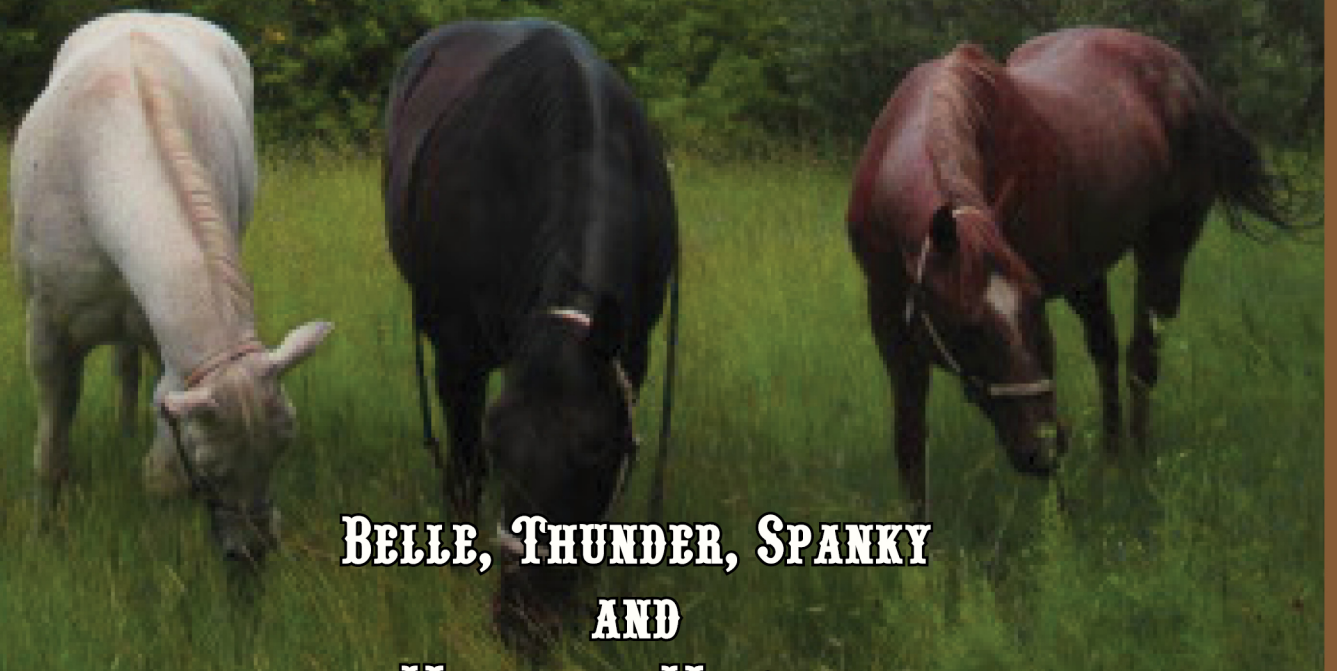


THE NOGAL JOURNALS

Volume Twenty-three



**BELLE, THUNDER, SPANKY
AND
MATTHEW MIDGETT**

“ So Beautiful! The words you choose to describe your journeys are magical. I truly feel I am there with all of you. Such a blessing you are! ”

Michael Carter



Come along and ride with us!

THE NOGAL JOURNALS

Volume XXIII

Part 1 of 3

With sincere gratitude
to Randy Clarke-Ianiero and Clem Ianiero-Clarke
whose technical expertise and tireless efforts
made this publication possible.

Cover Design: Laura Reynolds

Printing: PrintStar San Diego

First Edition Printing May 2024

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Living here, it's easy to travel a short distance to a different climate. With snow still lingering at home, we thought it would be nice to ride in the dry sand of the high desert. "And besides", added Belle, "we haven't seen our cow friends for a while. I want to wish them a happy new year!"

So off we go to the arroyo area south of Carrizozo.



The mountains wear a light mantle of white.



That's a high country peak we sometimes ride across (in summer).



Belle is excited to see her friends. "Happy New Year!" "Huh?" They seem to respond.



Then she spots a girlfriend. "Look! It's Cow Number 54! Hi!"



She's become a favorite of ours and is happy to see us (and our granola bar treats).



This herd is accustomed to our comings and goings.



Everyone is relaxed. "Hi!" "Hi!" "Where you go'in this time?" "I never know. Old two-legs is in charge."



Of course, the horses find a bucket of cattle supplement. The cows are generous hosts.



"This is tasty!" "I know Spanky, but we need to get going . . . just one more lick . . ."



Thunder waits patiently. "Come on - let's go this way!"



The mountains make a beautiful backdrop.



We find a (dry) grassy meadow, with good grazing - so take a little break . . .



... and we discover this nasty-looking weed pod. Yikes!



