

## **ON THE OKMULGEE TURTLE TRAIL**

**Or**

### **THE SPANIARD WHO RIGHTED MY LIFE, tra-la-la**

I call this beautiful Spanish Mustang Choctaw “mine”, because Darolyn allows me to think that he is mine - although he is clearly hers. He is certainly my friend, and I hope that he counts me as his.

We first met on May 28<sup>th</sup> 2002. It was a big day in my life, although I didn't realize this at the time. I hadn't ridden for more than 50 years, but was around horses every weekend to support my daughter Angela (12) – a very enthusiastic rider. We live on the south coast of England, and I was in Houston on a business trip. Alone in my hotel room the previous day, suffering from room fever as usual, I couldn't summon up my family but I could at least go and see some horses. The Yellow Pages in my room gave many options, but the prospect of a 30 mile drive out to Cypress Trails (<http://home.swbell.net/darolyn>) appeared the most interesting. Remember – I only wanted to look at horses!

Once out on Cypresswood Drive, just north of Houston Intercontinental Airport, I immediately felt at home. About 40 horses, mostly Arabians, in natural surroundings and clearly very relaxed and at peace with the world. The riders coming and going on trail rides appeared equally happy. I sat on a bench and was very content just to observe and to be a part of this. The people were very friendly, and it was not long before the local wranglers were asking me if I wanted to ride. Fifty years is a long time, but I suspected that I had not forgotten everything and eventually agreed to come back at 9 a.m. next day – before it got too hot. Little did I suspect that this casual decision was to change my life!

I was there at 8:30 next day, Sunday, and DJB Choctaw Traveling Man was given the more than slightly onerous task of reintroducing an out-of-shape Englishman to riding; one who had not sat in a saddle for 50 years. It was a life changing experience – certainly for me. I can't remember having had so much fun for a very long time, and Choctaw was a real gentleman and didn't once complain or laugh at my efforts. My signals must have been totally confusing to him, my balance terrible, and my contribution to the ride negligible. There were also irreversible consequences – the most important of which was that I had ceased being a spectator around horses! I had a couple more rides the following week, before returning to England for 6 weeks, and spending much of them thinking about my new friend Choctaw. I couldn't wait to get back!

Mid-June, and with my own boots and helmet, I was again fit to face the world with Choctaw. I was even a little jealous when others rode him, and this was quite often as he is strong, very stable and honest. Although each hour left some of my skin on the inside of my jeans (I still have the scars), we were now posting with some confidence and I was getting back into shape. I also met lots of really nice people. I was out at one day Cypress Trails when I was asked if I would be interested in riding Choctaw back from a dinner ride to Pappacitos – a 10-mile ride. I knew I wasn't yet up to it, but agreed immediately to the prospect of spending more time in the company of my mustang friend. By this time, Choctaw and I were “being seen together”, and there were more than a few comments. I enjoyed washing him down in the evenings, and we occasionally took walks together on foot so he could find good stuff to eat. He is a horse, a partner and not a pet, but he usually

nickered when he saw me and we seemed to be at ease together. Regardless of his feelings, I felt happy in his company, and was even beginning to understand the things he liked (food mostly – and particularly fruit!) and disliked - mud (and any other insecure footing). He is also the best smelling horse I had ever met.



The Pappacitos ride was an unforgettable experience. The picture above from my second Pappacitos ride shows Choctaw, followed by my daughter and wife. Doesn't he look good? I hadn't taken the trouble to consider the implications of it being night, and I was certainly not confident enough to move quickly in the dark after perhaps 5 hours in the saddle during the last half century. Fortunately Darolyn's daughter Ceci took pity on me, and we rode back VERY slowly in the night. Choctaw was amazing, particularly in the woods where I could see absolutely nothing. He didn't once scrape me off by passing under or too close to trees, and always seemed to find easy ways of negotiating the trail. For me, it was another level of feeling good in the company of my mustang friend. He really did look after me!

Three weeks in Houston passed all too quickly, but by this time Choctaw and I were making good progress and could tackle most things together. On my last day, Choctaw and I had a hard ride, all posting and cantering, before I took a shower and checked-in for my flight to London. I slept like a baby all the way, and can strongly recommend trail riding as a pre-flight activity! Now I was really missing him, and we quickly rescheduled the family holiday so that we could all be in Houston together and enjoy Cypress Trails and Choctaw in August.

