

A Weekend ON THE RANCH



By *Melody De Lappe*

Frequent *TMH* contributor, Melody De Lappe, and daughter Shelby, spend the weekend at the Taber's LittleWood Morgans in Idaho. Their travel journal and photographs take us back in time, and prove that the Morgan is an ideal ranch horse.

Friday, July 12, 2013 - 8:00 AM -

It is a beautiful Northwest summer day with temperatures in the high 80s and clear blue skies as my daughter, Shelby, and I set off on our trip to rural Southern Idaho to visit the Taber Family and their herd of working Morgans. The family members are Darren and Amie Taber, and their three children Martin (age 14), Moira (age 12), and Megan (age 8). We are both so excited to make this 1,300 mile road trip not only because it is our last adventure together before Shelby heads off to college, but we are also going to learn something new about this breed we love, the Morgan horse. Coming primarily from a background of arena and show riding, we can't believe our good fortune knowing that we will be experiencing firsthand what it is like to work cows, ride a reining pattern, and much more. Can't wait!

10:30 PM - We have gone through several geographical changes today—the Cascade Mountains of Washington, the wheat farmlands of the Palouse, through the Willowa Mountains of Oregon, and now onto the high desert of the Snake River Plain in Idaho. We are only an hour and a half away, but it is dark and we need to stop for the night. I've texted Amie to let her know we will be there early in the morning.

Saturday, July 13, 2013 - 11:00 AM -

Amie greets us warmly at the "Arts in the Park" event in Shoshone (pronounced Show-Shone), Idaho. The park is full of local artisans, good food and fiddlers playing onstage. It is one week before the Lincoln County Rodeo, and Amie and her daughter Moira, who is the current Lincoln County Rodeo Princess, are busy with their "Queening" responsibilities which include staffing an information booth at the park where they are promoting the Rodeo. Moira looks beautiful in her princess regalia, and she answers questions and sells tickets with the poise of someone much older than her 12 years. Helping her is rodeo queen contestant Cara Malone, who looks and sounds the part with her friendly smile and helpful demeanor.

I've never heard of queening (suburbanite that I am). Amie explains that Queening is the process that leads up to and happens during the selection of a rodeo queen and princess. The job of a rodeo queen is not just to look pretty, carry flags and wave at the audience from atop horseback (so yes, they do need to be able to ride, and riding well is a big plus), but they must also be knowledgeable about rodeos, ranching, agriculture, current events, and the history of the particular organization they represent. They must be approachable, and willing to share this information. They are, in short, ambassadors for

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1. Darren Taber readies LittleWood Inside Strait a.k.a. Dusty for their Cow Cutting competition; 2. Left to right: Moira, Amie, Megan and Martin relax and enjoy the beautiful evening on their farm while laughing at the goat's antics.



OPPOSITE PAGE: Background: Panoramic view of the trail ride at House Creek Ranch. Thousands of acres of high desert pasture and scrub brush; 1. Cow cutting competition; 2. Shelby De Lappe has a reining lesson on Dusty; 3. Megan Taber tries to catch Angel to put her in her pen; 4. Amie Taber and Pepper wait for their drill team presentation of the American flag; 5. Shelby and Melody De Lappe.

the lifestyle they embody. Amie went on to explain that at a rodeo, the contestants and those putting the rodeo on are busy every minute, and rarely have time to answer questions or schmooze with the public, so the rodeo royalty fills that role. In the weeks (and for the serious contestant, months) leading up to being crowned, the girls prepare for the competition by being coached on how to prepare a speech, wear the appropriate fashion, answer impromptu questions, and ride a horsemanship pattern—possibly on a horse they've never ridden before. "Queening is how I got involved with horses as a teen," Amie explained. "If it weren't for Queening and the opportunities it provided me, I would not be the rider I am today. It's quite possible I would not have been involved with horses today. That very dedicated group of women donated their time to improve our horsemanship in and out of the saddle. That was the first time I had any formal/professional coaching. It was through that program that other opportunities opened up." Admirably, Amie is passing this legacy on to another generation of young girls who might not otherwise have any professional coaching on horsemanship. Even better they are getting this experience on Morgans!

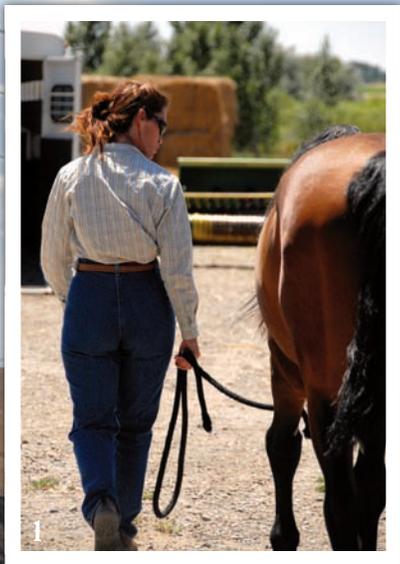
1:00 PM — We have driven through miles of beautiful high desert scrub brush and farmland and have arrived at the Taber

home. Shelby and I quickly stow our bags in our room and head back outside to meet the horses. Amie brings out her handsome stallion, LittleWood Rio Bravado, a.k.a. Pepper. It's obvious these two have a close bond and mutual respect. "Pepper is a cross between our foundation mare, Willowrun Hayli, and Roy Foote's stallion, Primavera Bravado. I was not breeding for a stallion," Amie explains. "I won't breed to nor keep a stallion that isn't used. But when Pepper was two years old he proved to me that he has the brain to be a stallion in a family setting by staying calm when my (then four-year-old) son Martin had managed to escape my supervision and was standing in front of Pepper and berating him for breaking his swing set when Pepper had gotten loose the night before. Pepper just stood rock still and looked down at him as if to say 'Are you sure you're supposed to be so close to me?' He has since proved that decision to be the right one time and again."