Spanky lingers behind. Hurry up - and look out for those spiky weeds!



Thunder leads us into his favorite arroyos. "Here we go Spanky - the sand is going to be so soft and warm!" "Oh boy! Sand angels! . . ."



". . . and there are snacks along the way!", Spanky adds.



This is dramatic country.



With a stunning beauty all its own.



'Birds of a feather'. At home, little Gracie is cuddled with her big black & white buddy, Orca.



MM

As our little Gracie grows up, she likes to play outside with her friends.
She watched with great interest as the snow melted. "Wasn't there more here yesterday?"



Our temperatures have been unusually mild. "I think I can see it disappearing!"



The next day, deer arrived for their brunch, while the horses nap in the sun.



Gracie runs to greet her deer-est friends. "Good morning! Good morning!"



"Oh, hey! Good morning to you, too! Sleep well?" "Oh, yeah, I always get a good night's sleep! I'm still growing, ya'know!"



"Sure, is a beautiful day!"



"Yeah. I kinda miss the white stuff, though . . ."



A curious baby deer. "Huh?"



"What the heck is that?"



("I'm not too sure about this . . .") She does kinda look like a skunk . . .



"Remember me? We played before all that white stuff appeared!"



"What's in here? Oh, it's your breakfast. I eat fish for mine!" ("Ewww . . .")



"Well, nice seeing you! I'll let you get back to your breakfast" . . . "Fish? Really?"



"Please don't get fish breath on my corn."



"Okay! You have a good day!"



Meanwhile, Chile watches the activity from his barn bedroom window. "She sure is popular!"



"I like my deer friends. Time for a nap."



MM

COMPANIONABLE [adj.] *possessing the qualities of a good companion; pleasant to be with.*

It's difficult to describe the connections between the horses - and me. It makes for very enjoyable (and easy) times together on the trail.

There's a good deal of trust in allowing horses to have such freedom in open country.



They seem to understand that - and certainly appreciate their liberty.



They share things of interest - like an elk moving through distant trees (Belle would rather snack).



It's important that they stay with me by choice.



We all appreciate Nature.



Talk about a 'survivor'. Time has bent this tree nearly horizontal, yet it continues to persevere. There are lessons and inspiration everywhere . . .



The day is passing.



Okay, Spanky, time to start back.



A few words are all it takes.



They understand and fall in line along the trail - on their own.



Now Belle takes the lead (it's getting close to supper time).



Back to their trailer they go.



Where they patiently wait for their drive home.



Extraordinary companions.

MM

Most days begin with Gracie greeting her deer friends.

"Good morning! Looks like it's going to be another beautiful day!"



"Wait a minute! What's that?"



"EWWW! Who used our lawn as a restroom?" "Huh?"



"It wasn't me!", said the big buck. (The other buck looks on with interest . . . and maybe a little guilt.)



"Hey, you over there - did you do this?"



"Ya-know, you're supposed to dig a hole first, and then cover it up!" Gracie is really good about using the litter box. She even runs in from outside, to use it (grrrr).



"I never heard that . . ."



"Well, you guys please think about it next time."





("I don't think that's going to happen . . .")



MM

We are known for our 'mild four-season climate. But this winter has been exceptionally temperate (so far . . .). Everyone is happy with that - except for Spanky who is longing to make his snow angels (there is snow in the high country . . . but also ice).

With bright blue skies and golden fields, it is a beautiful time of year (even without much snow).



Great day for a ride. "Where's the snow?", asks Spanky.



"I'm missing my snow angels!"



Still, this is hard to beat.



The boys have a nice run. Belle and I just mosey along.



Then I get off and we all mosey for a while.



Of course, Belle also snacks along the way. "Oh, yum. Dried clover!"



Come on, Belle. "Oh, alright . . ."



Spanky makes do with grass angels. "Whee!"



It's interesting, how the light and colors change from moment to moment.



"Let's go!"





Even Spanky has a quick frolic.



Here he comes.



Floating on a cloud of golden grama grass.



Yup, a beautiful day.



Meanwhile . . . Gracie plays hide-and-seek with a young friend. "I see you! (That is you, isn't it?)"



MM

We had a light, gentle snow overnight. No one was more excited to see it than Gracie. Except maybe Spanky - he loves his snow angels. "My turn next!", says Thunder.



To Gracie, it was another miracle. "Wow! It's back!"



"I didn't just imagine it!" She was excited (look at that tail).



She had to explore.



"This is great!"



"Hey, my Christmas tree is decorated again! (I like it better this way!)."



"Oh, look! My friends are here!" (Just about everything she thinks has an exclamation point after it.)



"Good morning! Isn't this wonderful?"



"Oh good, it's you, Gracie. I was afraid you might be a skunk."



