

“Cowboy-Up”

By Steve D. Spencer

They say, “Never send a boy to do a man’s job.” Whoever said it first must not have been a rancher since a boy is often the only help to be found. Sometimes, a boy must simply grow into it. Bucky was the ten-year-old son of a man he would never meet. His blonde-haired mother would sometimes visit the ranch for a few days in the summer. Her parents had been life-long friends of Aunt Ruth and Uncle Bob, the owners of Flying W Land & Cattle Company. Ruth and Bob had taken the boy in at age five. Bucky was not his real name just as Ruth and Bob were not his real aunt and uncle. On his birth certificate he was “Michael William Smith,” but folks just called him Bucky. They didn’t really know why. You might say it just suited him. Bucky’s childhood never so much as hinted that when he was grown, he would leave Wyoming for the city. No matter where life later took him, the Flying W would always be home. The ranch hands who were cast in the role of brothers, cousins, and uncles would one day forever go their separate ways, never to be reunited. The mountains of Wyoming would be the theatre of his childhood memories.

Summer in western Wyoming does not stay for long once it comes to visit. You had better get the cows on the mountain and you had better get them back by winter. You had better keep a watchful eye between times. Bucky awoke this late spring morning to the sound of Chuck hollering from across the hallway of the log bunkhouse. “Bucky, let’s go! Let’s ride!” The boy knew there was no point in pretending to sleep as Chuck was a cheerful man but not a patient one. Chuck appeared in the doorway and motioned with his head toward the porch exit. His cowboy hat was stained with sweat around the hatband and it had a dime-sized hole in the crown. The hem of his oilskin duster billowed slightly as he walked briskly down the hallway toward the door of the old log bunkhouse. The weathered skin on Chuck’s face above the border of his bushy grey beard sometimes reminded the boy of leather in need of oiling. Bucky sprang from the top bunk to pull on his pants and boots like a fireman. The sound of boot heels striking the old wooden floorboards moved toward the porch exit before disappearing into silence as man and boy stepped outside into the cold, morning darkness. A thin layer of frost on the weeds growing from under the edge of the bunkhouse sparkled faintly in the moonlight and the familiar sound of bellowing cattle could be heard in the distance.

“You ride Betty,” said Chuck. Betty the sorrel molly mule had already been caught and tied to the hitching rail between the old wooden barn and metal hayshed with the other horses. One of the hands had already thrown the saddle on her back but left the cinch hanging on the right side for the boy to fasten himself when he got there. The boy didn’t weigh as much as two saddles just yet. But



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he had learned to turn his back to the animal and spin a clockwise half-circle while holding a saddle in front and then boosting it with his knee, which gave him just enough momentum to lift it onto a horse’s back. The cowhands were in a big hurry to ride-out this morning, so they had lifted the saddle but left the boy to cinch it. The red mare mule with blonde points patiently stood with her feet planted and craned her neck a little while she tracked the men’s footsteps about her with her eyes and ears. Despite her limited size, Betty ruled the roost. Other horses in the corral had learned to stay out of her way to avoid her swift, singlefooted kicks or possibly a nasty bite. The old mare mule made a fine mount for a ten-year-old boy on a man’s errand.

In 1973, you could still ride from the Flying W northeast to the forest boundary without crossing a highway. The cowhands unfastened chains that held the double gates of the cattle pen together without dismounting and sent the blue heelers in with voice commands. The cattle gathered in clumps of two or ten while bellowing in protest as the dogs approached them from behind with their heads lowered. Soon, the cattle lumbered out the gate while four mounted hands plus Bucky watched them from their saddles on either side. Bucky could feel slight warmth from the mule’s body on the inside of his thighs. He tucked his hands into his armpits for a minute while holding the reins in his teeth as he waited on the cattle. Once the last pregnant cows had exited and passed in front, Betty recognized her cue to begin following them from behind, down the uneven, muddy trail and toward the mountain.