Some of the horses are in paddocks close to the house, but two of the horses needed for the Camas County Rodeo, which we are riding in tonight, are in their pasture across the LittleWood River, which runs through the farm. Moira gets out her half-Morgan pinto, LittleWood Legacy (a.k.a. Lacey), from her paddock, puts on her halter and ties the lead rope to both sides of the halter for makeshift reins. True to the lifestyle of a

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Saturday, July 13 - AFTERNOON AND EVENING



1. Amie Owens Taber and her stallion, LittleWood Rio Bravado, walk together as two longtime friends who know and trust each other well; **2.** Amie and daughter Moira, who is the Lincoln County Rodeo Princess of 2012; **3.** A mural in downtown Shoshone; **4.** Littlewood Willowwind and Kamima Gold watch and wonder if they will get chosen to go to the rodeo too.

Saturday, July 13 - 1:00 PM continued

girl raised on horseback, she throws a leg over her trusted mare and heads off bareback through the thick trees (so thick we can't even begin to see the trail she rode on) and across the river to bring back not only the horses we need for tonight, but the rest of the herd who have tagged along.

The herd is a mix of young and old, but all are calm and gentle. Not looking for treats (not once during our time with the Tabers did we ever see a carrot or apple offered, these horses think being with their people is the treat), the animals surround us with curiosity and interest. The younger ones do hold back, but not far and not for long. The more experienced mares and geldings come right up to us and push their noses into our chests, looking for a scratch and a pat. Three are selected; Iza Dazzle Too (a.k.a Dazzle, Megan's horse), LittleWood Chinook (a.k.a Chinook) and Shauni's Whispering Wind (a.k.a Windy, Martin's horse) and we are ready to head back to the trailer to load up. All of the other horses want to come along, but there's not enough room and we have to send them back to their pasture.

While we are loading tack into the trailer Darren pulls up in his truck and introduces himself. I ask a lot of questions and he is pleasantly willing to share. I learn he is one of three brothers who grew up in a farming family in Pennsylvania. In 1975, his father grew disillusioned with dairy farming and it was

then (Darren was three), that the family moved to the land we are standing on now. For years after that his family raised beef cattle, and he learned to ride on stock horses his family raised and used to work the cattle. Fast forward to today, he is now one of three principles on this family farm that manages their 4,000 acres. "Our main crops are corn and alfalfa, and sugar beets. We also grow wheat and malt barley. In addition to these crops, we have returned to dairy cows and have a herd of 3,000. 775 of them are milking, the rest are the babies which we raise. We breed and keep all of our own dairy stock. The steers we raise to fat. Of course we use our Morgans when moving the cows and doing all ranch work."

Naturally, I want to learn how he and Amie met. "It was January 1995," he says. "We met at the University of Idaho in Moscow, where we were both studying agriculture. It did not take me long to realize she was the right one for me. We were married in October of that same year. We finished our degrees and moved back here to the farm." Darren smiles broadly like a man who knows how smart he was to follow his heart.

The tack is in the trailer, five horses and five humans are loaded. It is time to head out for the Camas County Rodeo in Fairfield, Idaho. It is about 60 miles away, at the base of the Sawtooth National Forest in the Rocky Mountains. As we

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Saturday, July 13 - AFTERNOON AND EVENING

1



1. Moira mounts Little-Wood Legacy who stands rock still for her as they prepare to cross the creek to bring in the other horses; 2. Moira leads Lacey to the trailer to get ready to go pack flags at the rodeo; 3. Megan adores her Morgan mare Iza Dazzle Too.



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drive through the thousands of acres of farm and desert land to get there, I am reminded that we are in a very rural part of the country. Lincoln County covers 1,206 square miles and has a total population of 4,000 people, compared to Snohomish County where Shelby and I live with a population of 717,000 people in a 2,090 square mile radius. Let me do that math for you. That is 343 people per square mile for the suburbanites, versus three people per square mile for the ruralites. In my humble opinion, they win. Not that I am keeping score.

The hour long drive gives me a chance to ask Amie some more questions. First and foremost, I want to know how and why did they come to Morgans.