"What's a skunk? (It must be very pretty!)"



"Yuck. Their breakfast is so bland!"



"I still don't see how you can eat this stuff. It doesn't stink at all!"



"But of course, if you enjoy it . . ."



"Have you met my big cat friend? He's very quiet . . ." . . . "Doesn't she know?"



"Huh? What do you mean he's not a real cat?"



"Oh, well. I love this snow!"



A beautiful morning.



Glad we could share it with you.



MM

The young deer bucks like to show off and spar on our lawn.

More common in early autumn, some sparring can be aggressive and combative, but most is congenial.



Called 'skill sparring', bucks gain knowledge of their antler size and configuration relative to that of other bucks. It's a form of socializing. The clattering of antlers can be heard in the house.



This is a slow, playful game between two well-matched young bucks. In fact, if a smaller, younger buck spars with an older one, the much bigger buck will actually pull his punches in order to make it a fairer contest.



In her usual inquisitive way, "What are they doing?", asked Gracie of her deer friend.



"They're just playing, little girl." he answered. "Oh. Thank you! I was worried."



"Gee - I enjoy playing fetch with my stuffed ball!"



"Now to get someone to throw this for me, so I can bring it back again . . ."



"If I played like those deer, I'd have a splitting headache!"



MM

Clear skies were predicted - but as we left home, clouds moved in. In just a few minutes it went from sunny to gray.

"Wow! That was fast!", exclaimed Belle. I remind her that this is New Mexico, so . . .



Thunder keeps a brisk pace as our 'outrider'.



But these elk are relaxed as they graze in the distance.



*Spanky takes time for a roll in the grass. "Gotta keep in practice for my snow angels!"
The clouds are getting darker.*



We pass some small springs. Thunder shows off by taking the middle ground between pools.



As we climb into the hills, this spring has a thin skim of ice. It must be getting colder.



"Uh--does that look like snow coming down . . . only a few miles away?"



Spanky is right. There is snow coming down over the ski areas. Some elk disappear into the trees. Are they looking for cover?



Spanky pushes Thunder along. "I think we should speed this up."



The high peaks are being obscured by falling snow.



"I'm getting back inside the trailer now . . ."



Thunder agrees. "Time to go."



2022-01-24 - Surprise Snow

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At home, we hurried to get the horses into the barn. A fluffy, wet snow began to fall in earnest as darkness fell.



Clinging to the shrubs, this is not our typical powdery stuff. It's heavy with much-appreciated water.



By morning, the storm was over . . .



. . . and of course Gracie couldn't wait to get out and explore.



"I don't get it. Where does it come from all of a sudden?"



After their breakfast, the horses enjoyed it too.



Just six hours later. "Where'd it go?"



MM

This unusually mild winter has been terrific. Snow a couple of times a week - and pretty much melted by the end of that day. But Spanky has been concerned. "There isn't much time for me to make snow angels before it's all gone!", he lamented.

Nearly every morning, Chile the barn cat and his best buddy Spanky have a friendly chat to start the day. "How's your breakfast, Spanky?"



2022-01-27 - Angel Ride

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"I don't know. I'm still waiting for it! (I wish he would put that camera down and get to business . . .)"



"Oh, man. I'm sorry. Mine is in the bowl for me all the time." . . . "(Bowl? Huh?)"



Gracie has her own 'friend time'. "Good morning, Mr. Buck! Enjoy your corn (yuck.) I gotta move along! Busy day! . . . "



"(And I don't understand why they eat those apples, either. So strange . . .)"



Later, she was surprised while having a talk with Chile down by the barn. "Oh! You startled me! I was just telling Chile about the deer, and the way they eat corn and apples. Weird . . ."



After chores, I had an idea on how to help Spanky out with his snow angels. We headed up Bonito Canyon, which has lots of shade this time of year. "OH BOY!"



The shade keeps the snow nice and fluffy. He started right in. "Another horse angel gets his wings! . . ."



. . . and another one. "Dang! Kinda sliding downhill . . ."



"Yes, and you're kinda nuts, too!"



"Look out for that fallen tree!", warned Belle. "He's so strange." Thunder is ready to move on.



After lots of angels, we mosey along.



*As we approach the old apple orchard, he's distracted again. "Oh, look! More snow . . ."
"There he goes again."*



"Phooey, now I'm covered in snow." . . . "What did you expect, genius!"



Belle was more interested in the scant green grass along a little brook.



"I'll be darned - he's doing another angel. Sheesh!"



"What?"



Pretty spot. It's so quiet, all we can hear is the gentle murmur of the water.



Contented horses.



