Ulysses S. Grant and His Horses Before the Civil War,

By Marie Kelsey

Grant's skills in horsemanship made him a legend in his early years, long before he became a national hero. From his earliest days Grant had a special gift for relating to horses. As a toddler, he was permitted to play alone in his father's horse stalls under the bellies of the horses. Teams parked outside his father's tannery posed no threat to little Ulysses who was spotted by the neighbors blissfully swinging on the horses' tails and crawling among their feet. Hannah, his mother, who ignored the excited warnings by the neighbors simply stated, "Horses seem to understand Ulysses." Indeed, horses fascinated Ulysses. He would stand in the dust of the Georgetown, Ohio streets and look up into the patient faces of the animals, establishing at an early age a special bond with them that would serve him well in the path his unusual life would follow.

As he grew older, he amused the townsfolk with his exploits when the circus came to Georgetown. He could outmaneuver any trick pony presented by the ringmaster. Ponies were trained to unseat a rider with sudden stops, starts, bucks, and wheelings. Ulysses could not be thrown from these wild animals, even when a frustrated ringmaster tossed a monkey upon Grant's neck where it pulled his hair and scratched him. Another time he won $5.00 when he could not be thrown from the back of a fat, round, "slick as an apple pony."

Farmers often brought him unruly horses to break, which he did with crowds looking on. "The quietest boy in town" could be seen riding a horse at a breakneck
speed, through the village. Seeing that his son had a marketable talent, Jesse Root Grant allowed him to use the family teams to earn his own spending money. Ulysses was entrusted to transport passengers as far away as Cincinnati, about 40 miles from Georgetown. When passengers objected that this could be dangerous for such a young boy, Jesse's attitude was similar to Hannah's: "He'll take care of himself," he told the skeptical riders.

In May of 1839 Ulysses left Georgetown bound for West Point, or the United States Military Academy. Having little expectation of succeeding at this venture, he was quite surprised to finish his first year in 27th place among the 60 boys who survived the first year. Curriculum reform was underway and horsemanship became part of the program as Grant entered his second year.

Grant's future battlefield foe, Cadet James Longstreet, observed that Grant was "the most daring horseman at the Academy." Tiny, but resolute, dressed in old clothes for the dusty duty of ordinary riding exercises, Grant would stride to the stables to face what he excelled at. A fellow cadet said that it was as good as any circus to see Grant ride. Grant had taken a liking to a horse named York, a dark bay so fractious he was slated to be condemned. Grant commanded this horse with seeming effortlessness. The class would stand around admiring his control of the animal and the graceful evolutions he put it through.

At his graduation exercises in the riding hall, in front of hundreds of spectators, Grant was singled out to give a riding demonstration on York. Sergeant Herschberger lifted the jumping bar higher than his head, faced the class, all on horseback, and barked, "Cadet Grant!" The slender cadet dashed from the ranks on York and galloped to the end of the riding hall. He turned the horse toward to the front and the two of them, seemingly welded together, thundered toward the bar, faster, faster, then up into the air and sailed over it to the breathless astonishment of the onlookers. The silence was broken by Herschberger who growled, "Very well done sir!" The record jump stood for 25 years (Fry).

While Grant was not assigned to the cavalry upon his graduation from West Point, he was able to use his horsemanship skills during the Mexican War. An assignment as quartermaster (responsible for food and supplies) did not keep him off the field of battle. At Monterey on September 23, 1846, when the Fourth Infantry ran low on ammunition, he fastened himself to the side of his gray horse, Nellie, with his left leg up and left foot hooked on the raised curved part of the back of the saddle and his left arm clutched around Nellie's neck. In this manner he used Nellie as a shield from enemy fire. Together they made it through the streets and back with the necessary ammunition for the men.
In the fall of 1848 when Grant was stationed at Detroit he purchased a small, speedy mare from a gentleman named David Cicotte. This horse became known around town as Cicotte’s mare and Grant drove her fast! One day Grant offered a townsman a ride home. With some trepidation, Mr. Trowbridge accepted. When asked later how he liked riding with Grant, he responded “Grant was all right, but that beast of a horse only hit the ground three times in going up the avenue!” To his astonishment, Grant kept telling him the horse wasn’t well that day, but later in the season when it cooled off a bit Grant promised Trowbridge a “ride that is a ride!” There is no record that Trowbridge took him up on this offer!
Ulysses S. Grant and His Horses, During and After the Civil War

