

## *Chapter 1*

### *Alibhai's Dilemma*

*Pine Grove Farm, outside Scales Mound, far northwest Illinois, 1972*

Horst and Harriet Haenert's farmhouse back porch was larger than many homes' entire first floor. It opened from the kitchen and the living room and stretched over a multi-car garage and workshop. Its three walls were mostly floor to ceiling windows. The windows displayed the paddocks and pastures behind and to the side of the house. Beyond, the rolling hills of northwestern Illinois displayed the corn and cattle which support the sparse population of Jo Davies County. The porch windows framed the northern Midwest's gloriously sedate sunrises and sunsets that open and close each day.

Breakfasts and suppers at the long, cluttered table gathered however many friends and farmers and family showed up. Table conversation often centered on the weather and stock prices (livestock prices, that is).

Those prices were items of dead seriousness to those who depend on elements completely beyond their control.

Laugh if you will at farmers' laconic greeting, "Dry today, ain't it?" Such weather commentary holds deep implications for the rural community's welfare. Tied up in this summary of conditions could be early spring warnings of problems above the daily dawn to dusk chores.

It could signal a cautious early summer hope that the hay on which everyone's livestock depends will harvest up tasty and nutritious this year. A good hay crop would save some scarce dollars that otherwise must be spent for supplemental feed. "Dry today, ain't it?" could express sincere sympathy for a neighbor whose acreage everyone knew has inexplicably been passed over by all but the most massive rains this year. "Dry today, ain't it?" could be a mutual questioning of a man's fate at God's hand.

Such people understand early in life that we all live under the mercy of larger powers, so they tend to take things in stride. They know that Man has tried about everything to outsmart Mother Nature since before a hand was first put to a plow and never gained more than a temporary advantage. They are quick to see an opportunity and slow to expect too much. They know the long arm of Nature may reap slowly, but reap it will.

Harriet and I shared breakfast on the porch one summer day and looked over the half-dozen horses dozing under the pines to the side of the house. She rather casually mentioned that Alibhai might not make it through the next winter.

Alibhai was a smallish gray gelding, not all that old—eighteen. He had suffered a condition called joint evil as a foal. Harriet, her sister and her mother, had nursed Alibhai through the troubles, a remarkable feat rewarded by a kind and generous gelding. He could be relied on to give his best to his friends and family. He would happily turn in a full day working cattle and riding fence lines, or carry small children as if presenting eggs to the queen.

He was a little picky about his adult riders, though. He had deftly rid himself of more than one visitor who fancied themselves a 'cowboy.' If Alibhai decided someone was unworthy of his extensive and able services, he could appear resigned to unenlightened treatment. But in the course of the ride, Alibhai would cow kick once or twice, as if brushing flies off his belly with his hind leg. There were not necessarily any flies nearby. Alibhai, however, had determined thereby precisely the amount of lift and shift required to place a rider's own two feet judiciously back on the roadbed if they would not use his four feet with more care.

Such riders appeared back at the farm with their vanity more disheveled than the smart outfits they often wore. They arrived unmistakably on foot about ten yards behind Alibhai as he led them along the gravel roads back to the Haenert's front yard. Having brought the rider safely home, Alibhai neighed for a responsible person

to come take the pompous fool off his hands. When someone appeared at the door to hear another ‘cowboy’s’ side of the tale, Alibhai would take himself off to the barnyard for unsaddling.

On this summer morning, Alibhai was dozing in the breeze under the rows of billowing pines which gave Pine Grove Farm its name long ago. I studied him over my breakfast cereal and realized Harriet could be right. Alibhai’s stance was a hair less than content. A typical vicious Northern Illinois winter could indeed make his life miserable. He might well decide it was time to move on.

“Send him to Kiki’s,” I suggested, referring to Harriet’s sister who was breeding Arabians in Arizona at the time. “He’d do fine down there, wouldn’t he?”

She thought it over. “We can’t afford to send him down there.”