MM

Like much of the Southwest, our area's history is dominated by cycles of boom and bust (the historic town of White Oaks once was the state's second largest city. But the gold ran out and the railroad passed it by. Today it has fewer than 25 residents). About 20 miles northwest of White Oaks is another example of changing times. Located in a fertile valley, Ancho (which means 'wide') was first settled by farmers and ranchers. When a large gypsum deposit was found nearby, a plaster mill was established around 1902. After fire clay was discovered, the Ancho Brick Plant was built, providing even more employment and the town thrived. In 1905, the railroad arrived, and a depot opened for passengers and freight. Following the Great San Francisco Earthquake of 1906, Ancho was booming - shipping plaster and bricks to the destroyed city. But too-rapid expansion led the brick plant to close in 1921. It was a devastating blow to the community. Then in 1954, the new U.S. Highway 54 bypassed Ancho by 2 1/2 miles (often a death knell to rural communities). The final blow came when the railroad discontinued use of the depot in 1959. Today, surrounded by vast cattle ranches, a haunting wind blows through an abandoned place of faded dreams.

We set out to explore the ghost town of Ancho.



The old railroad depot sits unused and forlorn.



Nearby is the 'new' schoolhouse built of Ancho bricks in 1930. It closed in 1955 and today is used by ranchers as a community church.



It's doubtful that today's students would be impressed by the school's restroom facilities out back.



The horses seemed curious about the old swing set. "Hmmm . . . ?"



It's difficult to imagine this place as being a bustling center of commerce. Belle is baffled by some of the ruins.

"Why? . . . "



Once-elegant homes still stand proudly. But life's parade has passed them by.



These fancy old draperies are reminders of happier times, long past.



Clothing hangs in a closet, waiting for someone who will never come.



This dusty old 'console' television/record player combo must once have been an object of pride.



Neighboring houses keep each other company . . . sharing memories and isolation.



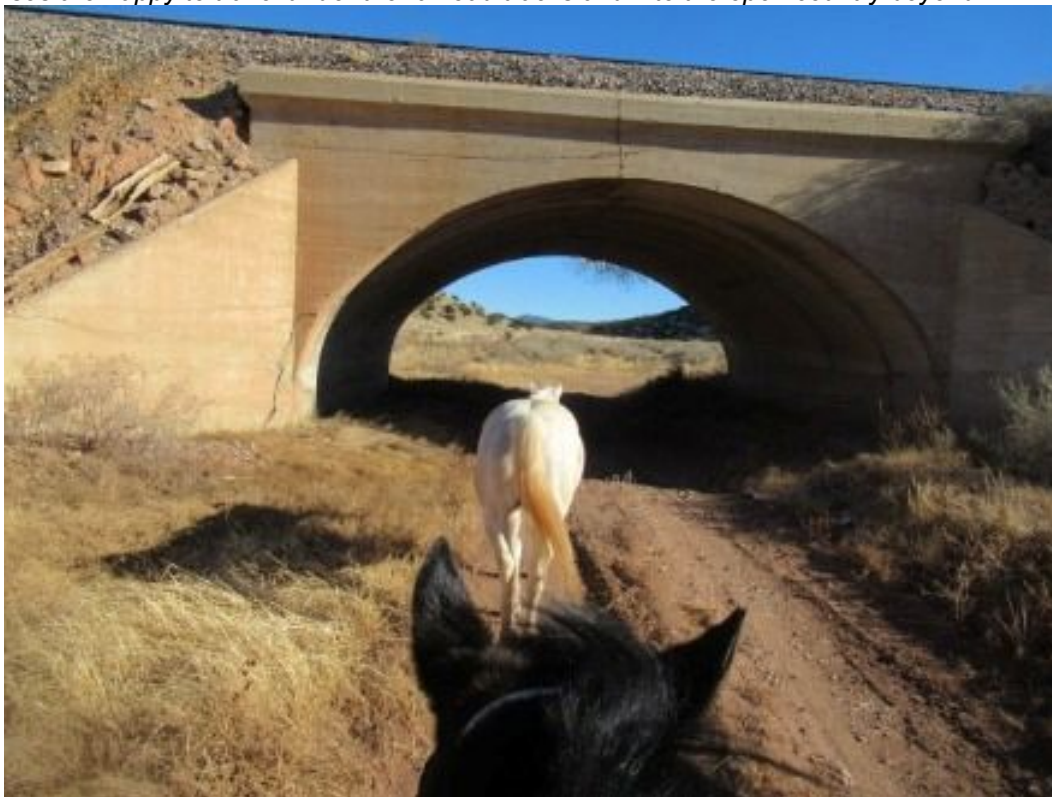
Waiting . . .



Close-up of the distinctively colored Ancho bricks.



The horses are happy to travel under the railroad tracks and into the open country beyond.



It's a relief to ride away from the faded dreams.