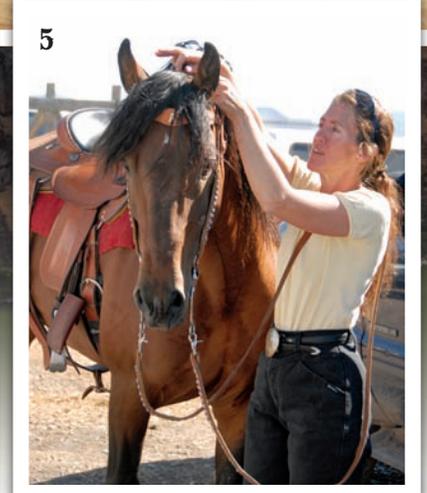
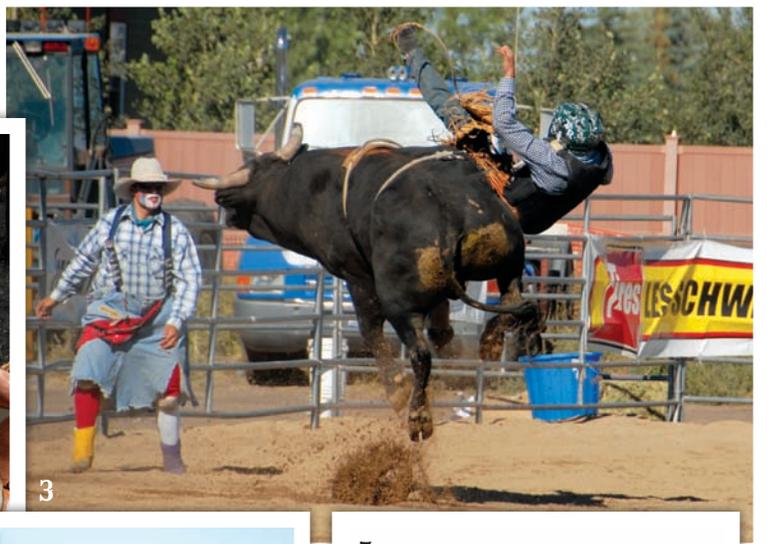
"It was 1997 and we were at the Denver Stock Show," Amie said. [Note from author—To give you some scope of the event, this was the same year it was selected as the world's #1 Indoor Rodeo by the Pro Rodeo Cowboys' Association convention. The venue itself covers some 100 acres. It has grown, from its' inception in 1899, to a 16-day show which serves as an entertainment arena, hosting one of the world's richest regular season professional rodeos, largest horse show and Colorado's largest trade show hosting over 350 vendors. Multiple events happen over multiple days.] Amie continued, "Darren and I were exhausted, and needed to sit and rest. We just happened to end up doing so at the Morgan and

Half-Morgan Show, which was one of the many events that were happening there at the same time. As we sat there and watched these up-headed, high-stepping park and driving horses (not Western, or working Morgans!), Darren kept saying how much he really liked them. Liked their looks, their way of moving. When we got home to Idaho, I looked up a breeder I knew of, Don Pruett (now deceased) of Willowrun Morgans. We went to see his available Morgans, and ended up purchasing ten-year-old Willowrun Hayli." As Amie is relaying the story, her face lights up and I can see that she is really warming up to the subject. "We thought she was in foal, but as it turned out she wasn't. Nevertheless we built a round pen and started her soon after we brought her home. She was a quick start for a ten-year-old broodmare, very open to learning."

While she drove, Amie continued, "She became Darren's saddle horse. Her third ride out of the round pen Darren was on her while I was on one of our stock horses. We were out for a fun ride and we came across some of our cows. I started working them with my horse. Hayli watched for about 15 seconds and it became very obvious she wanted to do it too, so Darren and she joined in. Despite the fact that he barely had any brakes or steering due to her short time under saddle, Darren was thrilled and called out to me, 'I never figured I'd be getting a cow horse

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Saturday, July 13 - AT THE RODEO



1. Moira and Littlewood Legacy are ready for the night; **2.** Megan may be the smallest member of the flag packing riders at the rodeo tonight, but she works just as hard as anyone else to get herself and her horse ready; **3.** Bucking Bull Rider coming off; **4.** Shelby checks to be sure her hat will stay on at a full gallop while Windy checks out the other horses; **5.** After helping the large group of riders get their horses ready, Amie turns to her stallion to get him ready too.

Saturday, July 13 - 1:00 PM continued

out of this deal!’ We were hooked. As soon as we could we bred her to Willowrun Darq Fox. Our first foal out of her was LittleWood River Fox, who we call Jasper, and is the first Morgan we raised. He is still today one of our best ‘go-to’ mounts for any and all work we do on our farm. We love how smooth Morgans are compared to anything else. We were definitely hooked!”

3:30 PM — We have arrived at the Camas County Rodeo. The excitement in the air is palpable as is the smell of ranch life—i.e. horses, cows, barbecue, and people. It is hot; the temperatures peaked in the mid-90’s today under clear skies, and have not started to cool down yet. We are joined by several other trailers who arrive shortly after us. We are the lone Morgan riders in a sea of stock horses, Quarter Horses, Appaloosas, and Paints, as more and more horses are unloaded. Just like at any one-day horse show event, the riders get right down to grooming and tacking up their equine partners. All tack and gear have a distinctive Western look to them minus the silver inlay that Shelby and I are used to seeing at horse shows—instead we see sturdy stock saddles beautifully beveled with intricate basket weave patterns, bridles that have the addition of horsehair tassels or red, white and blue rhinestones to match the patriotic theme that goes with the rodeo tonight. Our Morgan herd stands quietly while the girls not only groom them but apply spray adhesive onto a

star-shaped template and add sparkling red, blue or silver glitter to each horse’s rump.