The boy knew to push behind unless told otherwise. The men not assigned to push rode up and down both sides and hollered and swung their ropes at the cows that would wander off the trail to stop

and graze. Bucky and the other two men who rode from behind would swing their lariats but intentionally miss when throwing them to move the cattle up the trail faster. The heeler dogs occasionally looked-up at the men as though to verify their approval as they trotted around the perimeter and nipped at the heels of cows that lagged behind. The dogs would usually herd the slow ones before a cowhand could begin to throw his loop. Bucky laughed quietly to himself because Betty's ears swayed back and forth slightly from slight bobbing of her head as she walked. He could always tell when Betty was anxious or concerned because she would rotate those long ears outward in nearly opposite directions. The boy knew the mule was relaxed or even a little bored because her ears were turned to the front and swayed with the movement of her feet and neck as she walked. The mule could not resist the urge to nip at a cow that lagged far enough behind to allow her approach. A single nip from Betty would make that cow begin to frequently look back over her shoulder through widened eyes to check the mule's position.

Chuck rode thirty feet to Bucky's right as the herd left the valley and started up the mountain trail. Chuck rode Ranger, a 16-hand bay gelding that he had long boasted was the best ranch horse not just in the Flying W but in three counties. Nobody seemed to remember if Ranger was even born at the ranch or where he came from. He looked as though he might have been a draft horse cross with his heavy cannon bones and long, black feathering. Even with all that bone and hoof, that horse could scoot. Chuck was always ready to tell any stranger wearing a cowboy hat that he could head a steer and turn him on Ranger by the time you could count three Mississippi. Ranger did not particularly like the company of people or other horses but would stand off by himself in the corral. He would not come to greet you, even for a carrot. But he would let Chuck catch him without a fuss. The stout bay gelding avoided Betty in the corral as though he was more annoyed than intimidated by her antics. The other hands rotated through the string to keep all the horses rode down, but Bucky had only ever seen Chuck ride Ranger.

The old cows had been to the mountain and back so many times that they might have found their own way once they got hungry enough. But young cows and their calves were easy to lose on the mountain. Local folks often said a single county in western Wyoming or eastern Idaho would be larger than Delaware if you rolled it flat with a giant rolling pin. Hills and valleys, washes and bowls made countless nooks and crannies for livestock to disappear and the cattle didn't know they were lost so long as they were fed.

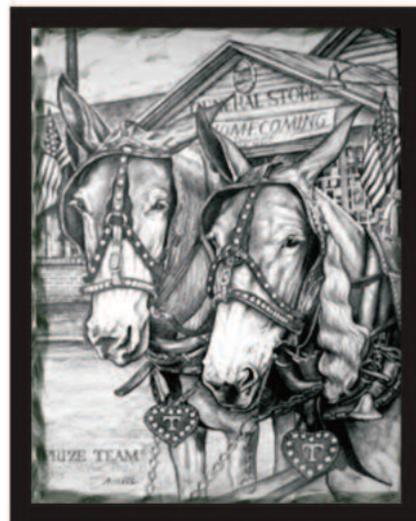
They say, "wet blankets make good horses." This old saying is a half-truth. The other half is that a horse without potential wouldn't stay around for long and the boy had seen many horses as well as people come and go. A ride like today might show whether a particular horse was going to be around for long. The jagged, rocky twin peaks that marked the place where they would make camp tonight could be seen on the distant horizon from the valley. But it still would have seemed nearly impossible to the average visitor

that a horse could travel all the way there in a single day. The boy knew well enough to stay out of the mule's way and not to waste her strength with games or nonsense.

Near the base of the mountain, the trail followed the riverbank into a steep and narrow canyon with shale rockslides on both sides so that the cattle traveled single file along the narrow riverbank. For those two miles, the hands would sometimes ride into the swift water to push from the downhill while the heelers would take the uphill side while carefully picking their footing in the jagged rocks. After climbing out of the first canyon, the trail widened and flattened for the next seven miles until it was past the half-way mark, where it became wide as a logging road bordered by sheer cliffs on one side and the raging river on the other for the next three miles. It finally expanded into the bowl-shaped meadow that lay between the two pointed and rocky peaks. The cattle would hasten on the final leg of the journey because they could smell the new clover once they came within a mile or so. The cows disbursed upon reaching the meadow. The boy watched as some of the calves would try to suck as the cows began to graze on the mountain foliage.

