

A story about trust... and following your heart

From the HoofPrints Newsletter - November 3, 2008 Issue - written by Gina Keesling

This summer, I had a once-in-a-lifetime experience... After years without a vacation of any length, my parents graciously offered to bring my 15 year old son Jordan and myself on an adventure out west. (thanks, Mom & Dad) To ensure that I didn't worry about things back home, my husband Rob elected to stay here and tend to the farm and all the animals. (bless his heart)

Our 2 week odyssey was packed with many, many miles - and lots of sights and experiences as we traversed to South Dakota, Nebraska, and North Dakota. The South Dakota leg of the trip included a stay at the HoofPrints Lodge in Lead, SD and trail rides guided by Andy Holmes of Andy's Trail Rides.



**HOW IT ALL GOT STARTED:
Our South Dakota Trail Ride**
Left to right:
Gina Keesling on Billy
Ron Stauffer on Trigger
Shirley Stauffer on _____
Jordan Keesling on Dr Pepper

When we arrived at the meeting point for the trail rides, I quickly sized up the waiting horses... nondescript smallish fellows of indeterminable breeding. They looked pretty lean - especially after being used to looking at our Indiana horses who seemingly get fat on air. The horses all looked bright and interested - except for the big one in the back. He just looked tired. He wasn't even tied to the hitching post - so I figured he was REALLY tired - as we were not far from a major roadway and it could have been serious if he had wandered off...



Here's Andy with his mount for the day. Most of Andy's horses were morgan crosses. Tough and sure-footed.

As I got closer, I could see that this poor old guy had been through the wringer. He had wire cut scars on more legs than not, a bowed tendon, white hair where a girth had galled him badly and lumps and bumps all over. His stance was that of a horse that was hurting all over. He was ugly and I felt sorry for him. Like a kid beside the merry-go-round, I quickly diverted my attention to the other horses. Would I get the pinto? the grey? No. Andy chose the ugly dude for me. His name was Billy.

After mounting up and riding off, I discovered that ugly Billy was actually a beautiful ride. He was light, responsive, and respectful. It seemed I had ridden him my whole life. Rental horses usually learn to ignore all but the "loudest" instructions - because they are ridden by so many folks who lack experience. The longer I rode him, the bigger this little plan in my head became... This thin old guy was not going to fare well for many more South Dakota winters... maybe they were getting

ready to retire him? If they did, would he end up at the sale barn, and subsequently on a truck to a Mexican slaughterhouse? I wondered how much it would cost to ship a horse to Indiana...



Probably every little girl that Andy ever took on a trail ride asked if they could buy the horse they were riding - so I felt a little foolish when I asked if he'd put a price on Billy. Ultimately it was determined that for a very reasonable sum, after the trail riding season was over, Billy could be mine. A major stumbling block, however, was the transport cost, which I estimated to be likely more than triple the cost of the horse.

Later this summer, after my repeated calls and emails to Andy went unanswered, I began to feel like a bit of a chump. Probably he had just humored me by acting like he'd sell - a goofy woman from Indiana wanting to buy a broken down old horse that wasn't worth much anyway. Rob likely breathed a sigh of relief, as I already have two horses with tedious mystery health issues that have caused me a great

deal of angst AND cost a lot of money. To knowingly bring geriatric problems into the herd was insane...

“This story has all the heartwarming aspects of a good love story. You met on vacation, felt the connection, and then even the distance could not keep you two apart...” -Cheryl www.paintinghorse.com

Imagine my surprise when Andy called - asking if I still wanted this horse... Winter is coming soon, and he wants him out of there NOW. OMG, my mind was racing... What if he (the horse) is getting ready to croak - and Andy wants to pawn him off on some idiot for a little cash before he does? Now that I am 1200 miles away - what if I send him the money and I get no horse in return? I met this guy once. How do I know if he's a crook? He tells me someone else is interested, but he thinks my home would be the best for Billy. A classic ploy to get a buyer to act fast... What to do??? Do trail ride owners really care if their old horses get a good home? Most I know of merely view the horses as commodities by which they earn a living... My head was spinning with distrustful thoughts. I decided NOT to decide - and to let the transport logistics be the determining factor.

When the connections I had with Rob's former horseshoeing clients failed to yield any leads for hauling, I began to wonder if this was such a great idea. I posted to our Indiana trail riders online group - looking for someone who was perhaps returning from a trip out west with an empty spot in the trailer. The only response I got was from a woman named Pam from Minnesota who alleged she could perhaps help me out... "Great", I thought. "Someone else I don't know, from far away, who could quite possibly turn out to be not what she says - AND take a bunch of my money." When I finally revealed the details of my impending scheme to my husband, I felt a little like one of those crazy people who meets someone on the internet and runs off to marry them - only to discover they are NOT what they seemed.

My plan to "rescue" Billy was feeling dumber by the hour... Why should I spend all this money to drag an old horse of questionable health and soundness 1200 miles, when there are hundreds of young, healthy horses needing homes right here in Indiana? What if it all ends up being for nothing? I was expecting two people I didn't know, to orchestrate a meeting with each other halfway across the country, for someone they didn't even know. About a million things could go wrong... Maybe I should forget about Billy and concentrate on my work; this time of year always brings lots of extra problems to be solved - with Christmas coming and folks ordering items for gifts. It's a real challenge making sure the shelves are stocked; I was barely keeping up as it was and I sure didn't need another distraction.