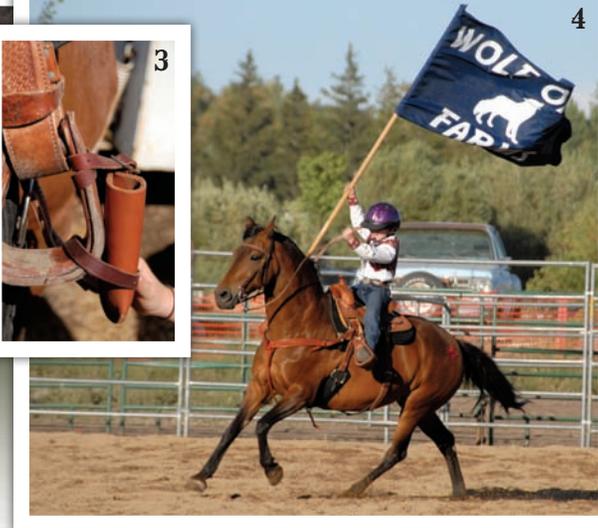
Our Morgans remain calm amidst the rising level of anticipation. Occasionally Pepper trumpets to us from the other side of the trailer where he protests his banishment from the presence of the mares. Shelby is only slightly nervous, she has never ‘packed flags’ before, much less on a horse she’s never ridden in an environment she’s never been in. Amie speaks to her in low tones, giving her the confidence she needs to go forth bravely. Sparkly patriotic shirts come out for each rider in a variety of colors. Eight-year-old Megan, who has up to this point done every single bit of preparation of her horse by herself, asks politely for someone (anyone) to help her saddle her horse as she’s just too small to do it by herself. Once her horse is ready, she is the first one in the saddle, ready for the night! Flag boots are attached to the right hand stirrup of those saddles that still need one. The flags are brought out. There are about fifteen sponsor flags that the girls will take turns packing into the arena between events plus five American flags for the American Glory Drill Team to carry when the rodeo commences.

5:15 PM — Our group heads over to the arena. I’m told this is a small rodeo, but the stands appear to have at least 150 people in them, and there are at least that many more who are

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Saturday, July 13 - AT THE RODEO

1. Amie and Pepper wait for their drill team presentation of the American flag; **2.** Flags wait to be 'packed' around the arena by the girls in-between rodeo events; **3.** A flag boot is attached to the right stirrup to assist in holding the flag upright while the riders go at a full gallop around the arena; **4.** Megan and Dazzle pack a sponsor flag around the arena with confidence and style; **5.** Girls just want to have fun on their Morgans!



participants, rodeo staff and support crew. It seems pretty big to me! The Morgans' job tonight is just to pack flags. "There's a lot more to a flag horse than one who can run really fast," I am told by Amie. "While it looks like you go in and run a lap around the arena, there is much more to it. The horse and rider must go at a full, controlled gallop—fast enough, but not too fast. They must move in a straight line around the perimeter of the arena and look like they are having fun. It must not look like the horse is out of control. You have to avoid the cameraman and the judges and everyone else who is standing in the middle of the arena," explains Amie. "You can't look like you are so choked up on your horse and your eyes are so bugged out because you think you are having a runaway. That doesn't impress the spectators! Our job is to honor our sponsors but it's also about entertainment. People are not happy when they see scared kids and scared horses. They don't want to see walking ponies. They came for the flash and the glamour." These are definitely words to ride by.

All the riders take several laps around the arena to warm up. Shelby gets to know Windy, the Morgan she will be riding tonight. Windy is a pretty bay mare with a willingness to run and go where Shelby needs her to go. Other than losing her hat on the warm up lap, they seem ready for anything.

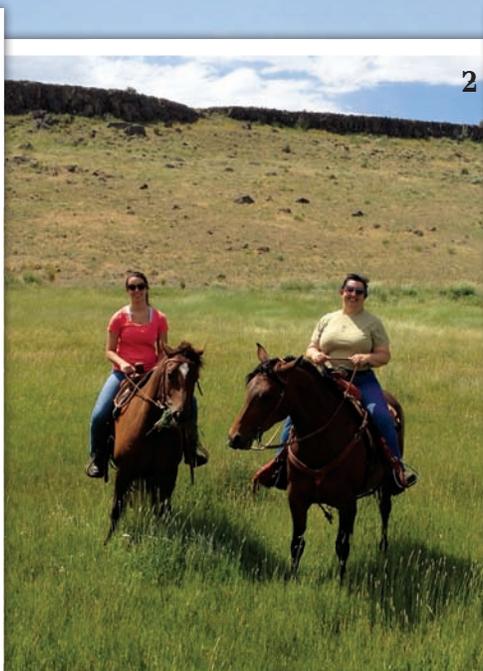
6:00 PM — The music starts and it is loud, which of course it has to be so that everyone around the arena can hear it! The announcer is a real pro, and his message and voice gets the crowd going. First in are the American Glory Drill Team riders of which Amie is one. Their purpose here tonight (and at any event they are invited to) is to present the colors in a professional and exciting manner, which they do. Their drill lasts through two songs and they weave intricately in and out of each other at a gallop while carrying American Flags. It is a stirring sight. I know I am biased, but Amie's Morgan stallion is the most charismatic, elegant and beautiful horse out there.

Next in are the rodeo queen contestants and Princess Moira to present the opening sponsor flags. The music is still blaring with a speedy upbeat tempo to match the galloping hoof beats. Shelby is offered the honor of being the first one in, but she declines wishing to see how it's done by the pros. As each girl passes through the gate, the announcer calls out the names of each sponsor and adds some words of gratitude for what they have done to help either the rodeo, the community or our country, as some of the flags are POW/MIA flags.

The rodeo events start. There is bull riding, bareback bronc riding, saddle bronc riding, steer wrestling, barrel racing, and calf-roping, to name a few. It's the real deal, and occasionally a

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Sunday, July 14 - **TRAIL RIDE AT HOUSE CREEK RANCH**



1. A country whose geography is as diverse as the people and horses who live here; **2.** Shelby on Autumn and Melody on LittleWood Chino in the immense country of rural southern Idaho high desert; **3.** A lone mother and calf view the riders warily as we pass them by.

