

## Notches (January 2018)

I own a pair of cowboy boots. Not the dress-up kind with the plushy-soft interior and an exterior that can be polished and buffed to newness. Not the dress-up, strut on the dance floor kind. They're the real thing, Tony Lamas. Old enough to be made in America. Two-toned, at least they used to be. The lower part that is not protected by jeans has faded and scratched and peeled to a sort of cardboard color.

For their first few years, I tried to polish the boots. Back then, I scraped the aged manure from the scant right angle where the soles meet the heels, scrubbed the leather with saddle soap and followed with a coating of Lexol. They looked nice for one day, but they soon soaked up the Lexol and Wyoming's dry wind.

Everyday wear and tear wasn't the only culprit. Oliver, my lively buckskin Appaloosa, did his own share of damage. Now many years deceased, my beloved buckaloosa was my first horse, and I was his first rider. He three-years-old and I twenty-eight, we trained each other. Perhaps we just merged. I can promise that few, if any, of the cues and aids we communicated to each other will be found in books on horse training. I would whisper, "Oh boy, here we go," and he clearly knew that meant it was time for us to practice something beyond trotting and broke into his canter. If he balled up his body, I knew I was in for all manner of antics.

Eventually, Oliver and I started to bond. He seemed to understand when I needed to talk to him about lessons plans or about my lack of confidence in raising my young sons. And once, in his corral just outside of town, he, a curious horse, slid in the pre-dawn into a narrow, high-walled trench with shallow water and thick mud. I awoke in that same pre-dawn and complained to my husband of a terrible nightmare—Oliver trapped in a horse trailer with water and mud running down the open sides, threatening to drown the horse. I swore I could hear his high-pitched whinnies, and my husband knew I trusted my dreams. Instead of driving to work, John detoured toward the ranch where we kept our horses. My husband's soothing voice, a couple of friends, and a backhoe saved my little buckaloosa.

Oliver grew older and settled down, but he held to one peculiar vice: He shied at the familiar. Every single time we rode past a certain lone shrubby pine tree on our prairie trail, he shied. One time when we were well past the tree, I said, "Oliver, you're forgetting something." At that, he jumped and swooped away from the side where he knew the tree lurked, nearly unseating me. And there was the time when we returned from a long ride, horses and riders dog-tired. I turned Oliver toward the fence where I always tied him. He was alert. He knew his halter, a horse cookie, and a brushing awaited him. As I reached for his halter, though, he startled and brought one of his front feet down on my right foot. Before jumping back, good horse that he was, he did a bit of grinding. My foot was not injured, but he took a healthy scrape of leather right off the boot, exposing a fuzzy, off-white dermal layer.

My boot toe eventually browned from dirt and manure. Oliver died, too young, from what we believe was an aneurism. I've felt the temptation to buy a new pair of flashy boots, but I won't. I won't part with the history of me and my buckaloosa--the split, scraped, notched leather. I can tell you every story.