The men dismounted, unsaddled and hobbled their animals and sent them grazing while they made dinner. One of the hands fetched a hatchet that he kept in a scabbard sewn into the flap of his saddlebag and began chopping kindling. Bucky unsaddled Betty and placed his saddle under the same tree where he would later sleep, standing it on the horn and draping the saddle blanket over the can-

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tle. One of the hands had produced a sealed plastic bag of dried pinto beans, soaked in beer from the night before, and a cast-iron Dutch oven from a packsaddle pannier that lay on the ground near the firepit. He handed the kettle to Bucky and sent him to fetch water while he chopped a pair of onions on the flat surface of an old tree stump.

Bucky hiked over the knoll that obscured his view of the riverbank from the meadow. Downstream a hundred feet or so, a bull moose stood in the river with a piece of moss dangling from his right antler. Each time the moose would raise his head from under the water, the dangling moss would sway while clinging stubbornly to the antler without falling. The moose also watched the boy while chewing with a look of mild curiosity as though to understand his intention. A stone-throw upstream, a bald eagle ripped the guts from a tiny brook trout it held in its talons. Bucky watched to see whether the Eagle would eat the whole fish now or fly back to its nest with the trophy. He then remembered the others would be annoyed if they had to wait even longer for their dinner, so he scooped the iron kettle full of river water and headed back.

Bucky sat on a rock at the campfire with the others, eating his bacon and beans with a wooden soup spoon from a tin plate while the men spoke of cattle drives and hunting trips from past years. Chuck told the men of how his only brother had been killed at Pearl Harbor and recounted the tale of how he had stormed the beach at Normandy but was alive to tell of it. Bucky knew that the United States had won the war, but the discussion was still a little confusing. He didn't understand everything the men were saying. Soon it was completely dark, as thick clouds had covered the moon and stars. Bucky untied the bedroll from his saddle, rolled it out under the tree, and laid on the ground, using his folded oilskin duster for a pillow.

It was barely light when Bucky awoke to the sound of the men talking from a distance away, already mounted on their horses. The boy saddled the mule and rode to where Chuck was talking with the other men while still seated on Ranger and looking a little perturbed. He could hear Chuck saying something about the headcount coming up 40 less than 260. He had heard Chuck tell the men the night before to take turns riding the perimeter to keep the cattle from scattering. Chuck was saying something about the smell of liquor and one of the hands was saying something about last night being dark from the clouds.

After riding the short distance to camp and dismounting, the men began preparing to ride for the lost cattle. While they restocked their saddlebags and tied their rolled-up oilskins with saddle strings, Chuck walked to the packsaddle pannier, which now hung from a tree branch, and produced a .22 bolt-action rifle in a leather scabbard. He went to where Bucky remained mounted on Betty and lashed the leather scabbard to the D-rings of the rigging. Chuck pulled the thin strap snugly and buckled it. He looked up at the boy and said, "You know how to use this" as he tucked the last end through a metal keeper. It was a statement and not a question. Bucky nodded affirmatively. Chuck handed the boy a small handful

of .22 long rifle shells, which the boy stuffed into his vest pocket. The two had gone out deer hunting in the same area last fall. Bucky was not old enough to have his own tag, but Chuck had let him shoot his deer with his Winchester 30-30 but made him promise not to tell. Bucky loved to go deer hunting with Chuck better than all the school holidays. "You stay here and keep an eye on things. We will be back before dark." Chuck hollered this from some distance as he rode off with the men that soon disappeared over the low pass of a distant ridge with the blue heelers tagging along.

