

We ride at dawn...

TEXAS – When I was a girl in the Northwest, I read about ranch life and pioneer settling and especially about horses. Eventually, TV came. The first ones were little screens in big boxes. They arrived first in our neighborhood, then in our house (probably to lure us back home from the neighbor's television). Programming included many Westerns. I liked that.

Invariably, a particular line was boiler-plate stamped into each book, movie, and TV series:

"We ride at dawn!"

Another repetitive theme was a standard skit in Westerns: The bad guy or a funny guy always ended up in the middle of the desert without canteen, without boots, and wearing only long-johns. What a hoot! Miles from town, limping and groaning and thirsting.

Living in the city, insulated from farm, ranch and desert realities, no whiff of hot dry air came through the TV or movie screen, or the pages of any book. I knew nothing of the venomous creatures

crawling the sands, had no frame of reference to envision miles of land with no trees for shade, and had never sweated a desert sweat.

Now that I have lived several more decades of life, much of it in the deserts of the South, a new perspective pervades my thoughts. You could say I've learned a thing or two.

One thing gained is a great sympathy for those long-johned barefoot cowboys I laughed at in my youth. And more than a little shame for my enjoyment of their misery. Sitting in our family living room in the Northwest, how could I have known of all the burrs and stickers that populate desert soils? Nothing else will condescend to grow there, so sharp things volunteer. Like cactus and prickly pear, and grass burrs, which are not grassy at all, but barbed. They really know how to hurt soft-skinned mammals, two-footed or four.

I'm always grateful for boots and brogans, and at the very least, sandals or flip-flops, letting them take up the heat of the burning hot sand. And it is by far easier to pry grass burrs out of flip-flops than feet.

And then there's still that favorite line that fades off into the West in a flaming sunset —

“We ride at dawn...”

In all those books, all those long-ago TV Westerns, I'd pictured ranchers lighting a kerosene lamp at three o'clock in the morning. (I also wondered what they used for an alarm clock. Probably their most reliable rooster.)

Yes, 3:00 a.m. - in the morning! It had to be. In the Northwest, and in my experience, summertime dawns arrive shortly after that. I didn't see how humans could possibly keep up a schedule like that, day after day, especially if the story involved children, and especially if that child was close to my age. They were always lighting fires in fireplaces before dawn, doing barn chores before dawn, hitching up the wagon before dawn, starting out on the trail before dawn.

Now I know. From a vantage point in Texas, it is clear to me that the sun sleeps in a little, down this way. It gets up and winds the gears of morning at a much more reasonable hour. So, like today, if someone were to say to me, "We ride at dawn," I'd say, "Okay, fine, see you then!" Because I know that tomorrow's sunrise isn't scheduled until about 7:30 a.m. And that's doable. Easy.

Peanut's discovery...

TEXAS – "Over here, Peanut. Put the grain in this bucket while I get the milking pail." I was in such a hurry I threw directions every which way.

I had a meeting to get to, so chores had to tick like clockwork or I'd never make it in time. Dinner was in the crockpot, the critters had to be fed, and I still had to change my clothes.

We kept moving. "I'll get the hay, Peanut. You feed the bunny. Don't forget to pick him some johnson grass or he'll never forgive you."

A few minutes later I handed her the bucket. "Take this milk into the house. I'll put Reva back in her pen and be right in to strain and chill the milk."

"Gramma..."

"Hurry! I have to leave in 20 short minutes!"

"But, Gramma..."

"Scoot! Go! And don't forget water for Pansy."

"Gramma, it's warm."

I was halfway to the barn, and only half listening.

"Gramma. Gramma. It's warm. The milk is warm!"

"What?"

"The milk is real warm when it comes out of the goat."

The light of discovery glistened in her eyes, and it stopped me in my tracks. I hugged her, and remembered back to before her Mama was born.

Puddin' was my first born and, oh, the plans I had for her little life. I saw myself with the patience of Job, introducing her to the wonders of our planet. I pictured her held safely in my arms while she reached for a delicate blossom above her head and I taught her to say "flower."

But, what happened? Instead, it went more like this: "Don't touch that - get down from there - time for your nap - eat your peas - don't forget to brush your teeth - make your bed - do your homework - be home by 10 - no more TV tonight - be home by midnight - yes, here's the keys, be careful..."