“This is so mean of you...

I am so drawn in on the Billy story. I CAN'T wait until the next edition.” - Miriam

“Sure - now that I'm interested, you say, ‘Stay tuned...’ This is as bad as the TV shows.”
- Larry

“It's not fair that I have to wait to hear the end of your Billy story!!” -Bill



This is Billings Dynamite (the *other* Billy) with his owner Marci Braddock. This Billy's mention on The Fugly Horse blog was my encouragement to follow my heart concerning "my" Billy.

Gina,

A friend on the pleasurehorse.com forum told me about YOUR Billy. I just read the story and HAD to say hello and I admire you so much! That is just too much of a coincidence, and I'm so very glad that your Billy is now getting to enjoy a wonderful, comfortable easy life. Even if it was a crazy scheme and you doubted it at times, it's a fabulous ending for both you and your Billy! This has just made my day--my whole Thanksgiving holiday!

Please give your boy an extra scratch in his favorite spot from me. And thanks for what you did for him and older horses everywhere. Who knows--you might just inspire someone ELSE to take on an older horse and give them a dream retirement home.

Marci Braddock and Billings Dynamite - La Mesa, NM

little just getting some burrs off and hitting some energy points on him... Not to sound weird... but you are doing something very special... he is truly a unique individual."
-Pam Gordon - an update on Billy during his overnight stay at her place.

Billy must have known about the "trust-themed" newsletter that I wrote about him and sent to my customers - as he obligingly followed my lead. He hopped off of Andy's trailer at a truck stop in Sioux Falls, SD - drank some water, and hopped onto Pam's trailer without hesitation. He settled in happily at Pam's place for his overnight stay, and after the 12 hour ride from there to here - he unloaded at yet another place in the dark, and followed me trustingly into his new stall. He was cheerful and alert - and not the least bit apprehensive or fearful. An attitude we all would do well to emulate in these uncertain times.

And, in case you're thinking that Billy may be a bit of a "doofus" and therefore too dumb to be worried about his fate, my informal testing of his intelligence ranks him pretty high. Our pasture consists of a maze of fencing. To get to the barn, my horses have to go the opposite direction to find the gate opening - they canNOT utilize the shortest distance to get to their intended destination. The other two STILL forget this sometimes - and will gaze wistfully across the fence - crying for their herdmates - instead of traversing what feels like the wrong way to the gate. Billy mastered the "horsey-maze" in about two days.

I am a firm believer that God helps us find our way in times like this, if we will only pay attention to the signs that He sends us. Here was my biggie. It couldn't have been any plainer. That day's entry on my favorite internet blog: **The Fugly Horse** - was a 24 year old ex-ranch horse who was rehomed and rehabbed into a successful show horse. He is solid bay, a Quarter Horse **named BILLY**. What are the chances of that? I guess God was worried that I might not make the connection - so he made it perfectly clear.

So, I threw caution to the wind. I trusted Andy - that he was truly sending me a healthy horse. I trusted Pam - that she'd truly carry out the transport as agreed upon. And I trusted God to have sent me the right guidance to do all this. Even in a time when all we hear and read about is people doing bad things - to each other, and to their animals... I decided to take the chance.

As it turns out, the trust I placed in Andy Holmes was well founded. He went above and beyond to make good on his promise to deliver Billy most of the way across SD, even though in the interim he had a family emergency, and partway into the trip he had truck trouble and had to go back home and get a different truck in order to complete the delivery.

And, the trust I placed in Pam Gordon of Moondance Transport was also well founded. She stuck with us through several changes in plans, rearranging her schedule each time. She rested Billy overnight at her place in MN, and he arrived here in fine shape late the following night.

"Just down to check on things before I sleep. I understand what you're doing. I went over him a



for more information see
www.shadowsoftheoldwest.com

This is Pam - of Moondance Equine Transport. Actually, Pam is also part of a troupe of Old West Re-enactors, and this is one of her characters. She is also a veterinary technician and certified pet masseuse. Billy was in good hands.

“It’s great to hear when people follow their hearts and then things work out!”

-Cindi - HoofPrints newsletter subscriber



This one leg (left front) has a bowed tendon, ringbone, and wire cut scars.

I remembered that Billy was beat up, but once he was here and I was able to look at him closely, I am amazed at the amount and scope of damage that he has. There doesn't seem to be a place on this horse that has not suffered some trauma at one time or another.

Billy's path in life is mostly unknown. Andy got him earlier this year from a rancher who was fed up with the fact that he would pull back and break reins when tied. The rancher got him from a dealer, and before that is unknown. Whatever he did was hard work - his body shows it. Both sides have white hair in multiple places from an ill-fitting saddle. His withers have no hair on the top.



Horse teeth aren't all that pretty anyway - but these are REALLY ugly. Fortunately he is able to eat without difficulty. Is he 16? or late 20's? We don't know.