The boy felt hungry. He tied Betty to a stout branch and searched his saddle bags for some breakfast, finding some dried apples and beef jerky Aunt Ruth had wrapped in waxed paper. Seating himself on an algae-covered rock near the firepit, he tore a flap from the clump of apple leather with his teeth and surveyed the herd while he listened to the distant sound of thunder. He hoped the rain would mostly pass by without soaking him as he donned his oilskin slicker. He untied Betty and rode out to the middle of the herd, gave her the "whoa" and let her graze with the cattle while using her back as a crow's nest. The cows occasionally raised their heads to search for their calves between large mouthfuls of forage. After two hours of sitting on the grazing mule, the boy felt sleepy, so he rode back to the campsite. He tied Betty to the same stout branch and laid on his bedroll while keeping one eye open and facing the herd.

The sun was high and the clouds had cleared when Bucky awoke to the sound of bellowing cows and Betty excitedly pawing the ground where she stood tied. He looked out over the herd and could see some cows at the back scurrying about as though to avoid something. He next looked to the ridge over which Chuck and the others had last disappeared but the men did not conveniently reappear. He looked back to survey the herd once again, but the cows continued scurrying about while they bellowed loudly.

The boy had occasionally seen cows disturb a badger hole. An angry badger was enough to move them around a little. One time, he and Chuck had seen a pack of coyotes watching the herd from thick brush on a nearby hillside. The coyotes knew the men were watching them so they wouldn't come into the herd during the daylight. Bucky would almost always see a bear on these rides, but black bears never attacked the cattle, or so he had often heard. Chuck had told him of Grizzly bears attacking cows when the bear was too injured or sick to hunt. Bucky quickly went to where Betty was standing tied and withdrew the .22 rifle from the scabbard with both hands. He turned to walk quickly through the herd and toward the back as Betty brayed loudly and pawed the ground, as though she were so offended at not being invited.

Some of the cattle stood in one place but they had all stopped grazing and they bellowed and looked around with obvious distress. Bucky looked down at the rifle as he opened the bolt to check for a live round in the chamber. Finding one, he continued walking quickly to the back of the herd and reached into his vest pocket to feel the handful of .22 shells he had placed there. All of the cattle except one seemed to have cleared out of an area at the back. As Bucky approached the lone cow, he could see her calf and some-

thing else in the tall grass on the opposite side of the mother cow, which obscured his view. The mother cow stood in one place and bellowed more loudly than the others while looking about from side to side as though searching for help.

As the boy came around to the other side of the mother cow, he could now see the entire calf, dead and bleeding from its throat where it lay nearly covered in the tall grass. The boy flinched with surprise when startled as another animal then explosively raised its head above the tall grass and stared at him with marbled, yellow eyes, punctuated by tiny black pupils. The yellow stare didn't blink but fixed on the boy without wavering. The boy stared back, too startled to raise his gun. With each quick movement of its lower jaw, it splattered droplets of airborne saliva. A single, elastic drip descended from the jaw as it bared two rows of awful teeth.

