

Ahmahl the Clown

By Heather Smith Thomas

After my husband Lynn and I were married, we bred my old Thoroughbred mare Nell to an Arabian stallion, to raise a foal for my younger sister. Nell had a little bay colt in April 1968. He and my first child arrived within a few days of each other. Lynn and I named our son Michael. My little sis named Nell's foal Ahmahl.

In late summer my parents moved to Montana but didn't have a place to keep horses at their new home, so Nell and her foal stayed here. My folks rented their house to a family that had a German Shepherd. Not long after they moved in, the dog chased Nell and Ahmahl around the pasture and put the foal through the fence, slicing one hock clear into the joint, leaking joint fluid.

Our vet examined the wound, and injected the joint. The foal's leg was so stiff and sore that he could hardly walk. Lynn and I treated his hock for more than two months, until my dad came to take the mare and foal to their new home in Montana. The hock joint remained noticeably large for a year or so, but he was no longer lame.

Ahmahl hated dogs! If a stray dog wandered through, he chased them out—going after them with his front feet and teeth. No dog was safe around him.

When he was a 2-year-old, my sister started training Ahmahl. Dad helped her, leading him while she was on his back. On one of those early rides he tried to jump around a little but Dad was holding onto him—so he reared up, and then bucked, and dumped her off.

She rode him for a few weeks, but then bought a 5-year-old Arabian stallion, and started competing on endurance rides. She didn't have time to continue training Ahmahl. Then the summer of 1974, I lost my best horse to colic. My sister realized she didn't really need Ahmahl—since she was so busy campaigning her stallion on endurance rides. So she

gave me 6-year-old Ahmahl as a replacement for the mare I lost.

Ahmahl was still green and hadn't been ridden for four years. He was goofy, and liked to buck a little if we were galloping. I rode him every day riding range, checking and moving cattle, and he became a good cowhorse.

He had a lot of heart and endurance and wasn't afraid of anything. This was a great asset one spring day the next year when we were moving some cows and calves. We had a horned Hereford bull named Little John with that group and we were bringing them up to the corral to sort and put out on the range.

Lynn and I were following the herd up into a smaller pasture and I was riding Ahmahl. Little John was notorious for herding his cows; he didn't want them to be near any other bulls, and he'd herd them away from the fence. That day, he knew his harem was moving into risky territory. He went charging toward the front of the herd to head them off so they couldn't go through the next gate. I galloped up there on Ahmahl to keep the bull from stopping the cows.

The bull was angry, and as we caught up with him to chase him away from the gate he was trying to block, Little John took a swipe at us with his horns. Ahmahl never faltered; he simply reared up and struck the bull in the head with his front feet. That started Little John; he wasn't expecting to be hit in the face with shod hooves, and he backed off. Ahmahl and I held off the bull so the cows could funnel through the gate. I've had some good cowhorses that wouldn't back down from a job and really put their heart in it, but I'd never had one put their front feet into it, too!

Ahmahl was a big clown with a sense of humor. He was always doing little tricks to try to get the best of people. If I was brushing him, saddling, getting ready to bridle him, or whatever, he



might nonchalantly step on my foot and then turn around and look at me as if to say, oh, did I do that? One day he casually clomped down and caught both my boot toes under his foot. I soon learned to react to every little hint of movement by moving my feet out of harm's way.

To elaborate on his wicked sense of humor—the second year I had him, he bucked me off three times. The first time was on one of our first rides after his winter vacation, riding down our snowy road—with big drifts on each side. When we were about half a mile from home, a car came up the road, and I didn't want to get off in the drift. I galloped Ahmahl to a jeep road turn-off, to get off the main road and out of the way before the car got to us.

The gallop turned into a buck as we headed up onto the jeep road. He bucked down the hill and lost me after about the fourth buck. He was a strong and agile buck and knew he could get rid of a rider (after having dumped my sister when she was starting his training). He gleefully left me sitting in the snowdrift and galloped home. I got up out of the snow and jogged home after him.

Later that spring I was moving cows through a brushy area along Baker Creek, moving them from the low range to the middle range pasture. Ahmahl and I were on the rim, the creek was down in a canyon, and we were going through some brush and rocks to follow some cattle. He suddenly bucked and I wasn't prepared for it, so he easily lost me and ran across the draw and over the hill and home. I

had to jog more than a mile that time; he was back in the barnyard happily munching grass when I caught up with him.

I rode him nearly every day checking range cattle through the next month and he never tried to buck. In July I rode him on a 40-mile endurance ride and placed second. I planned to go to several more endurance rides that summer.

Then he scraped his back, rolling on a rock in his pen, and I gave him 10 days off to let it heal so my saddle wouldn't open up the scab. During that time I rode one of our old horses to check cows. The first ride after his layoff, I made a fast six-hour loop checking range cows, and started home. Coming down a mountain trail I found another group of cows and checked them off in my cow book. After checking off those cows and calves, I was tucking my little notebook back in my hip pocket, riding on a loose rein, and he took that opportunity to buck, knowing I wasn't prepared to stop him. As I catapulted up into the air all I had time to do was yell his name!

We were going downhill on a steep trail, so it was a long way to the ground after he pitched me up over his head. I did a forward roll, landing between two big rocks. My guardian angel was on duty, because my only injuries were a cut ear and a bruised, sprained shoulder.

Ahmahl ran a short distance, then stopped to graze. I'm glad he didn't try to run home that time; we were several miles from home and my shoulder

hurt badly. He was smart. He knew he couldn't run all the way home because there was a gate we had to go through, about a mile farther down the mountain. So he let me walk up and catch him, all innocent-like as if he'd done nothing wrong.

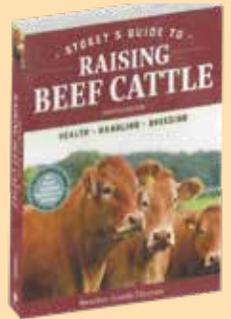
I had little trouble getting through the gate and getting the tight wire gate shut again with just one good arm, and mounting him again. But he seemed to know that he needed to be a good boy (he didn't mean to do me harm; bucking was just fun and games). He stood very still as I struggled to get on him.

He never bucked me off again—I always rode him like a green horse after that, prepared for anything, never with loose reins, and he knew it was pointless to try. He knew that I knew that he knew, and we got along just fine after that.

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Ahmahl on bridge - Bitterroot Ride.