We discover a beautiful arroyo.



This country seems timeless.



Human history only transitory.



"Enough with your loquacious ruminations! It's getting close to our supper time!"



So, we head home . . . each with our own thoughts.

"I'm thinking that new dreams can always replace the old."



MM

2022-02-01 - *Elk Encounters*

Page 1 of 8

Seems like everywhere we ride lately, we come across elk - most of whom appear to know the horses pretty well.

We even have to wait for them to cross our own driveway.



This group allows us to pass by. "After you!"



2022-02-01 - Elk Encounters

Page 2 of 8

A little ride behind the house found some friends having an outing. "How's it going?" . . . "Oh, fine. Just taking an evening hike . . ."



They all know Thunder!



It's always a pleasure to see them . . .



. . . and they enjoy seeing us, too. "Oh, yeah - those are the horses that have their meals delivered to them . . ."



2022-02-01 - Elk Encounters

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These cows have the classic 'questioning' expression. "Hmmm . . ."



This little group seemed to follow us home. They were waiting when we got there.



Snow coming down on the mountain at dusk.



Another ride, another encounter. This time at nearby Ranchman's Camp.



This remains one of our favorite spots to ride. It's rolling hills are beautiful, there's water, and the views can't be beat. ("And the grass is delicious!", adds Belle). We're grateful to have it so close by . . .



As the sun sets . . .





We came upon this curious herd.



The young bull below (on the left) has defective antlers. It looks like the pedicles (sockets on the skull, from which the antlers form) were damaged when he was a calf. If so, his antlers will continue to be deformed each time they grow out (really doesn't make much difference to him - and might spare him from hunters).



MM

After a very mild season so far, we were told that some 'real' winter weather was coming.

Gracie had a chat about it with her friend. "Guess what! That white stuff is coming back again!" (Of course, all Spanky could think about was his snow angels.)



2022-02-02 - Storm Warning

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*As the clouds began to move in, she played on her 'jungle gym' - (the old cattle scale next to the barn).
"Look where I am, Spanky!"*



Still operable, the scale originally was at old Fort Stanton . . . but when their cattle operation was closed down, it was moved here around 1940.



The horses wanted to go see if we could find some green grass before it was covered in snow, so we headed out to the Fort - where we know of a little meadow that somehow has grass through the winter.



It doesn't look like much to us, but Belle thinks it's delicious. "And out of season, too!"



We had a very nice ride, passing ruins of the old Fort pump station.



Here's how the station looked shortly after it was constructed in 1933. It provided water to the tuberculosis hospital. (Thanks for the historic photos, Kenny).



New well and pump house-1934



The great flood of 1941 destroyed the dam and filled the pump house with several feet of sediment. Here is one of the arches (seen in the top photo) today. The wooden building is long gone.



No snow, yet - but threatening skies.



2022-02-02 - Storm Warning

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This morning - before the snow started in earnest - the horses went for a little walk (wearing their blankets to keep them dry). Like the British saying, they 'carried on' as though it was a sunny day.



Well, sort of. "Is this really necessary?" pondered Spanky.



"We need our exercise", explained Belle.



"Besides, we can snack along the way!"



"Well, okay then."



The horses are back in the barn now. New Mexico is on the western edge of a massive storm which stretches all the way to Maine.

MM

2022-02-03 - A Foot of Snow

Page 1 of 10

It snowed all night. A gentle, constant shower of powdery white flakes drifting down.
At dawn, we all marveled at the transformation.



The deer dug down to find their corn breakfast.



Emerging with faces looking like powdered-sugar donuts.



Of course, Gracie had to come and say good morning to them. "Brrrr."



2022-02-03 - A Foot of Snow

Page 3 of 10

"Wow! It's so pretty! And so cold! I'm going back in now! Bye!"



About a foot of snow covered everything.





The horses had a leisurely breakfast in bed.



"Golly!", was about all Spanky could say about it as he emerged first from the barn.



Even the normally talkative Belle was short on words as she peered through the open barn door. "Gee!"



The view from Chile-the-barn-cat's loft window.



He was cozy and warm in bed under a heat lamp. "Go and enjoy. I'm fine right here! (Purrrrr . . .)"



Overnight our trails had become an inviting wonderland.



"And it tastes good, too!"



Belle has a natural snow cone. "Yum!"



What a treat to ride through fluffy fresh snow.



When we bump into the laden branches, there is an explosion of powder.



"This is great!"



We all agreed - as they managed to find tasty snacks buried along the way.



As the morning sun gained strength, the sky became blue again - their blankets came off and they enjoyed a winter solar bath.



Glad we could share this special wintertime with you.

MM

Snow is splendid. It's also cold, wet, and inconvenient on a ranch. But we welcome it for its beauty and it's moisture.

