

Lonesome Moon

Foreword

This is a story of a unique and admirable horse. Our ranch has been entwined with and has raised horses to be proud of for over a hundred years, and this stranger from the desert has joined the ranch in high standing. My husband Mike and I have seen hundreds of good horses come and go; and yet this wild black horse without a known mommy or daddy has become a dear thing to us.

Mike calls him Cortez and I call him Lonesome Moon; there are several horses for which we each have our own name. I believe Mike calls him Cortez in honor of the horses the Spaniard Cortez first brought to America; some survived a ship wreck to swim ashore and became wild horses. I call him Lonesome Moon because he is so black, beautiful, and mysterious and was very lonesome at one point of his life; a young stud ousted from the herd, drifting around alone in the desert like the moon hanging alone in the dark sky.

I believe I saw one of Lonesome Moons ancestors long ago, about 20 years before I knew him. We were back-riding for yearling steers on the desert. At daybreak we set off in different directions across the immense sagebrush tables and over the wind-blown pebbled bluffs. My sons and I made our own circle. Mike was riding a waspy renegade that needed the miles so he took an extra long sweep. The crew drizzled into the gathering grounds with their bunches in the mid-afternoon. Mike was the only one not showing up. I am used to this since Mike always rides far and thoroughly. We ate our lunch and waited. The boys were quite young and worn out; they lay down in the truck and went to sleep. I still waited until I became worried. Some of the crew were holding the cattle and I rode off to a tall distant bluff to look around for Mike.

From the top of the bluff I could see across the landscape for miles but saw nothing but desert until directly below me there was a sudden wild swirl of dust. I had a time trying to make out what this whirl-wind was about; something was in the middle of it causing the dust. It stopped, the dust cleared and then I saw a big black wild horse proudly looking up at me. We looked at each other for a still moment or two and then he whirled around a few times, stuck his tail in the air and ran off like a black steak over the grey land until I could not distinguish him any longer. I felt eerie, and about then a hawk flew over cocking his head looking at my horse and me. Then it came to me, I had a feeling that something had happened to Mike and his spirit was in the wild black horse; he had told me goodbye. I got off and piled a good mound of rocks. I figured I could return to this spot to show the boys where I last saw their Dad.

Long days on the desert are mysterious and it is a spiritual place; it can mess with your head. When I got back to the gathering ground Mike was coming in with a bunch of steers. Anyway, I still believe the black horse and hawk were telling me something. And I believe the horse was one of Lonesome Moons forbearers and ancestors.

Now, Cortez/Lonesome Moon and the end of June 2002.

Mike and a couple hands went to the desert to gather cattle. They were bunching the cattle to have them ready to move out the next day. Unloading from the trailer on a two-track desert road, they soon split off with the two hands going their way and Mike going his, agreeing that when Robby was through with his circle he would bring the trailer around to the North Windmill and meet Mike and Tim.

Mike was riding a three year old that he was breaking and needed some wet saddle blankets, he figured this would be a nice easy enough job for the colt. They looked over several draws and a few water holes and saw no tracks of cattle, only tracks and sign of horses. It was a beautiful clear mystifying desert day and not too warm. The immense quiet desert with its interesting rocks, brush and lay of land only moved when a bird or desert rabbit spooked up from the sage now and then or a horny toad flashed by taking cover. Mike needed to check the North Windmill and then cover some country beyond. He took a short-cut over a tall bluff and spotted a few cows at the windmill and as he meandered down he saw there was a horse with them. As he approached, this lone horse whinnied lonesomely and seemed excited to have company. The horse anxiously but cautiously trotted towards Mike, his neck arched and tail in the air. At first Mike thought he might be an abandoned domestic horse but the beautiful black got close enough to see or smell a human, he displayed his wildness. The big wild horse stopped in his tracks with eyes wide and nostrils open. He was jet black with a thick long mane and tail and feathered legs with socks on the back. He was as big as a grown horse but there was coltishness about him and Mike figured him to be two or three years old. The desert horse had several bite marks that had scraped the hair off his hide and big chunks of brush stuck in his tail. He wanted to come close but was afraid to. It looked as though he had been kicked out of a herd; he was a lonesome sight, a little thin, dusty and scraped up, though quite beautiful. Most likely, the young stud had been disbanded by the head stallion since he had reached maturity; he had been fought and run off from the other horses until he had finally given up and gone off on his own. In time, these young studs usually find others to hang out with; only now there are not so many wild horses on the desert and he had not found a companion which is hard on a herd animal.