In later years, during the Civil War, Grant's horses were objects of intense public interest. His oldest son, Frederick Dent Grant, tells of the horses Grant owned during the War (Rodenbough):

When the Civil War broke out, my father, General Grant, was appointed colonel of the Twenty-first Illinois Volunteer Infantry and on joining the regiment purchased a horse in Galena, Illinois. This horse, though a strong animal, proved to be unfitted for service and, when my father was taking his regiment from Springfield, Illinois, to Missouri, he encamped on the Illinois River for several days. During the time they were there a farmer brought in a horse called "Jack." This animal was a cream-colored horse, with black eyes, mane and tail of silver white, his hair gradually becoming darker toward his feet. He was a noble animal, high spirited, very intelligent and an excellent horse in every way. He was a stallion and of considerable value. My father used him until after the battle of Chattanooga (November, 1863), as an extra horse and for parades and ceremonial occasions. At the time of the Sanitary Fair in Chicago (1863 or '64), General Grant gave him to the fair, where he was raffled off, bringing $4,000 to the Sanitary Commission. (This is not exactly correct, if one believes a letter Grant wrote to Ellen Sherman, General Sherman’s wife, at the time she was involved in a benefit for sick and disabled soldiers in May of 1865 after the war. It was for this Sanitary Fair that Grant turned the horse over to the organization to be raffled off.)

Soon after my father was made a brigadier-general, (August 8, 1861), he purchased a pony for me and also another horse for field service for himself. At the battle of Belmont (November 7, 1861), his horse was killed under him and he took my pony. The pony was quite small and my father, feeling that the commanding general on the field should have a larger mount, he turned the pony over to one of his aides-de-camp (Captain Hyllier) and mounted the captain's horse. The pony was lost in the battle.

The next horse that my father purchased for field service was a roan called "Fox," a very powerful and spirited animal and of great endurance. This horse he rode during the siege and battles around Fort Donelson and also at Shiloh.

At the battle of Shiloh the Confederates left on the field a rawboned horse, very ugly and apparently good for nothing. As a joke, the officer who found this animal on the field, sent it with his compliments, to Colonel Lagow, one of my father's aide-de-camp, who always kept a very excellent mount and was a man of means. The other
officers of the staff "jollied" the colonel about this gift. When my father saw him, he
told the colonel that the animal was a thoroughbred and a valuable mount and that if
he, Lagow, did not wish to keep the horse he would be glad to have him. Because of
his appearance he was named "Kangaroo," and after a short period of rest and feeding
and care he turned out to be a magnificent animal and was used by my father during
the Vicksburg campaign.

In this campaign, General Grant had two other horses, both of them very
handsome, one of which he gave away and the other he used until late in the war.
During the campaign and siege of Vicksburg, a cavalry raid or scouting party arrived
at Joe Davis' plantation (brother of Jefferson Davis, President of the Confederacy) and
there captured a black pony which was brought to the rear of the city and presented to
me. The animal was worn out when it reached headquarters but was a very easy riding
horse and I used him once or twice. With care he began to pick up and soon carried
himself in fine shape.

At that time my father was suffering with a carbuncle and his horse being
restless caused him a great deal of pain. It was necessary for General Grant to visit the
lines frequently and one day he took this pony for that purpose. The gait of the pony
was so delightful that he directed that he be turned over to the quartermaster as a
captured horse and a board of officers be convened to appraise the animal. This was
done and my father purchased the animal and kept him until he died, which was long
after the Civil War. This pony was known as "Jeff Davis."