Morning view out the barn door.



Glistening daggers.



Angels . . .



. . . and quiet walks through the snow. "Dee-duh-dee-duh-dee."



Shadowed groves.



VERY cool water.





Peacefulness.



Snacking deer . . .



. . . and an ever-curious Gracie. "When will that snow fall from the roof? I wanna watch it go!"



"STOP TAKING MY PICTURE! I haven't done my hair yet!"



MM

Living adjacent to the southernmost true alpine climate in the U.S. (White Mountain Wilderness); and the Chihuahuan Desert of the Tularosa Basin - allows us to adjust our riding seasonally . . . and sometimes to enjoy them both in a single day.

Mountains.

Recent snow is melting fast at home, but in protected mountain valleys it still provides a breathtaking setting for a winter outing.



It sure seems like the horses enjoy the beauty, too. "Wow! Look at that!", says an appreciative Spanky.



Of course, he has his own 'winter sport'. "Whee!"



"It's not a sport - it's an obsession!", grumbles Belle.



"Whee!"



The horses are smart - they are very wary of ice. "Hey, Spanky, be careful. Just under the flowing water is a shelf of hard ice!", warns Thunder.



"You're right! Thanks!"



"Gosh, that's hard to see with the water running over it like that!"



So, they stay clear.



Melting snow keeps the stream flowing.



Distracted by deer.



We move on through the 'Currier & Ives' forest.



Spanky gingerly crosses a log.



They walk along like (well-behaved) schoolchildren on a field trip, nibbling the snow as they go.



Desert.

Less than 30 minutes later, we are in the arroyo country south of Carrizozo. We were surprised to find snow here, as well. But it is patchy, with plenty of dry ground.



They love this place, too.



"Hey! Weren't we just up there on that mountain?"



Ahhh . . . dry sand under foot.



"Come on! Let's run!", urges Thunder, cresting the wall of the arroyo.



The visit included time with our favorite bovines, Cow 54 and her herd.



Great day. Nice to share with you.
MM

Our taste of real winter weather was brief. Milder temps and clear skies have melted most of the snow - it's now in the ground as much-needed water.

The high country still has a considerable snow pack.



Gracie explores blocks of ice removed from the surface of a water tank. "This stuff is weird!"



"And I swear I can see it disappearing before my eyes!"



She's right - the snow is melting fast. "Where did all the white stuff go?"



It's already gone from the lawn, where she greets her deer friends each day. "Hi! How'ya doing? Did you see those funny cold chunks over by the water tank?"



("I still don't understand the whole apple thing . . .")



"Did you touch my apple?"



"No, no, it's all yours! (You look bigger up close!)"



"Oh, it's time for my supper now. Bye!"



The deer go on with their happy hour.



"So, if she doesn't like apples or corn, what does she eat?"



"It comes from a CAN? Really? Get outta here!"



Of course, winter isn't over yet . . .
MM

After a nice ride, the horses were grazing on a lonesome mesa, enjoying the views.



The snow on the mountains was mirage-like in the sunlight.



When Thunder spotted something in the distance . . .



"I think it's some Black Angus cattle coming this way!", announced Spanky.



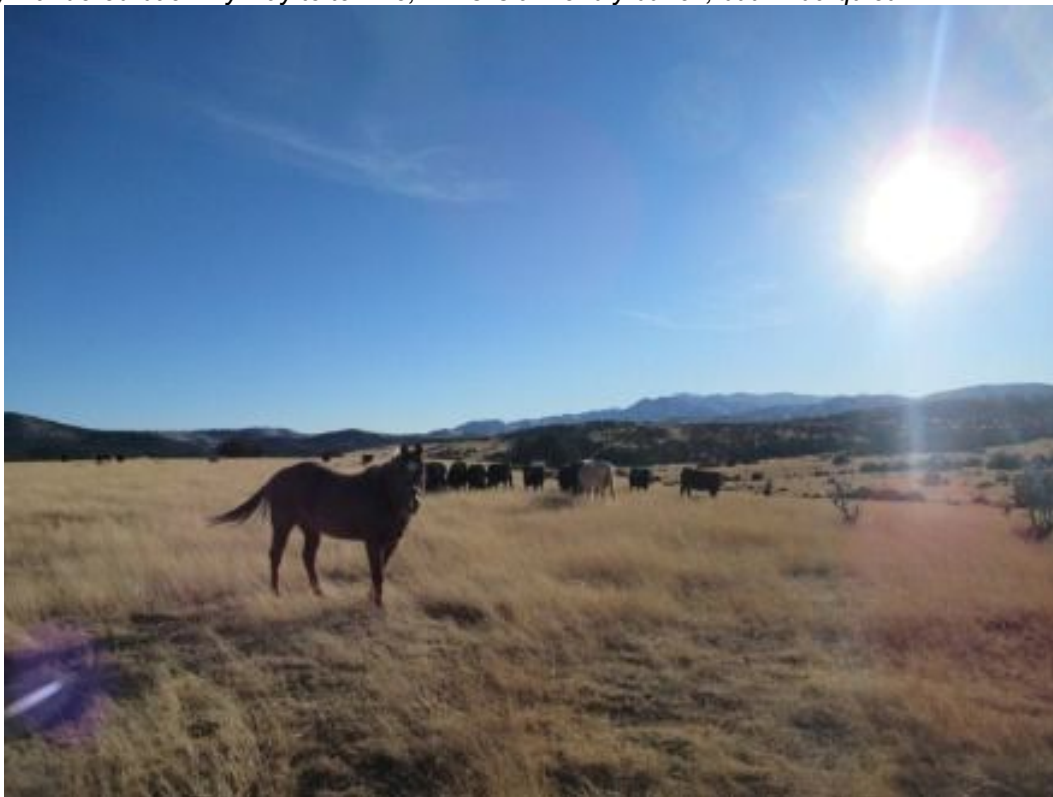
Sure enough, a little herd saw us and headed in our direction. The horses continued to graze.