He's got an old bowed tendon. Big wire cut scars. Ringbone. A cataract in one eye. Billy's age is a mystery. Andy initially thought late 20's, but then in reviewing his brand inspection paperwork the age was stated to be 16. I hoped that Dr Hollendonner could solve the mystery once and for all when he came to float Billy's teeth. Unfortunately, he could not. Like the rest of him, Billy's teeth have suffered trauma. An old injury - the doc theorizes that likely the upper jaw was fractured and several incisors broken off.

When I published Billy's story in our company's email newsletter, we got numerous calls and emails about Billy - and we were inspired to ask our readers who are so inclined to consider supporting equine rescue. Whether you take an extra one into your barn, or offer up financial support to others who do, I can say from experience that it is very rewarding. Like many of us experience with abandoned dogs and cats - the feeling that they know that you are their savior - Billy is the same way. He is loving, and grateful, and I can tell he doesn't take any of his new amenities for granted.

Shown here is our third ride. I was a little worried when I saddled him up for this photo; he'd not yet worn a saddle the two months he's been here, and had been basically stuffing himself with food and just hanging out. What if he was only a great ride back in SD because he was too tired to buck or run away - and now that he was rested and fed - he might turn into "psycho-horse"? My fears were unfounded. Billy seemed happy to see a bridle and saddle, and I can tell now, that he is the kind of horse who is keen for an adventure.

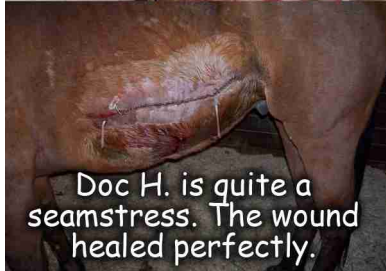


Gosh - with a little (lot) more practice (and grooming) we might look as pretty as Marci and her Billy!

He wears the snaffle bit like an old pro - and will take a working trot easily. He carries his head pretty much like this picture shows - although he's a little overflexed here as I was holding him back so we could get a picture with an uncluttered background.

You may be wondering what that funny place is on his rib cage. It's actually the remnants of a massive injury that he sustained the Friday after Thanksgiving. Rob saw the whole gang galloping in the pasture - and shortly after when we went to feed we were greeted by Billy at the back door - with an absolutely GIANT cut that ran almost the full length of his side. Our pasture is obstruction-free, so HOW he did it was a mystery. Later we discovered the eyelet that we snap the gate chain to was covered with hair. It's a big thick loop that doesn't stick out very far - and it's on the side of the opening that coincides with his eye that has the cataract - so he must have misjudged the distance

Maybe he was a champion hunter under saddle in his former life? However, I am not going to be trying him over fences any time soon...



and hit it going full speed.

Most of you know that horses do NOT choose convenient times to get hurt. Friday night on a holiday weekend is almost as bad as it gets. Fortunately, we were able to catch our vet on the way home from his last call (with apologies to his wife) and he was able to come and sew it up.

We've been fortunate to have had many years of horse owning without a major injury, so I guess we were about due. Once our teenage son Jordan got over his horror at the sight of all that blood - all he could talk about was if I'd be sharing the story of the accident in our newsletter... Initially I didn't think all that gore was newsworthy - but he documented the whole incident with his camera just in case I changed my mind.

But now that it's all healed up, I am so grateful that it wasn't any worse. It truly was "just a flesh wound". Had he hit the point of his shoulder on that post the outcome would not have been so good.

As you can imagine, an after hours / holiday weekend vet call was not an inexpensive endeavor. My thoughts turned to the many horse rescues throughout the country who routinely take in and treat horses with all sorts of maladies. They need financial support for more than just feed and bedding.

Please consider supporting equine rescue. Not all of us have room to take in another horse, but we can help in other ways. Monetary donations are always good - but donations of other items needed - halters, feed tubs, blankets, etc are always appreciated. Who doesn't have some good usable stuff laying around collecting dust? And donations of time are helpful too. Many of these horses have issues - and need to be around people who are nice to them - and have no expectations - for a while. A great way to de-stress - both them and you! Be sure to check out any rescue you consider helping - as not all are what they claim to be.

"I want to commend you for taking on Billy, and for using

your contact network for spreading a good message about older horses. Your words will have a greater impact than you realize... There are a lot of throw-away horses out there, especially in today's economy. If there is ever a time horses need people, it's now. The message you gave - has the ability to spread great distances and possibly help other horses."

-Lorn - HoofPrints newsletter subscriber

A note from Gina in closing: Thanks for reading my words about Billy. I still can't believe it all worked out so wonderfully - and I am honored to be able to share the story.

Author Robert Moss says it best:

"The Australian Aborigines say that Big Stories hunt for the right people to tell them. Sometimes a Big Story seizes us through a riff of coincidence we simply cannot dismiss. When we are seized by a Big Story, our lives are different. We have the power to cope with everyday dramas with greater courage and grace, because we are aware of a deeper drama. We now travel with a sense of mission, we draw different events and people and opportunities toward us."

May 2009 be your year for Big Stories!



Look at that face! Who could resist? It was a lot of trouble and expense, but I am so glad I did it and he is here now.