Saturday, July 13 - 6:00 PM continued

bull or bucking bronc crashes into the gate that we are standing next to. The horses seem unfazed but my eyes open wider as I think of what could happen if the gate didn't hold. As each event ends, the rodeo royalty and contestants are handed flags and they gallop through the gate. When it is Shelby's turn I can see that she is still a bit trepid but determined to have this experience. She makes the trip around the arena and despite losing her hat just as she was finishing, the smile on her face says it all. This is a thrill on the back of a fantastic and trustworthy working Morgan horse! When it is Megan's turn, I realize as I watch her that she is as confident as she is tiny. I say as much to Amie and she informs me that this is only the second time Megan has ever packed flags, the first being the night before. "Even in our world it is highly unusual to have such a young girl packing flags! To give you an idea of how unusual that is, even in Moira's division it is unusual to have girls her age running flags. It very clearly states the younger age divisions do not need to carry flags, so not many do. But in my world, if you are old enough to ride one handed, then you are old enough to carry a flag in the other hand," Amy smiles with a knowing grin. Megan's barely contained excitement at being here tonight is beginning to make a lot more sense.

9:15 PM - The rodeo is almost over. Our Morgan riders

are tired, but happy at how successful their evening has gone. At one quiet point, they all four stand up on their saddles just to see if it could be done. It can, easily. Now it's time to go home. Tomorrow is a new adventure of cow cutting and trail riding!

Sunday, July 14, 2013 - 8:00 AM -

We start our day with a delicious breakfast of eggs, sausages, waffles with buttermilk honey syrup, juice and coffee. Darren has cooked for us, despite being up all night baling hay. We learn that alfalfa must be baled at night because the farm is in the high desert, and the nighttime dew is necessary so that the hay does not become sticks and dust, which it would become if baled in the heat of the day. The temperatures continue to be in the mid-90's. It is Sunday, and this is the first day off Darren has had in over two weeks. He is going to spend it taking his cutting horse to a competition at House Creek Ranch, about 80 miles away. The competition is put on by Grassroot Cutters, an organization whose goal is to provide a safe, fun and friendly learning environment where both individuals and their families can enjoy the sport of cutting at an affordable price. Competitions are held once a month over eight months in a calendar year. Scores are averaged and standings are posted on their member's website.

Our first stop is at Bowlen Performance Horses in Jerome,

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Sunday, July 14 - REINING LESSON

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3



4



1. Shelby has a reining lesson on Dusty; 2. Melody has a reining lesson on Dusty, learning to spin; 3. Amie rides Dusty, seen here at the spin; 4. Amie rides Dusty for her lesson, seen here coming to a stop.

Idaho, where LittleWood Inside Strait (a.k.a Dusty) is in training with Brad Bowlen. Dusty is a most agreeable gelding, with a creamy buttermilk buckskin coat and accompanying black mane and tail. His eye is kind and everything about him bespeaks cow horse. Brad is already at the competition, so we load Dusty and are on our way.

Again, the beauty and expanse of this country is not lost on me. Everywhere we look we see broad expanses of desert, farms, ranches, and basalt rock formations of volcanic origin. Breeding and raising horses here, or a family for that matter, is not for the feint of heart! At one point we come to Salmon Falls Dam, with a one-lane road over the dam that was built in 1910 to provide irrigation water storage for surrounding ranches and farms. 217 feet high and 450 feet long, it is still doing the job 103 years later. I can't help but think of the horses and buggies, Stanley Steamers and Ford Model T's that must have driven over this same route so many years ago when it was first built.

On the drive I inquire as to how many Morgans the Tabers own. Amie stops to think for a minute. "There are twenty-two horses on our ranch. Of those, eighteen are purebred Morgans. One stallion, two stud colts, four broodmares, and the rest are all family horses or horses in training. We do most of the ground work and training ourselves," she said. "It's a family affair. Darren

and the kids all help. Martin is a good hand especially with the colts. Moira is very good with the patient work of brushing the horses' legs and getting them used to being groomed in general. Megan is still learning. She is loving and caring, which is what they all need."

Soon - We arrive at House Creek Ranch and unload the horses. Along with Dusty, we have brought LittleWood Chinook and Autumn, a Morgan-pony cross who we will take on a trail ride later. As I look around I can see that we are once again in an ocean of Paints, Appaloosas, Quarter Horse, and stock horses. No one seems to notice this other than me, least of all Dusty. He stands calmly while Darren gets him saddled and bridled. Camera in hand, I move off to get the lay of the land. I have no idea what cow cutting is about other than what I have seen in old Western movies. Can John Wayne and Clint Eastwood be wrong about any of it? I think not, but must verify.

The competition arena is approximately 90' x 100' and contains two calves for every horse and rider entered in each class. Much like the horse show world Shelby and I live in there are a variety of classes with everything from Novice Ranch Horse, Ranch Novice Horse Novice Rider, Non-Pro Ranch, Open Ranch Horse, Youth, Limited Rider, and much more, enough so as to fill two entire days of cow cutting. Darren is

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Sunday, July 14 - COW CUTTING COMPETITION

1



1. Brad Bowen, Dusty's trainer, waits for their class to start; 2. Shelby rides LittleWood Chinook and Amie rides Autumn in the warm up area; 3. A typical scene at a rural Southern Idaho Cow Cutting competition—mostly Quarter Horses, Appaloosas, Paints and Stock Horses.