By common consent, it was the best holiday we have ever had. I am lucky because my family all ride, and we could do a lot together. Pappacitos (there and back) was no longer a challenge, even for my 10 and 12-year olds, and two and three hour rides were fast becoming less scary. I found that Choctaw was good crossing creeks, and we worked out some paces where we both felt comfortable. One really nice development was that Choctaw allowed me to take more and more of the decisions, now that I was getting back into shape. I was always looking for him at the stables – the long white stockings, the white triangle behind his right shoulder, and the white tea-towel across his withers – and he occasionally looked for me. He may not have the posting speed of his Arabian stable-mates, but was practically “bomb proof”, so sure and reliable that I could ask him to take me home in the dark – and he never failed me. People notice “the Paint”, and I have become tired of telling them he is a Spanish Mustang. To me, he just looks great.

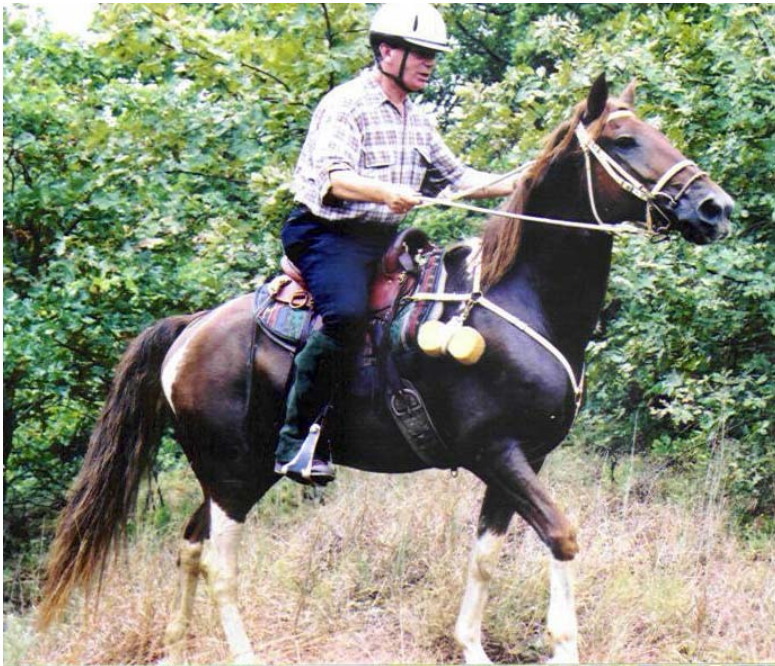
We were fast approaching another milestone. Darolyn, several times US Champion endurance rider and not a person to ignore a challenge, was beginning to hint that I should try something more demanding. The “something” turned out to be a 50-mile ride in Oklahoma, “MOVIN ON UP”, and I was far from sure that I was ready. In fact, I knew damn well that I was not. I had survived about 50 miles in 50 years (all during the last 3 months), and was far from confident about my ability to double this and cover a further 50 miles in only 12 hours. However, Darolyn and husband Mark had taken me under their wing, ably supported by their daughters Ceci and Brittany and friends and wranglers, and all knew so much more than I did that I had few problems accepting their judgment on all matters equine. I just felt that they did not realize that my partnership with Choctaw had a really weak link – me! There was never any doubt about Choctaw; even when carrying a heavyweight Englishman, as he is just plain sound.

They had befriended me, they outnumbered me, and for some unknown reason they were filled with unjustifiable optimism. I didn't really have a chance – especially when I thought of tackling something unknown but definitely difficult with Choctaw. We had been on a couple of 3 hour trail rides together, including an epic Spring Creek Ride on Labor Day with 22 riders, and I was able to stand after these – just! A 50 was surely no more than three of these – back-to-back. I mentioned it to my family, and my wife said “You're mad .....and be sure to check your insurance.”