After the battle of Chattanooga, General Grant went to St. Louis, where I was
at the time, critically ill with dysentery contracted during the siege of Vicksburg.
During the time of his visit to the city he received a letter from a gentleman who
signed his name "S. S. Grant," the initials being the same as those of a brother of my
father's, who had died in the summer of 1861. S. S. Grant wrote to the effect that he
was very desirous of seeing General Grant but that he was ill and confined to his room
at the Lindell Hotel and begged him to call, as he had something important to say
which my father might be gratified to hear.

The name excited my father's curiosity and he called at the hotel to meet the
gentleman who told him that he had, he thought, the finest horse in the world, and
knowing General Grant's great liking for horses he had concluded, insomuch as he
would never be able to ride again, that he would like to give his horse to him; that he
desired that the horse should have a good home and tender care and that the only
condition that he would make in parting with him would be that the person receiving
him would see that he was never ill-treated, and should never fall into the hands of a
person that would ill-treat him. The promise was given and General Grant accepted
the horse and called him "Cincinnati." This was his battle charger until the end of the
war and was kept by him until the horse died at Admiral Ammen's farm in Maryland, in 1878. Cincinnati was the son of "Lexington," the fastest four-mile thoroughbred in the United States, time 7:19 3/4 minutes. Cincinnati nearly equaled the speed of his half-brother, "Kentucky," and Grant was offered $10,000 in gold or its equivalent for him, but refused. He was seventeen hands high, and in the estimation of Grant was the finest horse that he had ever seen. Grant rarely permitted anyone to mount the horse. Two exceptions were Admiral Daniel Ammen and President Abraham Lincoln. Ammen saved Grant's life from drowning while a school-boy. Grant said: "Lincoln spent the latter days of his life with me. He came to City Point in the last month of the war and was with all me all the time. He was a fine horseman and rode my horse Cincinnati every day." According to General Horace Porter, Grant rode Cincinnati to the surrender meeting with General Robert E. Lee.

Grant and Cincinnati

About the time of January, 1864, some people in Illinois found a horse in the southern part of that state, which they thought was remarkably beautiful. They purchased him and sent him as a present to my father. This horse was known as "Egypt" as he was raised, or at least came from southern Illinois, a district known in the state as Egypt, as the northern part was known as Canaan.

General Horace Porter described Grant's technique in mounting Egypt. When the horse was brought up, the general mounted as usual in a manner peculiar to himself. He made no perceptible effort, and used his hands but little to aid him; he put his left foot in the stirrup, grasped the horse's mane near the withers with his left hand, and rose without making a spring by simply straightening the left leg til his body was high enough to enable him to throw the right leg over the saddle. There was no 'climbing' up the animal's side, and no jerky movements. The mounting was always done in an instant and with the greatest possible ease.
Grant acquired yet another fine animal, this time at Shiloh. Federal troops there “captured” a scrawny Confederate horse wandering the field. All scoffed and believed the horse to have no redeeming value. All but Grant, who called the horse a thoroughbred. This steed was cared for and brought back to health, becoming a magnificent animal that Grant named Kangaroo and used extensively at Vicksburg. Kangaroo got his name from his habit of energetically springing into the air when first mounted. (Dowdall)

At Vicksburg, Grant and his horse are described as follows: "It was hard for new troops to believe that the low-voiced man in the blouse and straw hat was the one center of all direction and command of this mighty force. His horse, however, was always in full uniform. That was due to the orderly, no doubt." (Garland)