2



3



Sunday, July 14 - Noon continued

entered in two classes. Each of his classes have eight competitors in them, so there will be sixteen calves in the arena.

People are very friendly and cheerfully share the finer points of what is happening. Besides the calves and the horse/rider combo, there are four other riders in the arena. Without them, the class could not take place, at least not very successfully. Two riders are the herd-holders, and are positioned on each side of and close to the herd to keep them bunched together and prevent them from scattering about while the horse/rider combo are cutting a cow. The other two are turn-back riders, who are responsible for driving the calf back toward the herd and the cutting horse while a cut is being made. The competitor then goes into the herd softly, picking out the cow they want to cut. There is a 2 ½ minute time limit during which the horse and rider will ideally cut at least two cows. Each cow must be kept separated until he respects you. The team starts with 70 points and can have points added or subtracted depending upon a variety of factors. The horse should not stop working the cow until the cow has stopped and looked at the horse, or turned tail and run straight away. If the horse quits working the cow in any other circumstance, it is considered a Hot Quit and a point penalty ensues.

Dusty will also have one class with his trainer, Brad. After a warm up period outside and then again inside the arena, they

begin. A cow is singled out, and Dusty 'hooks onto' the cow. As the calf dodges first left, then right, Dusty turns and spins with him each time. To my untrained eye, they look good and are doing the job. After the second cow is cut, the score is read aloud and it is a respectable 61 points. Next is Darren. He is obviously in his element, relaxed and sitting easily in the saddle. This is clearly a man who has grown up working cows from horseback. They move in softly on the herd and a calf is singled out. The dance begins. This calf is a runner and sprints to get back with his herd mates. With his ears forward Dusty clearly is enjoying his work. The second cow is selected, and the rumba begins again. This calf is another speed devil and just as the timer buzzes he skitters back to the herd. The score is read, and I am told it is also respectable, a 59. When the dust settles, Darren and Dusty are sitting 11th out of 19 in the Novice Rider Novice Horse division and Brad and Dusty are sitting 12th out of 29 in the Novice Horse Open division.

3:30 PM - The song "Happy Trails" is playing over the sound system and the cow pen is being dismantled. It is time to go for a trail ride on the thousands of acres that make up House Creek Ranch. Amie volunteers to stay behind while Darren takes Shelby on Autumn and I on Chinook out into the vast grasslands that surround the ranch. The trail weaves in and out of low growing

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Sunday, July 14 - COW CUTTING COMPETITION



1. Darren and Dusty work well together to cut the calf from the herd; **2.** Showing off the beautiful Morgan neck, Dusty stares down a calf who is trying to get past him; **3.** Dusty represents the Morgan breed well in an ocean of Quarter Horses, Appaloosas, Paints and Stock Horses; **4.** An unusual moment when the entire herd lines up in a straight line before the cutting competition starts.

trees and crisscrosses House Creek several times. Not being used to this kind of riding – but rather the kind where the arena envelopes me with a sense of security as I ride round and round perfecting each stride for the show ring—I find that my horse knows what she’s doing and all I have to do is relax and let her agile feet find the way. It’s not long before the trail opens up to the vast immensity of this spread. We’ve only walked for ten minutes but we are well out of sight of the ranch. We pass by a mother Angus and her calf. They eye us suspiciously, only relaxing when we are well past them. Talking ceases and we listen to the wind as it caresses the grasses and the cry of a hawk circling overhead. The soft and steady clip clop of our horses’ hooves in the dirt provides a rhythm that gives a sanctuary for our reflections on the scene in front of us. I’m not sure I ever want to go home.

Monday July 15th, 2013 10:00 AM –

Amie has surprised us with the good news that she has arranged a lesson for both Shelby and I on Dusty. Martin, Moira and Megan, who were left in charge of the ranch the day before, are once again given the responsibility of the homestead while the adults go and play. Er, work. When we arrive at Bowlen Performance Horses we find that Brad already has Dusty in the arena circling, spinning and sliding to a stop from the lope. We watch him go through his

paces, and are eager for our opportunity to learn new riding skills.

Shelby goes first. As she and Dusty evaluate each other, it becomes evident that she has earned Dusty’s trust and respect, as true to type he willingly moves forward with little urging. They walk, jog, and lope several times around the arena. Once they have these basics well in hand, Brad begins to teach Shelby how to ask Dusty to spin on his haunches. At first it does not come easily. This is a new skill for Shelby. She and Dusty strive to come to an understanding. “Use the outside rein to stop the forward motion,” Brad coaches. “Move your inside leg back a little.” They start to get it. A huge smile breaks out on Shelby’s face as they complete one spin. “This is so cool!” she exclaims. Next comes the sliding stop. This comes more easily and they perform the maneuver several times before it is my turn.

I hand my camera to Shelby inveigling her to take more than one or two pictures of my lesson. Dusty is very sweet and doesn’t complain as his third rider of the morning mounts up. It is fast approaching the 90+ degree mark on the thermometer, and we are riding in an outdoor, uncovered arena. I think about the stamina the Morgan is known for. Dusty has a lovely temperament and so far shows no signs of fatigue. We walk, jog and lope. He is comfortable and agreeable to the paces I ask of him. Before I realize it Brad is shouting out “Stop!” and as I lean

A Weekend ON THE RANCH

Monday, July 15 - WORKING COWS LESSON



1. Dusty and Melody squarely face the cow who wants to get past them; 2. Dusty and Melody turn with the calf to keep it against the fence where they want it; 3. After the calf is turned, it tries to run again with Dusty and Melody hot on it's heels to keep it where they want it; 4. Shelby and Dusty race to turn calf; 5. Dusty and Amie hook onto a cow.