Friday 13<sup>th</sup> September (there's an omen, if ever there was one) saw me taking Continental to Tulsa; complete with my entire luggage for my flight from Houston to London on the Sunday. I really had no idea what to expect, and was probably the first person to attend an endurance ride with a business suit in his luggage. I rented a car from Enterprise at Tulsa Airport, and set off down I75 for the Okmulgee Game Reserve at about 4 p.m. Following a short stop in Okmulgee, to fill the rental with food and drink for our 8 man (actually 3 men and 5 ladies) crew, I continued on minor roads to find the camp. Be absolutely clear, I had no idea what I was letting myself in for, but it was now too late to turn back. The directions were good, and yet another possible excuse evaporated. I made the camp by nightfall, to find that our team had unloaded the two trailers, had all the horses settled down in their pens, and had completed all the hard work. With nothing to do except make friends, I had time to be completely overwhelmed by all the people I met. Endurance riders are really special, and I could not have been made to feel more welcome. All must have been wondering what a distinctly middle-aged Englishman was doing at an endurance ride in the wilds of Oklahoma, but were too polite to comment on this unusual situation. I also said “Hi” to Choctaw, and then started a rather disorganized round of preparations for the following morning. Ceci instructed me on the procedure for Vet checks, and I then wheeled Choctaw through the arrival check – fortunately

without problems, thanks to a very understanding vet. Tack had to be fitted and checked, and I was introduced to the sponge – fortunately not to be used in anger this time.

One of my biggest concerns, my lack of experience, was resolved as usual by Darolyn. There was another novice from Cypress Trails, a young man in his early 20's called Jay who had even less recent experience on horseback than I did! Brave guy. Darolyn had got us into this mess, despite our misgivings, and husband Mark volunteered to get us out of it! The three of us were going to do the 50 miles together, with lots of moral support and direct help from the rest of our team. Thanks all of you – especially Vicky, who somehow remembered what it was like to be a novice, and was really helpful to this one.



After a very casual and impromptu tactical discussion, it was time for a final chat with our new friends and then bed. I slept in my rental, and I have no idea where everybody else went. The really nice thing was to sleep so close to the horses, who were clearly enjoying their own social function and could be heard doing so. There was a brief shower just before dawn, and it was good to stretch and get into riding clothes. I was successful in dressing myself, but needed help with Choctaw. There was also some new stuff to learn, like electrolytes for both horses and riders. These were taken regularly throughout the ride. How green I was. There was a ride briefing to explain trail markers, and places of difficulty, and we were then sent on our way. Our band of three had decided to let the fast group leave before we got underway; principally to avoid being sucked into the rush and getting these really competitive horses wound up. This worked well, and we were soon on the trail for the first 17 mile loop.

This went surprisingly well, if a little slowly, although I failed in my plan to end the first loop without having used any energy at all. Clutching my vet form, I then did my first real vet check. We had to wait until the horse's pulse

was below 60 before entering the check area, and I was amazed just how thorough they were. Nobody gave a damn about the riders, but the wellbeing of the horses was vitally important. Choctaw was in really good shape, and got straight “A’s”. Then there was a compulsory 40 minute “hold” to allow the horses to be fed and watered, and to have a break. Darolyn, who was either 8 or 16 miles ahead of us on the trail (I was too confused to know which), was concerned about our time, so we kept the hold to 40 minutes – just enough time for me to change a really sweaty shirt and refill my water bottle. The next 8 mile loop, to be ridden twice with just a trot past the vets half-way, was flat. Unfortunately, there were also two mud crossings to negotiate, and Choctaw hates mud! Even worse, the horses in front of us had churned up the mud until it was almost up to our girths. We kept a surprisingly good pace over the two loops, despite having posted for some hours by now. The mud was bad on the first loop and totally horrible on the second. Choctaw really did not believe he could do it second time round, and needed some encouragement from Mark to restore his confidence. However, Mustangs don’t quit and we made good time into the 33 mile vet check. Due to our pace over the two loops, Choctaw’s pulse was just over 60, and he needed some water from the lake on his neck to and withers to cool him down. After 5 minutes he was into the check, and again received a really good assessment. Another 40 minute “hold” for the horses to have a break. This almost obsessive focus on the welfare of the horses was heartwarming to observe, and no less than 12 of the 53 starters were eventually “pulled” while ensuring that no horse suffered any ill from the ride. Fortunately, there was probably not a doctor within miles, or I might have suffered the same fate! Boy was I tired!