“Well, ride him down there,” I suggested, meaning to deflect a host of unpleasant facts with mild humor. Most people would have understood this and gone along with the social ploy. Harriet understood my poor attempt at sympathy, all right. She is genetically adept at social ploys herself, when she bothers with them. I think she prefers to see what comes of taking one’s less considered words seriously.

“I can’t. I have to be back teaching school this fall, and he’ll have to take it kind of slowly,” she said. “But you could,” she continued and went to get an atlas.



It was that easy to expand my view of the possibilities of post-high school life. With these few words, I saw I could cast myself as an adventurer far beyond daring a tough riding school in Britain, as the post-high school/pre-college plan then read. I also reflected that I had better start watching what I was saying. Someone might take me seriously—an as yet unconsidered possibility. Is that how words become *that* real? By someone else taking them at face value?

These new paradigms were settling into my mind like the Cheerios settling into the milk in my cereal bowl. Harriet returned to the breakfast table with a thick book of maps. I could feel some sort of thought pattern restructuring going on while Harriet, humming, found the right map. She traced a line down the page with her finger.

“You could head south down this side of the Mississippi, cross over probably at St. Louis, and head southwest.”

“I’ve always wanted to see New Orleans,” I said, not having learned a damn thing and not over-clear on the geography. She flipped a few pages.

“Well, that would put some extra miles on the trip, but if he’s in good shape and you’re making good time, you could do that. Actually, it might be quickest to head north a little at first up to Galena and cross the Mississippi there. It’s a lot narrower up here than further south. That would be an easy bridge to cross, too.”

“Yes, I suppose it would be,” I responded, to keep my oar in the conversational waters. Meanwhile, I worked on the idea that a route to Phoenix, Arizona from Scales Mound, Illinois by horseback would include crossing rivers by horseback.

I began to look for different kinds of information from this map. What stood out now were the blanks between the roads rather than the roads themselves. I supposed the blank areas represented areas much like what surrounded Scales Mound: fenced farmland overlaid with unnamed gravel roads less mapped than the far side of the moon and more convoluted than a failed Cat’s Cradle. After a year on the farm, I was still not real sure of the ‘back way’ to the other nearby town of Elizabeth.

I focused on those thin red lines most travelers can ignore. Unlike the gravel road that ran in front of Pine Grove Farms, those roads were at least on the state map. They represented two-lane blacktops much like the road from Scales Mound to Galena. I had often daydreamed of riding along its shoulder as the school bus drove to the Agriculture class which I had insisted on taking instead of Home Economics. Ask me if I can cook muffins or whip up a yearling calf ration better, to this day.

Considering exactly what riding that road on horseback would be like, part of me realized I was afraid to ride the blacktop out of Scales Mound in any direction. Jo Davies County is one of the few areas of Illinois that isn’t flat, so the roads there aren’t real straight. The curving roads had steep drop offs and no shoulder. With few cars on the roads, drivers could get nonchalant about staying exactly between the lines. Turning Alibhai and myself into a wet red smear on the highway was not a solution to the problem of his surviving the next winter.

Not getting out of one’s own neighborhood is a stopper if one is headed for Arizona. Rather than present the issue of simple fear, I presented a logistical matter: what would I do with Alibhai at night? It was my experience that horses were stabled or pastured at night.

“Camp,” replied Harriet. “Most folks would let you camp in one of their fields.” The Haenerts would certainly have done so, as would any of their neighbors. They would have surreptitiously booted one of their own horses out of its stall, and a kid out of its own bed, to put up a traveling horse and rider. They would have fed the horse before the rider got out of bed the next morning. One of the kids would be holding it and a full canteen of water in the front yard, ready to roll after the rider was fed a huge country breakfast. Carrots for the horse and a few sandwiches would be hidden in the bedroll to be found later.

The chance of the traveler leaving that day would be slim. Something interesting that a traveler ought to come along with the family to see would be going on in the area, like within 100 miles or so. The horse would be returned to a comfortable paddock and the departure preparations repeated the next day. Still, the convention of being ready to move on would be served.