Now I'm a grandmother, still pushing to meet schedules. But Peanut just discovered one of the secrets of life. Stop the clock. This could take awhile.

Oh, nuthin' much...

TEXAS – “Hi, Bunny. What’cha doin’?” Smiley Riley was on the other end of the phone.

“Nuthin’ much.” I replied. “Let’s talk awhile.”

My four-year-old grandson in Washington State learned something new. It’s called “Leave a Message.” If I’m not home, he asks Bompá to “leave a message to have Bunny call me.”

“Are you still in Texas?” he asked. He always asks. Maybe to be sure. Maybe to practice the word Texas.

“Yes,” I tell him. “It’s a hot day and it’s lunch time.” It’s raining there, where he is, and he just got through eating breakfast. He thinks it’s silly that I had spaghetti for breakfast. He eats cereal, or toaster tarts. He named all his favorite flavors.

“Mama’s sick,” he said. Worry painted concern in his voice. He said, “I keep giving her back rubs, but it’s still so not working.”

I wished I could hug him. "I think every time you rub her back she gets a little bit better."

For a diversion, I told him about the army worm invasion a wet spring brought us. "There are millions of them," I said, "everywhere you step." I told him what color they were, and how they hid in the grass, and ate all my irises.

A long pause clued me he was thinking they wore Army camouflage uniforms and marched in platoons. He finally asked if they knew how to get up the steps and into the house. I told him no, and army worms don't carry rifles, either. He said, "Oh." And then he said, "Good."

Smiley Riley asked me if they looked like caterpillars, and if they had any fuzzies on them. He said he liked caterpillars. Then one of the goats bleated. "Bunny, are you outside? I heard a goat."

"Yes," I told him. "I'm sitting on a stool in the yard, watching Bompa fix the brakes on the pickup."

Then I had more than army worms to talk about. A giant green worm crawled towards my feet. I told Smiley Riley all about its bright color and its darker green stripes.

"How big is it?" he asked.

I told him to look at his hand, and that it was as long as his hand from fingertips to wrist. "Bompa says it's a tomato worm."

"Can it climb stairs?" he asked.

"He's leaving, Riley Boy. I don't have any tomatoes in my garden. Bomp says it's crawling off to check the neighbor's garden.

"Oh," he said, and then - "good."

After the excitement of the gorgeous green tomato worm, all that was left in the dirt at my feet was a squished worm, one of those army worms. Though no creature is much interested in army worms for dinner, one fly liked the idea of dried guts. But so did a fire ant. I watched the food chain fight for awhile, describing it to Smiley Riley on the telephone. He laughed each time the tiny ant nipped the big fly in the fanny.

Pretty soon I said, "Gotta go, Little One. I love you bunches."

He asked, "What'cha gonna do, Bunny?"

"Nuthin' much. Think I'll spend the afternoon thinking about you."

"Silly Bunny," he laughed. "Bye, Bunny. Can I leave a message?" He chanted robotic words into the phone. "This message is for Bunny. Call me tomorrow."

Typing lesson...

TEXAS – Sweet Pea is sitting at the kitchen table, hunched over a typewriter. It's an old, ancient impact typewriter, found at a moving sale. I think it lacked but three or four days to qualify as an antique.

I'm in the next room listening to the catchy rhythm of the typewriter keys. Most kids Sweet Pea's age have never even seen a typewriter close up, much less one this old. She thinks it's really neat.

First thing, I tell her a typewriter needs paper. It isn't good to type directly on the platen. She wants to know more about the parts that moved and the parts that make letters when a key is punched.

Next, I compliment her erect posture and the proper curve of her beautiful piano player fingers over the keys.

She pounds the keys steadily, not looking at the keyboard. She must be doing really well in her Computer keyboarding class at school, I thought.

She'll be typing the *Great American Novel* before long.

Watching her and listening to the clack-clack-clack of the keys took me back 100 years to high school typing class. I recalled the drills and exercises and the frequent timed tests that strengthened weak fingers and committed the alphabet to muscle memory.

I visualized the roomful of students at rows of typewriters that only the timer bell could quell. Imagine teaching several classes a day immured in all that clatter. I don't think I ever had enough sympathy for that teacher.

Sweet Pea asks for a sentence to type. I give her some standards: "Now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of their country," and "The quick brown fox jumped over the lazy dogs."

