

Al

*by Suzy Hopkins*

As soon as I saw him I just knew I wouldn't like him. I had never seen a man that looked like him. His face was deeply tanned with wrinkles like canyons. He was short and wore a dirty sweat stained cowboy hat. He was busy working a horse in a round pen so I wandered off to check out the facility. I needed one stall for my mare but liked to trail ride, as well as work in the arena where the jumps were. His enormous barn with an indoor arena was situated adjacent to miles of trails at Folsom Lake in California.

When he was done working the horse he found me looking at the tack room and indoor wash rack. He spoke with a soft voice and an Arkansas accent. We agreed on a price so I moved my mare there immediately.

Every single time I had a horse related question or training issue Al *had an answer* but would wait for me to ask, not being the kind who gave unsolicited advice. He ran the facility: buying hay and shavings, training staff, dealing with the boarders, training horses for sale, giving riding lessons every hour on the hour. Previously, for many years he had run a huge thoroughbred racing stable near San Francisco.

Sometimes we would go out for lunch. That's when I realized he could not read. He had been hired as a cowboy as soon as he could stay in the saddle – age eight. He never really went home again as cowboys tend their herd day and night living in the pastures to protect them from cougars, rustlers, broken fences and wolves.

One time I needed a note from him for one of my students. We argued back and forth about who was going to write this note. Then he said, "You write it and I'll sign it." When I saw his shaky signature I realized he couldn't write.

Over the next 20 years we spent many hours talking about horses. Al took on the training of the mean horses and with his wife trained riders from beginners to national circuit show jumpers. I broke young horses to the saddle and trained experienced riders to help with that process. Everything I ever knew about training horses I learned from him. Al was my friend all those years because he knew how to handle people just as well as he did horses – patiently, quietly, honestly.

Al worked with horses until the day he died. That day I lost my best friend.

Obviously, I was, in every respect, *wrong* when all those years ago I thought I wouldn't like him.