

## WinkWorld October 2004

We went on that way for years, Paul and I. One stifling hot afternoon a couple of years after he arrived, I noticed some clouds building up to the north. That morning one of my best bulls jumped the fence into the neighbors pasture. Mr. Jones, the neighbor, didn't care for any black calves out of his Hereford cows and he made a point to tell me in no uncertain terms when he came by. Paul and I saddled up and rode out to bring him back where he belonged. The horses walked slow through the heat, heads hanging easy, tails swishing away the flies.

Paul and I talked of the price of cows, the uncommon number of prairie fires that summer, and all assortment of other day-to-day things. We saw the bull in the distant pasture, a black island in a sea of yellow. A high-headed Angus, he lifted his head and headed straight for the water dam.

Paul and I kicked our horses into a gallop and lit out after him, him running for the water and us trying to head him off.

My horse surged beneath me. I felt his muscled stride through the saddle. I loved running a horse across the prairie. Of course, it was only done when needed, for fear of a hoof going down in a snake or prairie dog hole, breaking the horse's leg. Many a fine horse has had to be shot because some cowboy took it into his head to look big by running his horse when trotting would have worked just fine.

Faster we raced. Head and tail held high, the bull bolted across the grass.

"Hyah, bull!" Paul yelled, snapping his bullwhip above his head with a sharp crack. The bull headed straight for the dam. A trick he had learned to keep him away from cowboys who didn't want to ride in after him. I reined in closer to the bull and tried to force him to turn around. Lowering his neck, he put his head down and swiped its heft toward my horse, catching my leg and breaking my stirrup. The horse lurched below me. I grabbed for the saddle horn, clutching with my legs. I thought she was going down for sure. My mind jumped to the leaden black hooves that would soon be crushing my body. Relief coursed through me when I felt the bay catch herself and lunge away from the bull.

"You okay, Grace?" Paul spurred his horse up to me, eyes searching mine. His brow taut and tight under the brim of his hat, knuckles white as he held the reins. His eyes snapped with anger and concern.

"I'm okay, Paul. Just a little bit shaken up. I'm okay."

He reached out to touch my hand. Silken fire ran up my arm at the touch. "You sure now?" he asked again.

I nodded.

I'd never seen Paul truly angry before. He was gentleness itself. But, he lit out on his horse as if that bull was Lucifer himself.

Belly-deep in the dam, the bull stood there looking at us, strings of snot flying out of his nose

as he snorted and jerked his head toward the sky.

"This is the last time you pull this, you son of a gun," Paul hollered as he plunged his horse into the dam. His buckskin balked when the water hit his belly, twisting and rearing in the water. Out the water, the bull headed to the middle of the dam. He was swimming now. Paul pushed his horse in farther cursing all kinds of rough language I'd never heard come out of his mouth before. Soon he was swimming his horse toward the bull, hanging on to the reins and nothing else.

The bull turned back and started coming for him. I'm sure my heart skipped a beat. Paul later admitted his did, too.

Across the water came the black head atop a massive body and sharp, heavy hooves toward the buckskin and Paul. Paul's head and shoulders skimmed the surface, right behind his horse's head.

"Hyah!" Paul snapped his whip. "Get out of this here dam!"

Crack popped the whip touching the tip of the bull's nose.

I saw Paul slip off. My blood ran ice. Down he went. Two heads rent the surface of the dam, the horse and the bull. Living skulls churning the water.

A hand. A single brown work weathered hand thrust upward to seize the saddle horn. A forearm followed. And then the brim of a hat. A face, at last. Spitting out brown dam water, Paul hauled himself astride his horse.

His nose smarting from the whip, the bull turned the other direction. Paul swam him out, trailing him up the muddy shallows and ran him toward the gate.

"Grace! Grace, push him hard. Don't give him a chance to turn back on us again!" Our horse's chests up against the bull's muscular rump, both of us ran him through two gates and into the north pasture where he could make big black calves for the ranch.

Panting from the ride, I looked over at Paul. A mantle of mud encased him and that buckskin from the tops of his shoulders to the tips of the horse's hooves. "

Well," he peered up from under his hat, "I suppose I broke in my new saddle."

A slow smile spread beneath twinkling eyes.