Soon, everyone was peacefully mingling.



Spanky wandered back my way to tell me, "This is a friendly bunch, but kinda quiet."



I don't know, Spanky -Thunder seems to be deep in conversation with some of them.



Then they went back to their snacking, while the cows watched. "I don't think those two are cows, do you?" "No, but they seem pleasant enough. Maybe some kind of weird elk?"



Everyone just chilled together.



I kinda hated to break up the party, but it was time to go. Naturally, Belle lingered - "Just one more bite . . ."



. . . but as usual, they were cooperative.



"Just one more bite", said Belle again, before we headed home.



MM

During winter storms, snowflakes drift down from the sky and settle, layering into cozy insulation for the plants beneath. Although the green fades and the bright blades wither, grasses wait patiently in their protective white cocoon. Our winters are mild, and with each brief warm-up (a teasing reminder of spring to come), the snow melts and brave new shoots struggle to be the first to see the sun. The horses know this, and delight in finding the surprising greenery wherever it appears. Unlike the lush banquet of summer, grazing now is slower and more deliberate.

After a week of warmer temps, the horses are eager to see if there are any delicacies to be found along a stream.



Thunder is in a hurry. "Come on! This way!"



They remember right where to go.



Tiny tufts of new grass tempt them. They know it's a temporary treat and will disappear again with the next snowfall.



Spanky pauses for a moment to take in the sylvan setting.



"Golly!"



A reflective moment.



Belle concentrates on her nibbling.



"Hmmm . . . good idea!"



Yet even she is part of a magic moment.



Of course, Spanky has his 'snow angels' time, too - rolling in nature's downy softness.



"Oh, look . . . just one more bite . . ."



Peace . . .



. . . and tranquility - as snow becomes water. And water becomes life.



Winter's renewal.



MM

One day we were taking a ride along a creek on a pleasant afternoon . . .



The last snow had melted into the ground. "Hurry up and take the photo!", Belle urges as Thunder and Spanky wait.



Then, the next day . . .



"That was a surprise!", say the bucks at their happy hour.



A nice, wet snow. Of course, Gracie was thrilled. "Oh, Boy! Hey, isn't this great guys!"



"This is so cool!"



"What's under here?!"



"Hey! I found something fuzzy! (Oh . . . it's just grass . . .)"



"Maybe here . . ."



"Well, it's fun anyway!"



The deer watch her with interest. "What's she doing out here? She has a nice warm house . . ."



Some pretty dramatic icicles.



Time for a ride in the snow.



More icicles on the old barn roof.



Snowy trails.



"What a difference a day makes, Thunder!"



Gracie does have a nice warm house. And a loving Mommie Cat. "And then I thought I found a mousie, but it was just some grass." "That's nice, dear."



MM

Years ago, it took a huge leap of faith (and a lot of effort) for us to pull up stakes and cross three states (transporting a small circus), to New Mexico - where we knew not even one person. We were seeking something very special - and we were fortunate to have found it.

With tremendous open country and a wide variety of riding options, we often choose a familiar one.



In fact, the horses don't seem to care much where we ride, as long as it has freedom, grass, and water - and we are together.



Although I am technically in charge, it often feels more like they are taking me along.



"Let's go this way!"



Their destinations usually include something we all enjoy seeing - like a peaceful little creek.



This one offers an interesting underwater tableau - somehow a colorful autumn leaf is still preserved in an aqueous composition.



A comfy place to roll is appreciated, too.