Mike rode towards him and saw that the black stranger was very cranky. He must have still been feeling feisty from being kicked out of the mustang band. Challenging Mike's horse; he stood shaking his head, snorting and stomping the ground. Mike's colt danced around and challenged him back. Mike took a tight rein and tried to settle his colt as he got his rope down in case the wild one came at them. The stranger spun around, snorting and stomping forward calling Mike's horse on. Mike hollered at him and spun his rope. The black stopped, flared his nostrils and shook his head; he did not know what to make of the man. Mike went towards him hollering and beating his chaps and the horse gave ground to where Mike got past him and to the cows. He gave the cows a start down the draw but kept a close eye on the wild colt as he came up behind him a few times with his head down and pawing the air. Then Mike would give him another scare. With some hoop and hollering, soon the cows were traveling along well; and Mike headed out over the brush to check another draw. He still had quite a bit of country to cover. Looking back up the trail, Mike was pleased he did not see the pesky colt and figured he had lost him. As he was wrapping his rope back up to his saddle swell, suddenly, Mike's horse grabbed

his rear and startled forward. Mike got the colt shut down and turned to see the wild black stud coming hard and fast like he was really going to take them on. Mike slapped his rope on his chaps and hollered. Twenty feet away the black abruptly stopped with his head and tail in the air, snorting and pawing. Mike's colt was all riled up and both horses were screaming and striking the air; calling each other on.

Mike's colt was quite riled up and Mike had to jab him a bit and give him a few jerks on the reins to get his attention and settle him back down. Now Mike took a pause and was getting a real kick out of the wild colt and thought it was quite brazen of him to be so challenging. He watched this young brave stud a minute or two and admired his strong build, big intelligent eyes and wild spirit. But again, he wanted to get his work done so he spooked the stud off, yelling and swinging his rope and took off down a trail at a trot. They got a few hundred feet away from the black and here he came running at them again. Again he stopped about twenty feet away. Mike went at him hollering and swinging his rope, and the colt ran off in the other direction. Mike wanted to hurry as he had been delayed several times and had all that country to ride. He was glad he may have shook the colt for he was no longer in sight. Mike and his colt clipped along good for a ways; and all of a he heard sudden thundering hooves running up behind him. There was the wild-eyed colt suddenly stopping and rearing and pawing the air about fifteen feet away, then whirling like he was going to kick. Mike's horse whirled, jumped back and snorted. The little stud came a bit closer as Mike built a loop. He figured that was it, and he rashly decided to rope the daring young stud. He stuck out a houlihan but the black was facing him and the loop hit his neck. The wild one quickly flew back out of the rope. The black ran off a short ways then turned and looked at Mike surprised-like, wondering why he was throwing stuff. Mike thought this black was a character and was growing fonder of him all the time. But then he wanted to get his work done and started wondered how this was going to work.

Mike took off down the trail at a high trot with the wild one following but not as close and not as aggressively as he was leery after the rope incident. Then sometimes the black would loose some interest and get to hanging back until Mike was a ways off. Then he would rush up again. This went on for several miles as the black started falling further back and acted as though he might quit the pursuit. As Mike trotted along, he got to thinking of hearing stories of the old guys catching wild horses and thought of how it was something every cowboy wants to do, and how exciting it would be to catch your own horse. He was thinking of how cute that brave black stud was with his hind socks and varied expressions. Mike stopped to see if the black would come up near again. Soon he whinnied and come running up, but not as close now and he had ears perked and was sniffing the air. The black cautiously came in to about fifty foot, fell back and came in again; he was suspecting something was up. Mike thought he would really need a good start to catch this black for it is hard to outrun a horse without a rider, especially on a colt. Riding his colt forwards a ways and then turning to be facing the stud so that he could get the edge on him, Mike was planting his strategy. The stud would have to turn when Mike put the jump on him perhaps giving Mike the advantage he needed. Mike built a loop and when the stud inched forward to within about 50 feet, he quickly spurred his colt up and the stud wheeled and took off. Mike knew he had only one shot so bared down. The stud had his head down flat and running which made it very hard to catch from behind for Mike could not see his target and the black was very quick. Though not as close as he had hoped to be, Mike thought he better hurry and throw before he lost more ground. Throwing a lot of line, Mike gave it his best shot. Not

able to see if he caught, Mike dallied the horn just in case. The stud came to the end of the rope and Mike knew he had him. The black stallion was like a fighting Marlin, wildly fighting the rope for his life. He would rear up striking and fall over, bellowing, snorting, fighting mad. It was all Mike's colt could do to hold the wild one. Mike did not want to hurt the black and tried to position the colt to balance both horses as best he could. When the combating stallion reared in the air, Mike would quickly ride up and give him slack before he hit the end of the rope. This let him come forward to save a bad fall. The brave one flared his nostrils, gave it his all and fought the rope hard for about five minutes. Wondering when things were going to calm down, Mike was not real sure what to do. Being there by himself he was thinking maybe this had not been smart and was hoping the young stud would not get hurt. He was also hoping his colt could keep a hold of the frantic stud for he was getting jerked around quite a bit. The stud gradually quieted down; he was spent, out of air and then he sulked up on the end of the rope. Then Mike would give him slack so he could catch his air. Soon he would snort, flare his nostrils and fight til worn down again. Each time they went through this pattern the stud would get a little more wise and realized that falling back was not in his best interest so not do it quite so hard.