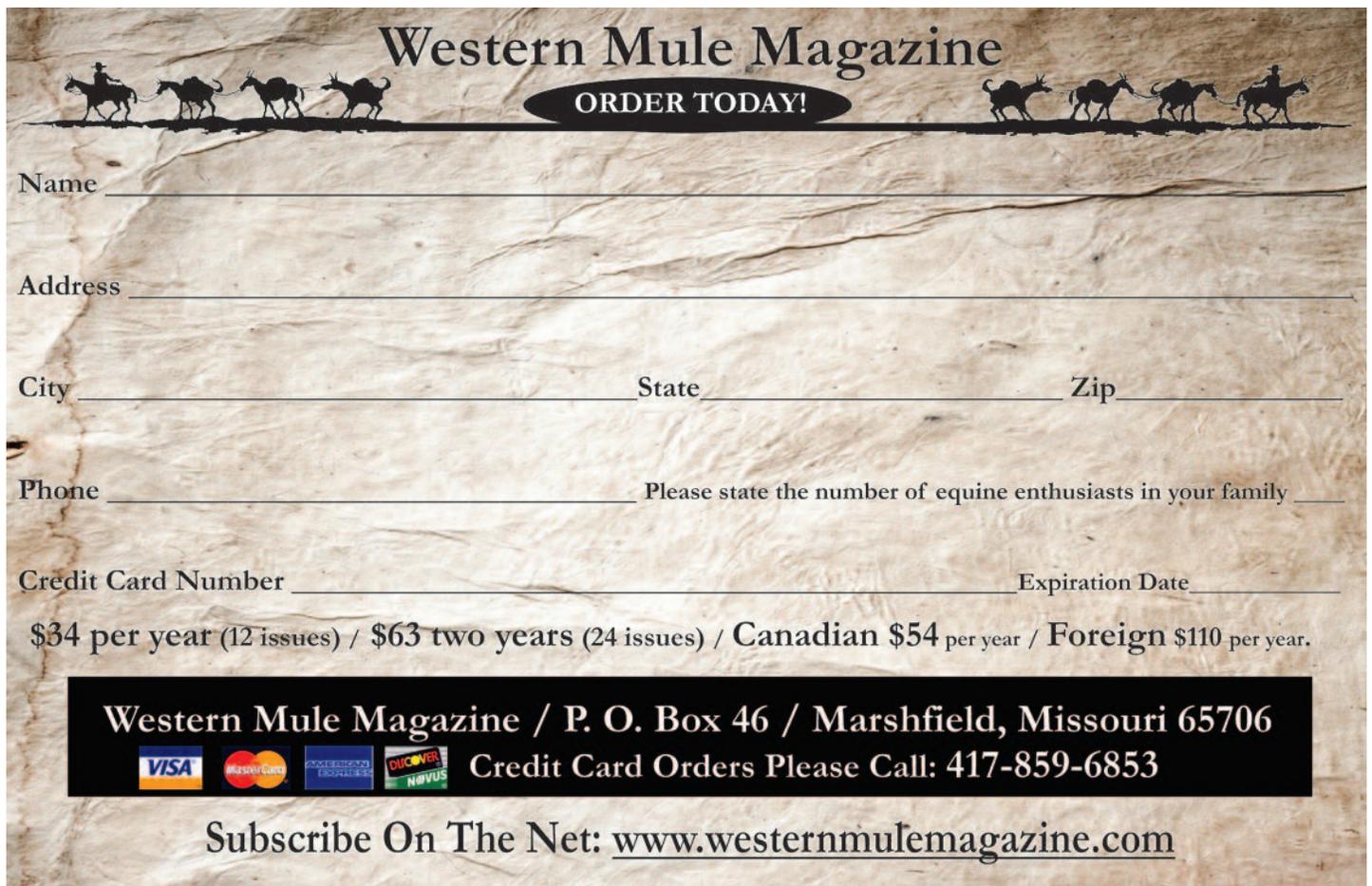
Chuck had once said that according to the papers, there was not supposed to be any more wolves in Yellowstone. But Chuck had often said he had seen an occasional wolf wander through the area in recent years. Bucky had been riding the range by the time other children enter school, but like most of them, he had only seen pictures of wolves. This must be a wolf, he thought. It was much more than twice the size of coyotes he and Chuck had shot on other rides with the same rifle.

The animal continued its intense stare with awful teeth barred as it crouched, ready to spring. It made sounds like an angry dog. Coyotes in packs sometimes crouched in defiance for an instant when men would ride into the heard to chase them out before shooting

so they would not hit a cow with a stray bullet. The boy remembered again to raise the rifle, but his arms flatly refused his brain's command.

