

Close Call in the Cold

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By Tara Miller

There was a scare with the Millers one December night. The day before, cattle and a bull had been spotted by the sheriffs department by plane in the forest. Mike thought they most likely belonged to one of his neighbors, Hamilton or Budd, but decided to help Budd's two hired men go after them. The hired men were making one loop but couldn't finish because their horses gave out in the wet and heavy snow. Mike was on his tough circle horse, so after making his loop, decided to finish theirs. Mike had never been in that country before. He followed a half-frozen creek down a steep draw, literally having to walk in the creek at times, thinking the cattle may have wandered down and be hung up in the draw. His horse slipped and fell on his side in the creek, drenching Mike's heavy wool pants. He continued down, figuring the draw would come out near the trucks. As day was falling, he found the draw narrowed at the bottom and the creek was strewn with large boulders and timber. The sides were too steep to climb out of, the only way out was to back-track all the way. Mike has night-blindness, and besides, there was no moon. He hoped to get on top of the draw by dark. Now he had to follow the creek bed back up and out of the draw. His horse gave out several times and Mike would let him catch his air and gather strength to go again. He led the big gelding part of the way, both of them stumbling up the side of the creek to get to the top of the draw. Mike was thankful he had this horse of such great endurance because their getting out of there was going to count on the horse. They reached the top at dead dark, Mike was enveloped in cold blackness, exhausted and still several hard miles from the truck and trailer.

Mike climbed into the saddle and gave the horse the reins, he rode bent and low to lesson the blows from unforeseen branches. His wool hat was swiped off by the timber; he got off and fumbled around but could not find it in the dark deep snow. He took his silk neck scarf off and tied it over his head and ears. Wet, cold and blinded, Mike got back into the saddle. Again he gave slack in the reins; it would be up to his horse to find the way back alone.

At dark, Dan Budd drove out to where the trucks and trailers were and found his hired men waiting for Mike. On his cell phone, he called the search and rescue who decided they could do nothing but fly at day-break since the snow was too soft for snow machines. He told Mike's wife, Tara, and she asked the search captain if he could lend some good search lights for she was going to organize a horse-back search. They tried to convince her that since Mike knew how to dress for the cold and were an outdoorsman that he would be alright and flying at the crack of dawn was the most sensible thing to do. It was growing colder, nearing 0 degree, she could not be calmed and despite lack of faith in her plan, they were persuaded to give her lights. One friend Tara called tried to dissuade her, telling her to wait until dawn. She wished her two boys were home to help.

Dan Budd said, "I'm 72 years old and probably have no business doing it but yes, certainly I will go." Dan knew that country well. He left his men at the horse trailers in case Mike came in and he headed home to get a horse and some supplies.

"I'll be there," said Keith Manning, Tara's brother-in-law whom she knew would be the most capable and effective person in such a circumstance. "It is better not to have many people or machines to help," said Keith "for we will track Mike like elk, we will track and listen – we will not be able to see him in timber even with the lights. Dan and I will go alone and you will keep a big fire going and be our base, bring a horse just in case." Keith quickly and wisely gathered a sleeping bag, warm clothing, lighter, waterproof matches, and a little food to tie behind his saddle and put his rifle in its scabbard, of course he had his knife. Kieth said it scared him for Mike when he went out to catch his horse for it was below zero and so dark he could hardly find his horse in the corral.

It was 11:00 p.m., and just as Dan got back to the trailers with similar supplies as Kieth had rounded up, and Tara was in town with her horse picking up the lights, and Kieth was just leaving for Piney; Mike rode up to the trailers on his big, rangy horse. His face was scratched, his body was bruised and he was shivering with blue lips. Dan called Tara at the search captains, and she called her sister Talli to stop Kieth.

It was a close call! If it had been a lesser horse, they would not have made it out. Mike collapsed with numb legs when he slid out of the saddle. Dan put him in his warm pickup until Mike's truck warmed up then followed him out. Shaking all the way home, Tara met Mike at the barn and helped put a blanket on his horse for his first time and put him in the corral. Mike soaked in the tepid and then warm tub for quite some time. He drank warm tea and ate but a little then slept chilled in his long-handles and huddled to Tara all night. His strong, brave horse was kept in and fed well - his legs swelled and took several days to go down but he recovered to be a bionic horse once again, a horse with a world of heart and try.

It was great that the search wasn't necessary, but they were proud of Dan Budd's courage and proud that Keith was unquestioningly ready to go out in the harsh night for his brother-in-law and friend.

A good Ending to potential trouble!

A few days later, Harry Hamilton and another man went for the cattle that had again been spotted by plane in an entirely different area than the one reported by the sheriff's department. Either the sheriffs' bearings had been off or the plane had reported the wrong drainage. Harry's horse fell and broke Harry's ankle but he was able to get back on and ride out. The cattle had been given a start and eventually wandered down and were brought home but the bull was never found.