While I stir lunch, she keeps typing. My mind wanders back to typing class, and another class called *Office Machines*. There we met dittoes and stencils, cash-register-sized 10-key, and clunky rotary calculators. This was just before the world shifted into overdrive. From then on, computer language ruled. I never saw any of those machines again after my first office job.

Sweet Pea is still typing while I dish up lunch. "Oh, cool!" she said. "I just typed 'or.'"

It startled me. "Does that mean you aren't typing words except by accident?"

"Yep," she said, still typing. "Oh, wow! I almost got 'also!'"

I guess it will be awhile before she starts that novel.

Triage: a time sort

Emergency! Emergency!
Schedule's gone awry.
Re-sort! Milk the goat.
Trash can to the roadside.
Change gears, change clothes,
get to the meeting, late.

Hurry, Peanut, Hold this bucket!
Gramma...
No time, sweetie.
Gramma, Gramma, but...
What?
Milk is warm
fresh from the goat.

Re-sort. Level 1:
a child's discovery.

Driving a stick shift...

TEXAS – One day MyKeeper pointed out the window. “Look,” he said.

I followed his finger until I saw...Oh, my gosh! It was Punkin! Driving! In the fields! Alone!!!

I clutched at my heart, gripped a chair, and forced myself to breathe.

It was really nothing to worry about, though. Kids who grow up on rural county roads grow up driving - tractors, mowers, old farm pickups and the like. Punkin did the same, beginning on her Grampa’s knee.

These days, we call in the dogs and her sisters and all visiting friends, and give the outdoors over to her. She smiles and smiles, bumping and bobbing around the field.

We had to drag her out of the sand pit once when she cut too close. Her aunt before her had to be hauled out of the snow, and once got the old

pickup hung up on the humps of a plowed field. Oh, what a mess that was!

One of Punkin's favorite Sunday afternoon events was to forge roadways and driveways for us. Back and forth, back and forth, flattening all the grass and tall weeds in the path. A friend teased her recently about driving in the fields. "I'll bet you even drive back and forth in the driveway!"

She ducked her head and looked sheepish. "Well...um...as a matter of fact..." She laughed.

There were other jobs for her. Useful tasks. Quick as lightning, she'd slide behind the wheel just to jockey the car close to the outdoor faucet so it could be washed. Preferably by someone else. Unless there was spending money involved.

And heavy transport. One of the projects dubbed "Gramma's family outings" was a day of loading the pickup with rocks from the rock pile out back and hauling them to the garden site to be laid out in patterns. Guess who drove the pickup back and forth.

Most of all, she likes to start the car, back it up, and turn the car around in the driveway when we're ready to head to town.

It takes longer than usual, because first she takes a turn around the field, practices backing ten times, makes a few attempts at parallel parking,

then drives way out back, out where she can't hear me holler hurry up.

She sights along trees for lanes, and pretends certain weeds are orange road cones. She slaloms between the "cones" of her obstacle course, ending up twenty minutes later curbside to pick me up. I don't even have to step off the porch. She reminds me to buckle up, drives to the road, and puts the car in "park." We then run around the car, changing seats.

I tell her I can't wait till she gets her license so she can cart me around and I won't have to drive. No matter that I know she'll be too busy for an old lady.

Gramps is responsible for teaching, or rather, letting her learn to drive. She loved to hear him start up a vehicle. Any vehicle. Farm or road. He'd wear a secret grin and she'd break out in a big smile. Of course she always assumed he did it for her sake, and not because of any need to get anything done.

A few days ago he drove up in a different pickup. She begged to back it up. He asked for the puppy dog eyes - the supreme plea. She complied. He teased. "No, you can do better than that."

She won out. The puppy dog eyes always win out. He dangled the keys in front of her. He asked, "You sure you can drive a stick?"

A perplexed look flitted across her face, but she hesitated only the short side of a half second before replying, "Sure! A little bit at a time!"

SNOW DANCE

Workday begins heavily wrapped
against the cold. Boots tramp a
path of piled, packed snow to the
barn, until the scarf is noticed.
She leaves the path, trips at the
edge - the snowfield is crusted,
a frozen stage. She climbs up,
smiles,
lifts the scarf,
floats to a
silent waltz.
Boots, pink
ballet shoes,
her down coat
chiffon, as
she dances
winter away,
away.