Mostly, it is about just being together . . .



. . . In a peaceful place.



Well, except for the occasional splashy interruption by Spanky.



"I do this 'cause it's fun!"

"Let's allow him to have his fun alone. I don't like getting my hair wet!", complains Belle as we mosey up another trail.



We take none of this for granted.

MM

Each year, the local rural youth groups - Future Farmers of America (FFA), and 4-H ('Head, Heart, Hands, and Health') combine to hold a big District Invitational event. Essentially, it is an opportunity for the young people to be mentored and learn how to judge livestock (cattle) and horse competitions. This year the invitation for the horses to participate began with, "And we think yours are the best-behaved horses we've seen . . .". Couldn't say no to that!

It's been quite a while since the horses have been around this sort of thing. They seemed to enjoy watching all the other horses.



More than 50 young people served as student 'judges' for the various competitions.



They come from a large region. This is a group from tiny Corona, New Mexico. They are the future of the ranching way of life.



Here's a future cowboy (actually, he qualifies now!)



Thunder and Belle were each entered in 'halter class' competitions, so called because the horses are not saddled. They are judged on condition, conformation, and general appearance. Thunder checks out the competition with a sly look.



"Hmmm . . . I got this."



"Gotta look good for the judges!" (I'm not sure that sticking his tongue out helped . . .)



This is a world away from our usual private cross-country rides. I was proud of how they handled all the hoopla. And Thunder won in his class! "Aw, shucks, twern't noth'in."



Then it was the mares' turn. Belle was ready - "So those are the judges?"



"I'll just turn on the charm. Hi kids! Don't I have a sweet face?"



She was much relieved to learn that there would be no swimsuit competition. "After all, full-figured gals are beautiful, too". Apparently, the judges agreed - as she won her class!



We decided to celebrate their wins with a trip to nearby historic White Oaks.



The old mining town is considered one of the most authentic in the West. Gold in 'them thar hills' once made it the second-largest city in New Mexico - and gave it some 'Eastern' flair (this is the 1892 Gumm house). Today it is considered a ghost town.



*Belle suggested that she deserved a beer at the famous 'No Scum Allowed Saloon', and we all agreed.
"I'm afraid it's not very ladylike to drink out of a bottle . . ."*



"But frankly, I don't care! (Chug, chug)."



At home, some elk were gathered by the house. They seemed to add their congratulations, too. "Hey, way to go!"



Everyone had fun. It was a great, true Western day.
MM

Construction of the Bonito pipeline was considered an engineering marvel - running 134 miles over rough terrain, in order to bring clean mountain water from the Bonito River to the new railroad in the Tularosa Basin (where ground water was so laden with minerals, it quickly corroded the train boilers). Begun in 1907, principal construction was completed in 1914. Parts of it still operate today. The first pipe was made of tongue & groove oak staves, shipped from the Wykoff Wood Pipe Company of Elmira, NY; then banded with metal and covered in asphalt sealer. It was like a very long barrel. Crews of 150 men hand-dug the trench with picks and shovels, dynamiting where necessary. The pipe was hauled along on 10-horse wagons. When that original pipe was replaced in the 1930's, the portion which ran through this ranch was dug up and used to build the barns, tool shop, and stable - which are still here. The pipeline was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1979.

Here is an example of the first wooden pipe. Even after more than 100 years, the tough material is still in place. When that pipe became obsolete locals dug it up, separated the staves and repurposed the lumber for a variety of building projects.



The original pipeline system included a large reservoir known as Nogal Lake, seen here in the distance. It was a half-mile across and 36 ft. deep. Now dry (except during the monsoons), Belle checks it out from above.



The horses investigate ruins of a water treatment plant installed in the line during 1940. They enjoy exploring interesting sites like this. "Whatdaya think this was, Spanky?" "I dunno, maybe an outdoor bowling alley?"



Weathered and stained by time, the concrete structure still stands with authority.



Decades of erosion have exposed a complicated system of pipes and valves - which Spanky tries to understand. "Huh?"



Thunder's not sure either. "But I know enough to steer clear of it!", he says.



We carefully follow along the pipeline . . .



. . . and discover a of graveyard of vintage cars. How they ended up here is a mystery.





After about 70 years, this seat fabric still retains its astonishing stripes.



The horses are more interested in a special treat - 'snow cones' from a deep shady canyon.



Oh, and . . . "Whee!"



After our short lesson in local history, we continued to take advantage of the beautiful winter's day.



Belle takes in the view of a distant pond.



We run through soft, grassy arroyo bottoms.



Thunder likes to race along the upper edge.



Keeping an eye on us, below . . .



. . . and posing for a silhouette shot . . .



. . . as the shadows grow longer.



Time to head home.



MM

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