



PHOTOS COURTESY DARRELL HOLDEN

Never

My “little red mule” was payment for an electrical job.

By Darrell Holden

Never. The word is so final. It’s a heartless word and hope and faith seem to flee from its presence. Never! It’s a statement of people who are angry. It ends marriages and it breaks friendships. It sometimes has a few other words that run around in a pack with it. Words like pride, resentment, unforgiveness.

But tonight, my mind kept trying to think about another use of never. I will never see my sweet old mare again.

Reba was a plain little sorrel filly when she came to me as the only payment I’d ever get for an electrical job that had cost five times what she was worth. She’d been picked on by a bunch of older mares and wasn’t very friendly to us two-legged critters either. I loaded her and took her home with the intention to send her to the next horse sale to try and recoup money I’d spent on parts for the delinquent bill. But she grew on me. She had long pointed ears and she was rail thin and I

took to calling her my little red mule. Unlike her previous owners, we had plenty of hay and she started filling out into a pretty mare.

She quit being a little bitch too. No longer did she spin her hips and pin her ears back and threaten to kick when approached. In fact, those tall red ears would silhouette over the corral rail and she’d whinny her hello as we went to feed her.

I told my young wife that a broke horse would bring more money than an unbroken one and she gave me her blessing to see how I could do. So to the round pen we went. I’d wanted to try a new-to-me method of breaking horses and Reba was the guinea pig.

I’ll never forget walking toward her with a rag tied onto a light whip. The white in her eyes was evident from across the corral. She turned inside out, and whichever direction she went I was there to meet her with the whip and the pressure it placed on her. The videos I’d studied said it might take several

hours until the horse quit kicking and running and trying to get away and turned to face the hated man with the rag.

It took Reba two minutes! She suddenly turned back towards me, trotted across that old wooden round corral and stuck her whole head against my chest. As if to say, enough already. From that moment on, she did anything I asked of her. I had her saddled an hour later. I used a rope on all four legs and she released on every command. I led her with a rope around her flank and even under her tail. Not a single blowup and not a single buck. She’d get confused and then she’d turn back to me and bring her head to my chest for reassurance. She won my heart that day. I wouldn’t be selling the little red mule.

Reba was never an athletic horse. She wasn’t super fast. But she gave all she had. We put on a bunch of miles moving cattle in tough, mean country. The desert is steep and rocky and makes for long days a horseback. I saw

lots of miles looking at the view framed by two tall, thin ears.

I rode or packed salt on her for 18 years. She seemed to enjoy every trip. We'd pull up in some high desert pass to let our horses puff a little. Other horses would start looking for grass while Reba would survey the scenery. I swear to God she loved the quiet high desert trails as much as I did. And at the end of a long day, after she had a good roll, when I went to the corral to lead her over to water, she'd cross the corral and bury her head against my chest.

I buried my head against her a time or two as well. When my grandmother, the matriarch of our ranching family died, I walked to the corral with my grief. Reba nickered quietly and sensed my hurt. I stuck my tear-covered face on her neck and sobbed. She never moved. Healing began, thanks to the old red mule.

As time passed and more horses filled our corrals I gave her more time off. I had a few horses with more skill and ability. Reba graduated from everyday horse to once in a while and then on to kids' horse. Both kids grew up with the old red mule for a babysitter. They loped along the pony express trail as we reenacted the mail delivery service in our little town every July Fourth. They rode in parades and in the local roping arena.

I even took the grand old lady up for a night with the young ladies in our church's youth program. Some had never been around horses or felt the amazing privilege it is to sit astride a good one. Reba pricked her ears and calmly welcomed each young woman as they fussed and fretted and bonded. I will forever remember those girls as they lost their fears and found their confidence with the help of an old red mule.

Age is an enemy that never relents, and time kept marching. We buried Hacksaw and

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FROM TOP: The author with Reba. Ranch is packing the salt. ▶ Dalton's smile, about to ride Reba, says it all. ▶ Hailey likes to help bring cattle home in the fall. BOTTOM: Reba in her prime after a long day. OPPOSITE: Long-eared Reba and Darrell are on the top of Sheeprock Mountain looking east toward Snow Hollow and Rattlesnake Ridge.



Dandy, Topper, Wally, Vega, Bar Ran, Pumpkin and Ranch. We lost Bandit and Rooster and Cisco and Doc. If my math is right, Reba outlived 17 horses that our family or my

cousin's family (who have my grandparents' ranch now) owned. She got a slight swayback and her knees got knobby. Arthritis started to spread. We treated her and coddled her and spoiled her, but time kept marching. I had those two skinny red ears turn toward my voice and send an unspoken beckoning for 28 wonderful years.

Until it was time. I knew what needed to happen. And as tough as I am, I knew I just couldn't be the one. So with a full, sad, thankful heart I called the vet and made the appointment. It was the hardest thing for me to walk into that corral for the last time and have her place her head against my heart. It was a lonely ride the 60 plus miles to the veterinarian. It was a sacred moment as I untied her for the last time, led her off the trailer and handed the lead rope to the staff. I took a long walk and when it was done I turned west for home and the empty corral. I brought her thin, old red body home to lie next to her amigos. I dug a deep hole and gently laid her—and

part of me—in the desert ground.

But tonight, through my tears, the word "never" doesn't hold any weight. I buried her body, but not her soul. She runs like a three-year-old across the tops of the mountains. Our mountains. My grandparents will keep an eye on her for me until it's my time to ride the high ground of heaven.

The word "never" is powerless, unless we weaken and lose the light of our faith. I will see and ride and feel the nuzzle of my fine red mare again. Of that I am sure. ■

Darrell Holden is a fifth-generation rancher who lives in Vernon, Utah. He admits to loving horses and dogs more than the majority of people he knows.