Ginkgo on my mind...

TEXAS – “Honey, that dripping faucet is about to drive me bonkers!” After a month’s regimen of Ginkgo Biloba, it took me only four days to remember to tell MyKeeper about the crazy-making annoyance. It might have taken weeks. The pills must be working.

The drip had gone on long enough to be reclassified a drizzle, and once it became a drizzle it penetrated my awareness to the point of exasperation. I heard it over kitchen noises, over the blaring TV, and it woke me in the middle of the night when I thought I was sitting on a rock at the edge of a whitewater river. I tried to get the dream back, but reality kept its sharp edge. I counted dribbles instead of sheep.

Ginkgo came into my life one day as my sister and I were sitting on the sidelines, watching skaters on the outdoor rink at Sun Valley. It was a gorgeous, flower-scented summer morning - the second or third day of my vacation time with her. One of us

mentioned the movie filmed years ago on the 7,000 foot ski slopes of Mount Baldy.

"Who starred in that movie?" I asked.

My sister remembered. I did not. I think it's because she spends a lot of time in that area and is much more familiar with the local history, but she thinks it's because I need Ginkgo Biloba.

Sure enough, a stack of things remembered started piling up. With my mind so full, the pills got forgotten. What a paradox: the pills made me remember things, but remembering so many things made me forget to take the pills.

It will take awhile to see if there's really any positive result, or if I have only found one more thing to forget first thing each morning.

Assessing the value is a little difficult. All in one day, I forgot my grocery list, forgot a friend's name, forgot to take a sack of clothes to the Clothes Closet mission on Tuesday. I remembered on Wednesday. They aren't open on Wednesday. Maybe these are slow-acting pills.

One day last week, I managed to recall at 5:20 p.m. what it was I thought in the morning sounded good for dinner. It took a great deal of concentration, but with effort the menu popped out just long enough for me to get to the refrigerator and pull out the ingredients.

Two days ago, I remembered all but one of the four things I wanted to tell my sister next time she called. When the one thing strolled across my mind, I called her back. We talked for another 45 minutes. So, I forgot to do whatever it was I had planned to do that morning.

Huddled somewhere in my memory is the reminder to pick up my coat at the cleaners next week, but who knows if I'll remember by then. My biggest hope is that I remember to check the calendar where I posted the tickler note. String tied in a neat bow on my finger is cute, but absolutely useless in jogging this memory.

Yesterday, the pills helped me remember in the nick of time that I was supposed to get some things to Sweet Pea by noon, before the team departed for the Regional Cross Country meet. I made it with 15 minutes to spare. But, I forgot to iron a shirt for MyKeeper to wear out to dinner that evening.

So far, it's pretty hard to tell if any good is coming from downing those pills every day.

Last night, a huge dam burst its flooding waters in the bathroom. I jumped out of bed and pushed the door open. It was just that dang faucet!

You know, it occurs to me that the memory pills are working. My hearing is greatly improved. Must be the pills got a little confused and missed my

memory centers altogether. I guess good hearing is important, too. Wonder if this means I could take ear drops for better memory.

Talking in the treetops

Dozens of them land at once,
dark iridescence dazzles
while they preen and pose,
parade and dance
with noisy rasps and clicks,
more chirps and screeches
and some cackles.

Frenzied birds up in the tree and, oh,
my nerves they frazzle
talking all at once,
tails punctuate
with flash and flicker —
Oh, my gosh,
those noisy twinkling grackles!

Jessica's toothbrush...

TEXAS – Jessica and our youngest daughter, Precious, were friends. Friends may not be a strong enough word. They were zipped at the hip from the moment they met in middle school.

They went everywhere together, arm in arm, side by side. Jessica spent so much time at our house we counted her as one of ours.

Their early teen friendship was a collage of eating, phone calls, reading, giggling, homework and phone calls, sleeping over, baking cookies, and more phone calls.

They'd flop on the living room floor with their heads on teddy bear pillows to watch TV and talk. After dinner, they went out back to feed lettuce to Hurkey Turtle. He lived under a big rock under a palo verde tree shading our southwest home. The two worked as a team to get out of doing dishes.

They'd fly out the door in tandem to catch the school bus, go for a walk around the neighborhood,