Slowly the stallion was being broke to lead. Mike would pull him from side to side until he inched forward and then give him release and let him stand and think about it. Mike decided to work his way with the stud back to the well where he first saw him, now about five miles back. He knew Robby would eventually be bringing the truck around. Mike also herded the stud some by keeping his dallies and going from side to side to get him moving in the right direction and if he took off he stopped him, let him breath and got him lined out again. They eventually got back to the windmill where Mike sat with the interesting black at the water tank as he could not tie him up. They hung around there for a couple hours til Robby showed up with the truck.

Quite surprised, Robby jumped in to help Mike. He smoothly roped the black and now with two ropes on they lead him up as close as they could to the back of the trailer. By running one of the ropes through the side of the trailer then dallying to it, they pulled him in. It was pretty easy to get him in, not near the fight Mike thought it would be since the stud was tired out. They shut him in the trailer and got the ropes off through the sides so he would not step on them and choke. They left the trailer there and went off to finish the day, giving the colt a pretty good wait.

By the time Mike got home that night he was very proud of the beautiful black horse. The stallion pranced around proudly and undaunted in the corral. Tara, the boys and the hands were very impressed with this new stranger. He was like a horse from another land; an unrecognizable breed, with his head held high in dignity with a direct and distinct look in his eyes of self respect.

Mike kept the black in the round pen in front of the barn where he could stop and see him several times a day. He named him Cortez. After hearing the story, Tara called him Lonesome Moon. Cortez stood in the corral watching everything that happened and would barely eat. Mike put water and hay in the middle of the corral but the black stud was on a hunger strike; Tara brought grass from the yard but still he would not eat. Mike put an old gelding in with him and that turned the tide, giving him comfort, so he started eating. Everyday Mike would go into the corral with him and just sit and Cortez would watch closely. Mike would talk to him and try to give him a bite of grain but Cortez would only watch the gelding eat then pick at the bit left on the hay when Mike left. After several days, he took a bite out of Mike's hand.

With a lot of patience, Mike got Cortez where he could run him around the round-coral and catch him. It took a long time for Mike to earn his trust. All along, Cortez watched him like a hawk. Likewise, Mike had to watch Cortez closely for he was real bad to kick. It took a great deal of ground work to get him over his kicking instinct. Mike worked with him every day all summer and slowly got him gentled and broke to ride. In the fall when the flies were gone, Mike castrated Cortez and soon started keeping him in the field with the remuda. You could see his appreciation in being part of a herd; he watched that he was always with them. Mike rode him on several cattle drives later that winter and was glad to find out that he had a strong interest in cows. Soon Cortez made several good buddies and they are all the big strong 'bosses of the herd' geldings.

Mike and Cortez click, both being survivors, brave, strong and persevering. Growing up, both have lived part of the old cowboy-day ways and have experienced vestiges of the olden days. To this day, six years later, Mike is the only one that can catch Cortez without a lot of trouble. Cortez has settled into ranch life and is very good at his cow-horse work. He has tremendous stamina, and likes to use his strong body. Of course his feet are like rocks and never need shod. Mike rides him quite often on long drives and long days on the desert. He ropes off of him, doctors cattle, does it all. Though Cortez snorts around and acts like he thinks he is a renegade, he is very kind and intelligent. Though only Mike can catch him, Cortez is very gentle; but out of respect Mike doesn't let many people ride him.

While he gets along well with them, Cortez still stands out from the other horses in his looks and actions. As big as he is, he has some draft horse blood in him. Some time ago when draft horses were used a lot on the ranches, some would get out and escape to the desert. Cortez has a gentle disposition like a draft horse, but then he also has his wild side. He often raises his head with a big arch in his neck, perks his ears, blows his nostrils and turns around looking surprised-like and the other horses will look to see what has him going and can't figure it out. He comes from a different past and you can tell. He has memories and instincts the other horses will never know. He is proud and noble and we give him his space. He is our wild horse and we leave him out in the big pasture most of the time where he is comfortable and one of the kings. Cortez is a feather in Mike's cowboy hat, and they seem to have mutual affection and respect for each other. 'Lonesome Moon' is gorgeous, other worldly, our companion and one of earths good things.