But, yes, plan on camping, because planning to freeload was not the idea. That would have been detected miles away and generally known well before such a traveler arrived at anyone’s doorstep.

I mentally delayed considering the fact that I had never camped aside from summer camp-type camping, with bunk houses and three meals daily served at tables. It’s not that I insist on service. I just had no idea how to camp, make a campfire, put up a tent, or pack a horse for camping. So, I said:

“Bears. What about bears?”

“Avoid them. They’re mostly further west, anyway. Snakes won’t bother you, though.”

“You mean...like...rattlesnakes?”

“You probably ought to leave about September and move south as winter sets in behind you.”



As with most pioneering ideas, the initial enthusiasm was tempered by practical considerations raised in further discussion. Could I find a companion to ride with? Starting the conversation with my folks was a formidable prospect, too. We were not on remarkably good terms, as evidenced by their youngest, a high school senior, living on a farm four hours west and a world away from their suburban Chicago condo. There could be no acceptable explanation of why I should ride a horse to Arizona because he looked like he might have trouble over the winter. Absurd of itself, it would further delay my much objected-to

plan to get certified as a riding instructor in Britain. That, in turn, delayed my much-anticipated college attendance.

But when I cut to the chase, all obstacles were surmountable. I would realize this almost ten years later when I overcame even more and actually did hit a trail similar to that plotted out on the Haenerts' back porch that summer morning over breakfast. On that summer morning, though, I was simply afraid and wouldn't admit it even to myself. I 'decided' I had to go ahead with my plan to train in Britain. It was already all set, after all.

Alibhai died shortly after I would have had to start south with him. In a twist of irony, he died at Harriet's folks' place not a mile from the farm. Sarah, Harriet's younger daughter, had ridden him up there to visit her grandmother along the very road I imagined as a death trap. That part was fine, but Sarah staked Alibhai out in the front yard while she visited. Uncharacteristically, Alibhai panicked when his stake out rope got wrapped around his leg. Alibhai had been staked out hundreds of times and had ropes around his legs even more often. This time, Alibhai broke his leg.

Looking back, I am inclined to think maybe he knew what Harriet knew: he wasn't going to make it through another winter and no one was taking him to warmer quarters. He died in a fashion that showed me my fears had been groundless and also foreshadowed a problem I was later to encounter with another of the Haenerts' charming gray Arabians.

With Alibhai dead, the idea of riding to Arizona transformed into an idea of riding from coast to coast—someday.

More to make my word good than anything else and to avoid having to wonder for the rest of my life what it would have been like, in 1981 what I call *The Grand Trek* became one of what I now call an *Apparent Adventure*.

An *Apparent Adventure* ("A.A.") is a rather exotic event or action which you'd think would be important, perhaps even epiphanal. Real adventures change something although not always in the way expected. At heart, A.A.s are contrived or pointless, or at least not to the point. Therefore, A.A.s yield disproportionately little final effect on anything. So it seemed to me at the time about *The Grand Trek*, in the more obvious ways. Not to say those seven months on the road with my horse and dog were without value, but it sure wasn't what I expected. After all, look what merely forty days in the desert did for Jesus.

I was to travel Europe and a bit of Africa before I would undertake my youthful dream of adventurously traveling the U.S. by horseback.

But, thus was one dream of my youth formed, and also transformed, and finally performed to a surprising point. Looking back and having been asked dozens of times over the years why I did The Grand Trek, I now think I missed the point. The idea had been to save Alibhai (the real adventure), not to adventure by horseback for the sake of adventure (the apparent adventure). Having some point to it, an adventure to save Alibhai might have been the best that could have happened.

What happened instead does have some interesting moments, however, as I hope you will agree.

I may leave some things out of these recollections, as would you. And I may exaggerate some other things, although probably not the ones you will think I have. But please pour yourself a cup of coffee and come along with me as I tell you stories of The Grand Trek and what happened next.

We may then consider together whether the best that can happen is, indeed, to fulfill the dreams of one's youth.