There was no question of quitting, and after the “hold” we remounted for the last 17 miles – a repeat of the first loop. Choctaw, who has a strong mind and much commonsense, was reluctant to embark on the final stage, probably out of consideration for me. We turned around half a dozen times on the edge of the ride camp before agreeing to get on with it. By this time his other hate, sharp stones, was beginning to have an effect. I had never before seen Choctaw tired and sore-footed, and it was another good lesson for me that I was not the only one to be feeling sorry for himself. He has really good feet, as a mustang living barefoot should have, but the sharp stones and long inclines were really getting his head down. My right knee (old football injury combined with too little training) was also playing up, and we walked most of the last loop. Choctaw is normally a good eater on the trail, and seldom misses an opportunity to graze; but by now he was just too damn tired. Fortunately, he was able to continue drinking, and we kept each other going – as old friends should. I really did not expect to reach the finish within the time allowed, but news that we were in good shape for the coveted “Turtle” prize kept us going. In fact, the finishing area was in a nice field, and we managed a very respectable canter to the line. And then, once again, into the veterinary area for the final vet check. We could still have been pulled, if Choctaw had not been in good shape. Thanks to the efforts of my mustang, we had made it. What a relief.



For me, this was a truly awesome experience that I could not have enjoyed without the constant encouragement of the crew from Humble, and most of all through the efforts of my trusty Spanish mustang. I now have even more respect for honest and gutsy Choctaw, and just can't wait to enjoy further adventures in his company. They tell me, with some justification, that endurance riding is highly addictive. So are Spanish mustangs, if Choctaw is representative of the breed.

I am left with the thought that I have written too much about myself, and too little about the hero of the piece – Choctaw.

He really is magnificent. Being a mustang, his social sense is very well developed, and he fits seamlessly into the herd. You can't take liberties with him, especially at feed time, and if anyone considers intruding on his conversations with me they would be well advised to reconsider. I have seen him plant both rear hooves on the butt of the intruder - so fast that there was a clear impression of his frogs. This may be yet another argument for barefootin'. He is very competitive, and does not like to be passed on the trail. He also does not care to be last in line, as this is too far from the centre of the herd. Because of this, he has to be constantly reminded to leave a little space behind the horse in front. He has no fear of water, and will cheerfully cross deep creeks. He is also quite brave, and does not spook easily, even when others are doing so. He is quite capable of making up his own mind about most potential dangers. He doesn't like having his face washed, but will now happily play with a jet of water just in front of his nose. Above all, he is proud of himself but never arrogant. He really is a good friend to have.

It will be obvious that I don't have enough experience to talk about endurance riding. The American Endurance Riders Conference (<http://www.aerc.org/>) can do that much better than I can. What I can say is that "my" Spanish Mustang appears very well suited to this most natural of activities to share with your horse. He may not have the unbelievable posting speed of the Arabians with whom he lives; but his honesty, courage and strength are great assets to have on the trail. I have become addicted after only one ride, and look forward to our next 50 with great anticipation.

What I can't yet come to grips with is the way Choctaw has changed my life in only 3 months. I celebrated (?) my 68<sup>th</sup> birthday during the 3 months, so I wasn't exactly a young novice. I hadn't planned on getting involved in any more endurance sports, and was well on the way to becoming a couch potato. Outside work and family, I really had no great enthusiasms.

All that has changed. I have taken in two notches on all my belts, I want to spend all my time in the saddle, and I am still on a high after our first 50. I have met more people that I really respect and care about than for many years, and I have a new learning curve to climb. My family wants to move to the US and, who knows, we may soon have our own horses there - and at least one will hopefully be a mustang. I feel better, work better and have a new zest for living. Choctaw didn't do it all, but without him it may never have happened. To Darolyn, Mark, their daughters, and all the nice people in Humble, TX and in Okmulgee, OK – an enormous THANK YOU. I owe you all.

The first photograph is mine. The last 3 are from the Movin On UP ride and were taken by John Adame [johnadame@mac.com]. His permission should be sought before publication.