Monday, July 15 - 10:00 AM continued

slightly back Dusty immediately puts on the brakes. "Good!" Brad calls out to me. "Do it again." We do. I'm feeling confident and really having a lot of fun. Next we attempt the spin. Having watched Shelby gives me a wider base of understanding of what the mechanics are. It's not long before Brad is smiling at me, "You did it! That was one full spin!" I feel like a champ.

Amie takes a well-deserved turn on her horse. I keep thinking he must be getting tired but I see no signs at all of a horse who is even starting to think about quitting. Amie has as solid a seat as any rider I've ever seen. Her position does not move one inch as she puts Dusty through his paces, loping, sliding to the stop, spinning. I'm reminded of the reining pattern she performed at the AMHA Convention last February (2013) on Chinook. She was moving at much faster speeds then, and still sat as steady on Chinook as she is on Dusty today.

We are in for another surprise. As part of our lesson we will be working with cows! This is super-exciting, as we spent the bulk of the day before watching the cutting competition. Brad saddles one of his horses and with Amie and Dusty moves out into the pasture where the herd is located. Ever so slowly they work the herd toward the chute that leads into the round pen. However, this is not a herd of calves like the one we watched yesterday. This herd has bona fide horns that measure anywhere

from eight to ten inches long on each bovine specimen! Shelby and I watch Amie and Brad work the herd together, and decide if they can do it, so can we.

Shelby has no reservations about climbing aboard Dusty and heads to the cow. Brad teaches her about "hooking on" to the steer first—following it for a ways so the horse knows for sure which steer has been selected. It isn't long before the steer is running with Shelby and Dusty hot on its heels putting it where they want it against the fence. When it is my turn Brad puts me through the same training—hook onto the steer first, then work with the horse to keep the cow where you want it. This is pretty heady stuff. Dusty is firmly underneath me so all I have to do is keep my eye on the steer's eye. He walks, he trots, he stops and looks sideways at us. I can see that he is deliberating which way to spin away from us. We wait, wait, then he rockets to our right and we spin to head it off. A few steps later he squarely faces us and I can see it is really frustrated; he wants to get away from us badly. He starts a charge straight at us and at the last second swerves to the right again, with Dusty and I turning right along with him, not allowing him past us. I can easily see how this sort of riding would quickly become addictive—the adrenaline rush is amazing!

1:00 PM — We are heading back to the Taber home to pick up Moira and Megan and take a trip to see some of the historical

A Weekend ON THE RANCH

Monday, July 15 - MARES AND BABIES



1. The Taber children with the pony mare Ruby, who lives with the babies and is seen here showing off her wonderful temperament which makes her a wonderful nanny; **2.** Megan and Little Red getting to know each other better; **3.** Little Red to Megan: "Hey wait a minute, come back here, I want more attention!"; **4.** Martin helps with the important job of socializing the colts, a job he clearly enjoys, as do the babies!

sights of the region. Amie receives a phone call and I can see she is visibly upset at the news on the other end of the phone. Hayli, their foundation mare who started their herd, has been found deceased in her high desert pasture. Her neighbors found the mare and have immediately called Amie.

We head straight to the pasture to where she is. Amie is struggling with her grief, and we feel terrible for her. It's one thing to be interviewed and under a microscope for a few days by two friendly strangers, it's another thing to cope with deep grief and try to keep it together for the same strangers, no matter how nice they are. Amie determines that the mare most likely died from a heart attack. She was 25 years old. I do the only thing I can and help Amie collect her mane and tail before Darren can come to get her and bury her on their farm.

3:00 PM — There is a pragmatism and practicality to farm/ranch life. It is not always fun, but life in a rural setting demands that one not give in completely to the vagaries of grief when there is work to be done, or commitments to be attended to. Amie and her children, although still in the throes of sadness over the sudden and unexpected loss of their mare, have promised Shelby and I a tour of the local region which includes a visit to a local creamery that is rumored to have the best ice cream in four surrounding counties. We head out to see the sights.

3:30 PM — We have a quick bite to eat and then stop at the Hagerman Fossil Beds National Park Visitor Center. It seems only fitting that on this trip we see the fossilized remains of a horse that lived 3.5 million years ago, so very near the same location the LittleWood Morgans are born and raised. We also learn that the Oregon Trail came through this valley. As it is right on our way we stop and take a 20 minute hike on a trail that leads us to a spot where we can see where the Oregon Trail came up a gully on its way West. It is the hottest day yet since we've been here, and I cannot imagine how those pioneers did it. In one spot there are faint marks in the ground where the ruts can still be seen, although they don't show up in any of the pictures I take. I remind Shelby that her great-great-grandmother came across the country in a Prairie Schooner on the Oregon Trail, most likely on this very spot we are standing. I ask her if she thinks they might have brought Morgan horses with them? She isn't sure. Being a pragmatic idealist, I suspect it is possible.