The .22 was a Winchester model 1904, a single-shot bolt action with an external firing pin the shooter would set manually by pulling on it. Winchester had sold countless of these before and after the First World War. This one, which had been given to Chuck by his own father long ago, was badly scratched by tree branches on the walnut stock where the scabbard didn't cover it. Much of the bluing had been rubbed off the barrel, especially near the muzzle although it was mechanically tight over half a century after coming off the assembly line. Perhaps the rifle's durability was the reason that Winchester had sold so many of them. But knowing the history of the weapon was unimportant at that moment. The boy did understand that a .22 rifle, though a real gun, had less than half the "pop" of Chuck's 30-30 carbine, which still was no 30-06.

By then it was clear to him that even a great first shot would not guarantee a second one. The moment in which he considered all of this seemed like hours but it seemed inevitable that animal would take him in those awful teeth if he should fail to kill it with a single shot. Again commanding his brain to raise his arms, the arms now reluctantly cooperated. The thought occurred to him to shoot the eyeball so that the bullet would pass-through the soft tissue and into the brain without being deflected. The mother cow looked at Bucky as he raised the rifle. She continued bellowing as the wolf nearly straddled her dead calf in the crouched position.



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Bucky loved to target shoot although sometimes there was not enough ammunition at the ranch to allow the wasting of any. Chuck had been teaching the boy to shoot for several years although he would not be eleven until the coming fall. Chuck must have been a good teacher as the boy had beaten many grown men in a shooting contest at the county fair last summer. But there was so much work to be done on the ranch that the men did not have much time for hunting. Still, Bucky could often talk Chuck into letting him borrow the .22 to shoot jackrabbits. Jackrabbits made for better practice than paper targets.

Bucky placed the wing sights over the wolf's left eye and thought to himself that the trajectory of the rifle at this range should make it shoot barely high. He lowered his aim by half an inch to the edge of the lower eyelid. He couldn't remember if he had cocked the firing pin, so he pulled it a second time to be reminded that he had. As he readied himself to gently squeeze the trigger, he envisioned his blonde-haired mother and wondered if she would be coming to visit the ranch soon, hopefully before winter. She had come by last summer and stayed for one night. He envisioned her tear-stained face, which bolstered his resolve to steady his weapon perfectly. He imagined his handsome father was present and watching the boy now with a look of pride, although he had never really seen the nameless figure. His mind's eye saw an image of Chuck on Ranger checking cattle without him. It didn't seem right. He wondered if Chuck might later think his trust was misplaced. Aunt Ruth and Uncle Bob would still need his help at the ranch, and they were deserving of help where they had done much for him. This flurry of thought was another brief moment suspended in time indefinitely.

As the boy tightened his grip to begin gently squeezing the trigger, he realized the iron wing sights were moving slightly with each beat of his heart and his eardrums throbbed slightly in the rhythm of heartbeats. The wolf snarled again and more droplets became airborne with each snapping movement of its jaw. Then, finally, without further warning, the beast lurched forward with lightening quickness. Before both of its front feet left the ground, the gun sounded with a "pop" that reverberated from the high cliffs on either side of the meadow. Bucky was surprised to realize he had pulled the trigger. He could not remember doing it. The wolf at once reeled over backward, landing on its back but immediately rolled onto its side and bounced to its feet. It shook its head as though dispelling water and gathered itself again into the crouched position. The boy's eardrums continued throbbing to the brisk tempo of his beating heart as his right hand reached into his vest pocket and fumbled for another shell.

Bucky had lifted the bolt and pulled it back in a single motion while keeping both eyes on the wolf when the pounding of hoofbeats, faint at first and then louder, fast approached from the direction of camp. Betty was still wearing her mule halter but the short section of lead rope hanging from it was only about a foot long now with a badly frayed end. The mule continued sprinting toward him with her long ears pinned back and a look of frightening aggression on her mule face. Bucky adroitly closed the bolt and pulled the fir-

