

Our first years together, however, were very trying, partly because of her unique sense of humor. She was more like a big monkey than a horse, doing all kinds of un-horse-like activities to entertain herself. She'd often toss her grain tub into the air, or fling the water hose over her head. She beat on her water tank



with a front foot if it wasn't full enough to suit her. I had to use a metal tank because she thought rubber tubs were just for playing soccer. Sometimes she'd take the top strand of fence wire in her teeth and pluck it like a banjo string, just to hear the sound it made.

She was bold and curious. When she was young, there was only an electric wire separating her part of the pasture from our hayfields. If the electricity went off, she immediately knew it, and walked over or under the wire. She wasn't afraid of anything, and would walk on the ice-covered creek in the winter without hesitation.

Her boldness sometimes got her into trouble, like trying to open gates with her front feet. When she was 4 she got her foot caught in a gate, and by the time she pulled free, she had injured the joints in her lower leg. The leg swelled up as big as a fencepost, in spite of the cold water and ice I soaked it in (using a tall homemade soaking boot created from a rubber inner tube, held in place with a leather strap over her back). She could hardly walk for several days, and I wasn't able to ride her that year.

She also had another problem. Her digestive tract was very sensitive, perhaps from early worm damage as a young horse. She was the first of my foals born on this ranch, the spring we moved here after Lynn and I were married. The pasture where we kept Nell



and foal had been used for decades by horses of previous owners, and was probably contaminated with worm eggs.

Fahleen had a tendency to colic, so I limited the amount of cold water she drank at any one time while working hard, even though a horse needs to drink a lot during a day's work on the range to keep from becoming dehydrated. I discovered her extra-sensitivity after she drank from a cold stream in the mountains one hot day when I was searching for stray cattle. Even though I limited her to about 12 swallows at a time and spaced her drinks over several stream crossings, she got gut cramps, wanting to lie down and roll. I led her home 10 miles, wearing holes in the soles of my old boots.

I also discovered she couldn't tolerate grain, but she stayed fit and energetic on good hay. Since she was in such good physical condition from our range chores



and cow checking, I rode her on several endurance rides during the early 1970's. She was less apt to colic on a hard ride if she wasn't fed grain.

Fahleen did very well on endurance rides because of her fast trot and stamina, but during the 60-mile Bitterroot Ride (at Hamilton, Montana), we had an accident coming into a checkpoint near the end of the ride. As we waited our turn to be checked, a young girl rode up behind us. Her horse bumped Fahleen, who jumped sideways and collided with a parked car. Her hind leg caught under the bumper, taking the skin off the cannon bone. She finished the ride without lameness, and one of the vets helped me clip the dangling flap of skin off her leg after the ride. I hosed the leg with cold water for several hours, to reduce any pain or swelling. She traveled sound the next morning at the final vet check in spite of the injury.

She was fun to ride because she put her whole heart into it. Her tremendous trot was a joy. You really haven't lived until you've ridden a trot like that for 40 miles; it's like flying! This was her kind of sport and she loved it. Forty miles in 6 hours, 30 miles in 5 hours, 20 miles in 2 hours. For pure heart and willingness, and athletic endurance she was the

best. She always looked good after a ride, full of eager energy, looking like she could easily go another 40 miles and relish every minute of it.

She was a great range-riding horse for the same reason, carrying me 20 to 30 miles in an afternoon checking cattle, water troughs, fences and gates. The summer she was a 6-year-old I rode her more than 2500 miles, partly on competitive rides, but most of it was riding range.

Fahleen was an eager traveler and a willing cowhorse. I also used her to mark trail for our 40-mile Salmon River Ride, carrying bags of spray-painted red paper plates tied behind my saddle. Most of the ride looped through our cattle range and I tied paper plates to sagebrush and trees to mark the trail. We'd gather all the plates afterward, before the cows tore them off.

The first year, she was still pretty green, and unsure about those big bags of paper plates. My kids were still too young to ride with me, so I was riding by myself. As we came around an open hillside a gust of wind hit as I dismounted to tie a plate on a small bush, and I lost the bag of plates I was holding—and red plates went flying across the mountainside. It spooked Fahleen and she took off, scattering plates as she jumped

and bucked. I called to her, and she turned around and stood wide-eyed and trembling as I caught her and then gathered up plates.

She was a smart mare, and a wonderful partner. But I only got to ride her a few years. The spring she was 7, we competed on a 40-mile ride (placing 2nd in the lightweight division). I planned to do more distance rides that summer, but it didn't happen. True to form, she got into trouble because of her exuberant nature. But this time it was serious trouble and there was no way out of it. She was bucking, leaping and playing in her pen, expressing violent displeasure because I had walked through her pen to go catch one of the yearlings and hadn't stopped to catch her. In her burst of activity she must have twisted her intestine, probably by charging full speed from one side of the pen to the other, stopping abruptly and then flinging herself off bucking in another direction.

When she ceased her violent exertions, she was in pain. She began to paw, and then to roll, breaking out in a sweat. I gave her an injection of smooth-muscle relaxant (the standard drug for colic, in those days) to help ease the gut cramping. I walked her around, so she wouldn't plop down and roll. She got better for a little while



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and then steadily worse again, descending into pain and shock.

Our two veterinarians came out to the ranch and examined her, and suspected a twisted gut. But there was nothing they could do. She needed surgery, but they had no facility for doing equine abdominal surgery at their clinic. We would have to trailer her 140 miles to the closest equine hospital, over winding mountain roads, or 170 miles to a big town in the other direction. She was in no shape to withstand that trip.