7:00 PM — We are heading out to see the mares and foals in the pasture close to the house. Darren is taking a quick nap before heading out to bale the last of the hayfields, but Martin, Moira and Megan are coming with us. It's an easy walk and on the way Moira and Megan have brought their goats, Apache and Angel, with us. The goats live in a moveable pen, and it's time

A Weekend ON THE RANCH

Tuesday, July 16 - TRAIL RIDE



1. Amie and Willowrun Commette lead the way across the Little Wood River; **2.** Shelby, Chickie and Patriot are enjoying the start to their morning trail ride. It begins by going through a freshly cut hayfield on the Taber Farm; **3.** Riding by one of the pens that house some of the Taber Family's steers and heifers.

Monday, July 15 continued

to move the pen. But first, the babies. Amie usually breeds for two foals a year, and this year they are both colts. The babies are charming and endearing as they frolic and play in their pasture. They are similar in markings, but not in temperament. One is shy and slow to warm up to us. For now he is called Patriot (LittleWood Rio Bravado x Homestead Chicklette). The other is more outgoing and slightly mischievous, he is called Red (LittleWood Rio Bravado x Willowrun Hayli's Comette). While Patriot stays close to his mother's side, Red comes right up to us begging to be scratched and patted. Every now and then he tests the boundaries to see if he can nip an unsuspecting elbow or piece of clothing. He is gently rebuked, then the love and affection continues. Soon both colts have found Martin and cannot leave him alone. He (Martin) is plainly very good at this job of socializing and gentling these young boys.

Megan is trying to get the goats tethered and into their pen. The task is proving challenging (a nice way of saying she is getting nowhere fast) and we collapse into laughter, Megan included. Ruby, a pony cross on loan to the Taber breeding/kid program wanders over to see what all the fuss is about. She is very gentle and offers no protest at all when Moira clammers on her back. Megan gives up on the goats and spends some time with Red who is as enamored with her as she is with him. As the

sun signals the end of another day, we take our time heading in to the house. Tomorrow will be our last day here.

Tuesday, July 16, 2013 - 8:00 AM -

It's another beautiful, warm summer morning on the Taber Farm/Ranch. We have time for one more trail ride but before we can do that Megan has a swimming lesson in town and Amie needs to take Darren, who has been baling hay all night for the umpteenth night in a row, some breakfast. After we drop off Megan at the pool, we find Darren (in the last hayfield) who has managed to bale 108 tons of hay the night before. The bales are huge, larger than anything we've seen back home. Darren tells us they weigh one ton each. "Once they are baled, then we stack them two high, which makes it quicker and easier to load them onto the trucks." I see the loader in another field being operated with speed and proficiency. Amie notices me watching it and answers my unasked question, "That is Martin. Yes, that is my 14-year-old son operating heavy machinery!" Darren asks if we want to go for a ride in the tractor. One look at Shelby tells me an emphatic yes, and up we go. It takes us, well Darren really, about an hour to bale the last 30 tons of hay.

10:00 AM - We are venturing forth on a three mile loop trail ride on the ranch. Shelby and Amie have headed out to get

A Weekend ON THE RANCH

Tuesday, July 16 - TRAIL RIDE



1. Amie leads the way on Willowrun Commette for our morning trail ride; **2.** Patriot and Shelby check out the scenery to their left while wading in the cool, refreshing waters of the Little Wood River; **3.** Shelby and Chickie start to cross the river; **4.** Tired but happy after a successful trail ride, the group crosses the bridge over the Little Wood River before reaching home.

the broodmares Chickie and Comette for the ride, and the babies will tag along. I am riding the talented and versatile Windy, whom I trust implicitly with my camera. Once we are mounted we start along the outskirts of a freshly mowed hayfield. The babies are ecstatic to be on an adventure, and I cannot help but think what good training and preliminary trail work this is for them. Once we leave the farm fields we find ourselves in the natural high desert habitat. The horses wind their way through the scrub brush without a worry in the world. I am glad Amie knows the way, for several times the trail is not at all obvious to me. We make our first water crossing and the horses take a drink. It is already a hot day, even at 10:30 in the morning!

We climb up the other side of the river bank and find ourselves on the edge of a sugar beet field. It is quiet and peaceful. The river splashes and burbles, showing that it is deeper in this part of its route through the farm. Before we know it, Amie points to a stand of what look to be some kind of thickly growing variety of eucalyptus bushes. I can't even see two feet into them. "This is where we cross the river again," she assures us. Who are we to argue? She heads down a steep embankment calling back to us, "You will need to cover your face for the first two or three steps." I point Windy in what I can only hope is the right direction and down we go. I cover my face (Amie gives

good advice) and the next thing I know Windy is taking her first step into the river and we are in a cool, shady spot that feels refreshingly wonderful!

I get out my camera to get some shots of Shelby as she comes through the brush. Then I realize that Patriot has not crossed with his mother, he is hanging back with Red. Both are behind Shelby and Chickie and seem hesitant to go through the brush. With both of their mothers in the water, the colts put on a brave face and plunge in! Once in, they seem to enjoy the cool spot as much as we do.

We have reached the last portion of the trail. Amie shows us the course they have built to train their horses for extreme trail competitions. There is a tarp, a cliff with a drop-off (which she took us on) a large log which she jumped Comette over (quite handily) and more. I find myself wishing we had just one more day....there is still so much to see and learn about!

1:00 PM - It is so hard to say goodbye. The Tabers have opened up their home, their horses and their hearts to us. We have found an entirely newfound respect and admiration for this breed that we already were so passionate about, and gained valuable new skills and knowledge for our equestrian tool belts. We leave changed, knowing that working Morgans (and their people!) will always have a special place in our hearts. ■