ing pin to the cocked position. Before he could take aim, the mule stopped hard in front of him on her back feet and then whirled around in a continuous movement to kick the wolf hard twice with her right hind foot, causing a dull "thud" when the hoof met its target. She then whirled around to face it, reared slightly and came down hard, stomping it with both front feet by throwing herself toward the ground with a whip-like movement of her head and neck. Then, grabbing the wolf by the base of its tail in her teeth without hesitation, she took a step backward before spinning in a full circle and flung it for some distance with surprising acceleration. She then bounded like a deer to the spot of flattened grass where it landed. With her ears still pinned, she again reared and stomped it twice more with both front feet, throwing her weight down hard onto her front legs each time by using her head and neck like a pile driver. The wolf lay motionless in the tall grass and gusts of wind intermittently disturbed small patches of fur on its side and belly. The mule slowly and cautiously lowered her head to sniff the beast, crouched as if to spring again if necessary, with most of her weight on her hind feet. Being apparently satisfied, she calmly wandered a short distance and began to graze without concern.

Bucky turned his head from side to side to compare the grazing mule and the wolf carcass for another moment in which time seemed to stand still. He finally walked over to Betty and interrupted her grazing by scratching her affectionately under the jaw with his fingernails before moving them to the left side of her neck. Still standing next to her but turning his back, he again opened the bolt to see a live round in the chamber. He tiptoed to the furry carcass with the barrel pointed at the ground in front of him. The wolf lay motionless on its side with its eyes and mouth opened wide. Bucky could see thin streams of crimson slowly oozing from the ears, nose and mouth. Again admiring the rows of terrible teeth, he considered what animals might have recently been killed or devoured by them. A feeling of sad relief rested upon the boy as he reflected that the wolf was just trying to survive, same as him. He thought to himself that it was his job to protect the cows from the wolf, but it was the wolf's job to find and kill its prey. But certainly, it would have been far worse if the wolf were the one to kill him today, he thought.

The swollen and bloody left eyeball protruded from its socket. The boy searched for the entry wound, but having no success, he took a knee in the tall grass while using the rifle as a staff and continued alternating his gaze between the grazing mule and the dead wolf. The cows were again grazing contentedly with their heads to the ground and their tails to the wind.

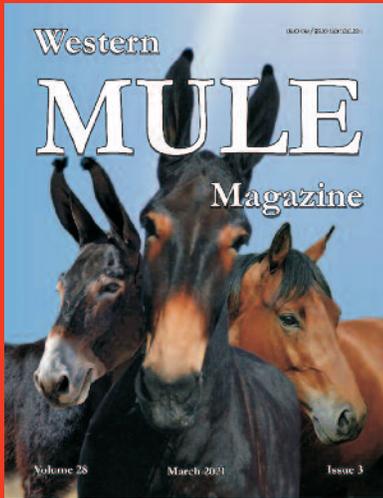
Two hours before sunset, Chuck and the others finally reappeared with the lost cows in front and the heeler dogs behind. Bucky watched while the men pushed the cows back into the herd. Later, after the men had again seated themselves around the campfire to clear their tin plates of beans with wooden spoons, Bucky said to Chuck, "I need to show you something." Chuck looked up curiously as Bucky gestured with a hand to follow him toward the herd. He followed Bucky through the herd to where the boy pointed at

the dead calf in the tall grass without speaking. Chuck surveyed the dead calf and then looked back at Bucky. The boy's footsteps parted the tall grass as he walked a distance to where he pointed at the dead wolf laying on its side with eyes open. Chuck followed the boy to that spot and then dropped to one knee before seizing the scruff of its neck in his leathery

fist. He lifted its head to inspect the bloody eyeball. "Well, I'll be damned," is all he said. Chuck looked away from the wolf and at Bucky with just a hint of a smile before setting it back on the ground and letting go. As he walked past Bucky and toward camp, he reached out with one hand and tousled the boy's hair. "Good that I brought you."

He then put the same arm around Bucky's shoulder and hugged him with that arm for a second.

The following sunrise found the two and their mounts making their way west down the steep trail and to the ranch. The sunrise behind them cast a shadow of the mountain on the farms below in the valley. The sound



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