So all we could do was treat her for shock and relieve her pain with drugs, walking her when the pain made her want to go down. She was cold, from shock and drenched with sweat, so we blanketed her. As the drugs relieved the terrible pain, she didn't try so much to crash down and thrash, and we were able to let her rest. There wasn't much more we could do but stay with her, comforting her, easing her pain—as hope sifted away and we began to realize she wouldn't survive this trauma. And a person does hope, always. There's just something inside us that won't let go until it is utterly hopeless.

She finally became too weak to stand, and my husband trudged to the house to get a gun and end her pain, but before he could return, Fahleen died with her head in my arms, cradled in my lap, trusting me. My brave, good mare, not



afraid of death as humans are, but merely puzzled because her strong young body was failing. And as she nickered softly in those last moments before she went down, I had the feeling she was seeing things beyond me, something I couldn't see.

When Fahleen went out of my life I realized I lost a lot more than a horse. I lost a good friend. And it took a long time before I could think about her without a tear in my eye. The empty corral in front of the house was a constant reminder. I had to walk through it daily to go feed and water the other horses. I used to wake up in the night and look out the window to check on her, to make sure she was ok after a hard ride or a long day chasing cattle. I'd wake up and then realize she was no longer there.

A hundred little things kept reminding me about her through

each day--the trails we traveled together, the wire gate on the range that she caught her foot in and tore apart (I still think of her every time I open it, and we call it Fahleen's gate), the place on a trail where she spooked at a grouse flying up.

Many years have passed since I lost that mare, and time has blunted the sharp pain of loss, but not the wealth of memories. She taught me a lot; she fine-tuned my horsemanship and understanding of horses, and gave me much more than I was ever able to give her. I've raised, trained and ridden a lot of good horses since Fahleen, but in so many ways she was different, and very special. Like the teacher who is exasperated by (and yet eventually so proud of) the smart-aleck kid in class who ends up being head and shoulders above the rest, I am glad that I knew her, that her life touched mine, that for awhile we traveled our paths together.

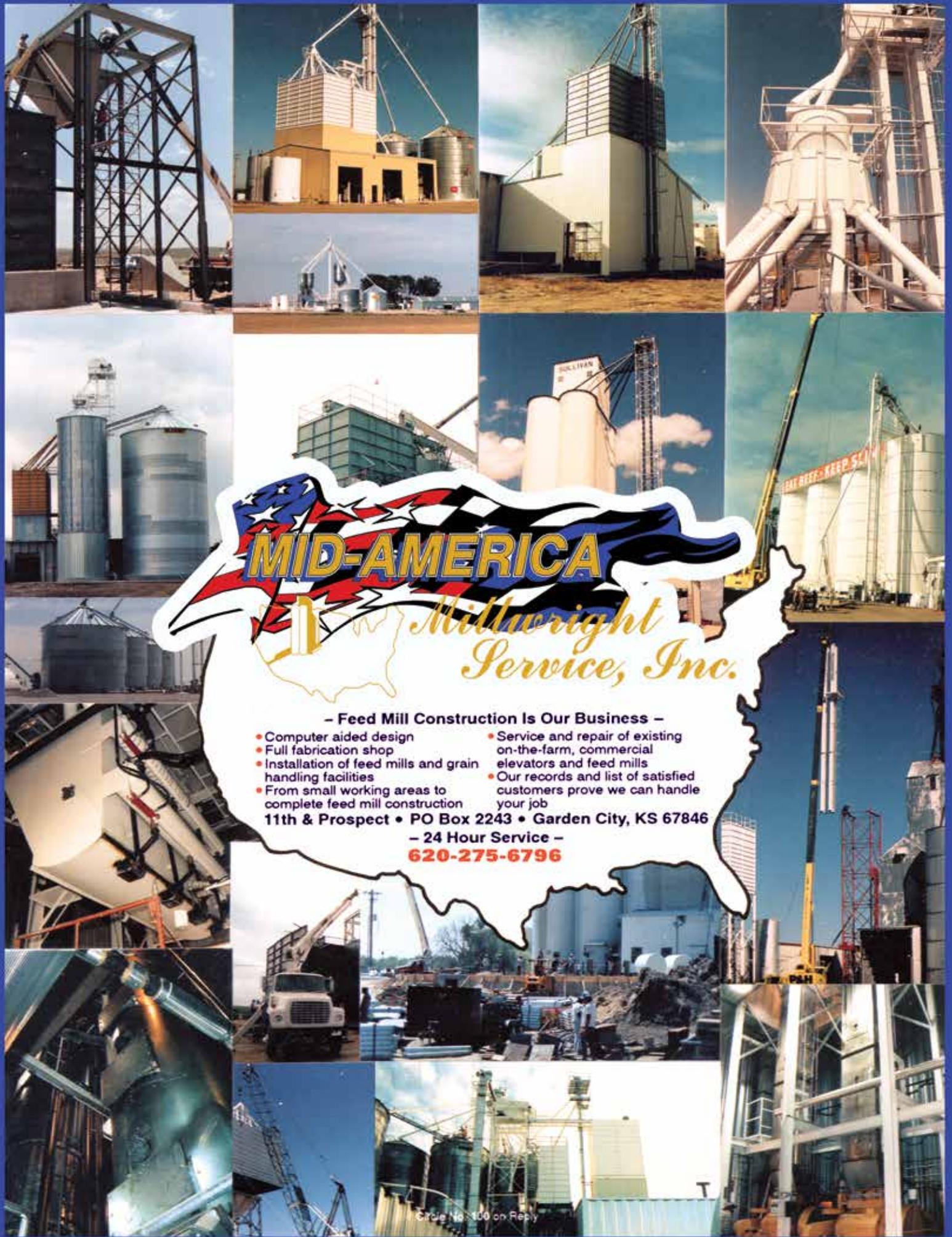
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