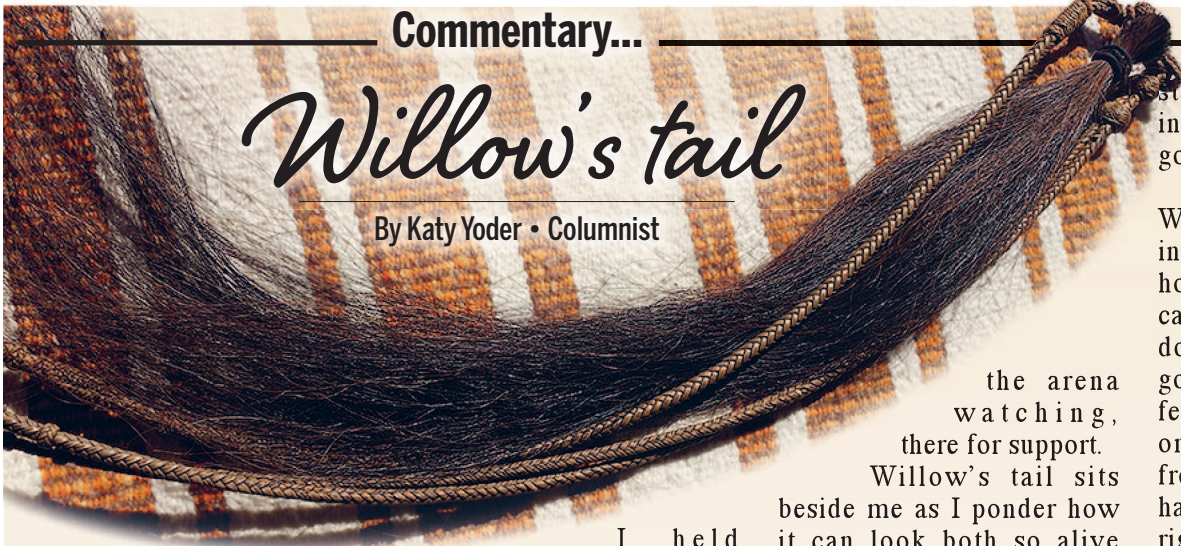


Commentary...

Willow's tail

By Katy Yoder • Columnist



the arena watching, there for support.

Willow's tail sits beside me as I ponder how it can look both so alive and dead. I brushed it out so many times. She loved the attention. Before we found her, life had been hard. She was rescued by a woman who saw her tied to a tree with no water by a heartless neighbor. She convinced him to sell her the mare for the price he'd paid at auction. She told him a fib about wanting the horse for her husband but really she just couldn't watch the abuse.

Willow and I shared some tough times together. We brought her home in October of 2009 and I rode her twice before the trouble began. I ended up in the hospital for eight days with a rare kind of pneumonia brought on by complications of the H1N1 virus. I was on oxygen for a few months. It was snowing by then. Willow and her new

stablemates stayed warm in their stalls with plenty of good food and warm water.

While I was recuperating, Willow had a bad accident in her paddock. Neighboring horses had gotten loose and came galloping past our paddocks causing everyone to go nuts. Willow charged her fence defensively and slipped on the snow, crashing her front leg into the metal. She had a gash seven inches long right above her knee. The vet wasn't sure if she'd ever be sound again.

Willow had to be on stall rest for three months. A captured mustang, she had lived her first 18 years outside in big pastures with no barn, let alone a stall. When we got her she'd never been in a barn and had to be taught how to eat a carrot or eat grain out of a bucket. So asking her to live in a 12-by-12-foot stall for months with her entire leg wrapped so tight it couldn't bend was asking a lot.

It was another two months before I could go to the barn and see her. I had a portable oxygen canister with a shoulder strap so I could carry it from the car to her stall. I sat in a chair and she put her head out the stall door and rested it on my shoulder. We stayed like that for a long

time, taking in each other's breath and receiving strength to keep going.

The next month, Willow's bandage was less constricting and my lungs were healing. We began to take short walks down the barn road. When I got tired, I'd put my arm over her back and we'd hobble back to the barn exhausted and hopeful. Eventually, she was declared sound and I was healthy enough to go back to work and ride her. We both appreciated the chance to take walks out in the BLM, enjoying the smell of the sun-drenched sage and juniper trees.

Willow died in April of this year, after a tough winter. She was 24, and until she got sick was a beautiful 16-hand powerhouse of a horse. She and I shared so many memories. She represents a significant part of my life, and I plan on writing more about our time together. We got each other through so much. I still miss hugging her neck and looking into those sweet, kind eyes. All I've got left now are memories, photographs and some of her tail. I'm not sure what I'll do with it. For now, I keep it close and when I pick it up, there's a little bit of Willow still with me.

This summer, I took a class taught by John Calderazzo at the High Desert Museum. It was a part of the Waterston Desert Writing Award ceremony. Calderazzo, a writer and professor of English, emeritus at Colorado State University, asked us to bring a memento we had with us and put it on a table in front of the class. There were wedding rings, a note and photographs of loved ones kept tucked inside wallets.

After a class discussion, Calderazzo asked us to write about a memento that still matters to us now. I thought immediately of my horse Willow's tail lying on the table in our tack room and could barely wait for him to stop talking before I began to write.

I took dull scissors from the feed room and a brush into her stall. Her nostrils flared; the pain eating at her. I brushed out her long tri-colored tail; auburn, black, and faded red. I kept going until all the snarls were gone.

I held it, thick and round and began to cut. The sound of that fistful of hair being taken from her made it more final.

Her tail hair was slippery and limp, so before starting I used a rubber band to keep it from falling. She looked back at me, brown eyes framed with white, showing concern and confusion asking me *Why do I hurt?* There was nothing I could do.

The vet arrived an hour later. I buckled her halter below her left ear for the last time. I knew what was coming, the huge syringes filled with pink liquid and the first shot to calm her. I've known our vet for 24 years; it's not the first time we've done this together. He asked me to hold the second syringe and get ready to hand it to him once he'd given her the first round. My throat was tight with anticipated grief. No tears yet, but I knew they'd come. Soon her struggle would end and I would feel the emptiness. My daughter happened to be home for a visit. She stood outside

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