One horse, however, proved too much even for General Grant. In August of 1863, right after the fall of Vicksburg, Grant went to New Orleans to confer with General Banks about movements west of the Mississippi. One September 4th he reviewed General Banks' army at Carrollton and was given a large and somewhat wild and nervous horse to ride for the occasion. An accident occurred which Grant described in his Memoirs. "The horse I rode was vicious and but little used, and on my return to New Orleans ran away and, shying at a locomotive in the street, fell, probably on me. I was rendered insensible, and when I regained consciousness I found myself in a hotel nearby with several doctors attending me. My leg was swollen from the knee to the thigh, and the swelling, almost to the point of bursting, extended along the body up to the arm-pit. The pain was almost beyond endurance. I lay at the hotel something over a week without being able to turn myself in bed. I had a steamer stop at the nearest point possible, and was carried to it on a litter. I was then taken to Vicksburg, where I remained unable to move for some time afterwards." Grant was on crutches for two months after this incident.

Cincinnati, Jeff Davis and Egypt all lived to enter the White House stables when Grant became president in 1869. Albert Hawkins was in charge of those stables at this time. He reports that arrangements were made during Grant's second term for an equestrian statue of him mounted on Cincinnati, and that every day for nearly a month the General would have the bridle and saddle put on Cincinnati and ride out to meet the sculptor. Hawkins relates that Jeff Davis was a kicker and he had the habit of biting to such an extent that the stable hands were afraid to go near him. General Grant, however, could handle him as he desired and as soon as he entered the stable. Jeff would throw back his ears and move about restlessly until the General came up and patted him.

Jesse Root Grant, Grant's youngest son, describes a ride he took with his father when Grant was president. "Father was driving a fast horse and we were going at a
good clip, when a butcher's delivery wagon drew up and passed us. A short distance it stopped to make a delivery. Then again it caught up with us and despite all father's effort, it passed us a second time. By now father had read the owner's name on the wagon and the following day he bought that horse. The animal became a great favorite and father named him "Butcher Boy." (In the Days of My Father, by Jesse Root Grant).

In later years when General Grant made his celebrated tour around the world, the Sultan of Turkey presented him with two magnificent Arabian stallions. The craze among the general public over those horses led to people coming to the blacksmith shop that shod those horses and asking for the nails, old shoes, and the clippings of the hoofs as relics. The horses were named Leopard and Linden Tree. For those readers who are interested in finding out more about these stallions, there is an old book containing details about them: History in Brief of Leopard and Linden, General Grant's Arabian Stallions, Presented to Him by the Sultan of Turkey in 1879, by Randolph Huntington, J. P. Lippincott Company, 1885.

Ulysses S. Grant always had plans for the future, most of which did not work out the way he intended. The opening line to the preface of his Memoirs reflects his fatalistic philosophy: "Man proposes, God disposes;" man has very little control over his destiny, he lamented. During the Civil War Grant was dreaming of the day when the War would be over and he would be free to train horses. He extended this daydream to cover his old age as well. "I am looking forward longingly to the time when we can end this war and I can settle down on my St. Louis farm and raise horses. I love to train young colts ... When old age comes on, and I get too feeble to move about, I expect to derive my chief pleasure sitting in a big arm-chair in the center of a ring—a sort of training course, holding a colt's leading-line in my hand, and watching him run around the ring."

Sadly, this picture was not to be in Grant's destiny, but he did retain his love of horses until the end of his life. At his apartment in New York City he reminisced about York in the spring of 1885, when he was very ill and engaged in writing his memoirs. A former classmate, James Fry, came to visit him and reminded him of the great jump he made on York so many years before. "Yes," Grant whispered, "I remember that very well. York was a wonderful horse. I could feel him gathering under me for the effort as he approached the bar." Horses were, of course, a means of transportation in the 19th century, but to Grant they were much more. He seemed to have a nearly mystical relationship with them: it transcended that which could be objectively explained. Those horses served him well and it has been said that they carried on their backs the destiny of the American nation. Perhaps they knew that, and knew that Hannah Simpson Grant was right when she said "Horses seem to understand Ulysses."
Sources relating to Grant and his horses:

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