

A girl. A horse. A dog. And 2,600 miles.

# DISTANT SKIES

An American Journey on Horseback



Melissa A. Priblo Chapman

# CONTENTS

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PROLOGUE      XIII

PART ONE

**Before**      I

Rainy      5

The Dream      6

Conditioning, Training      7

A Guy and a Dog      8

Gypsy      12

48 Hours until Departure      13

PART TWO

**On Our Way**      17

Leaving      21

Longest Day      22

Different Day      28

Ghosts      29

Old Toys, Country Roads      30

Meshoppen      33

Crying to Singing      35

The Bridge	36
Too Long, Too Far	37
Traveler's Spring	38
Welcome to Hughesville	40
House of Guys	40
Along the River	43
Unexpected Friendship	43
Just People	48
Funhouse Faces	49
Penn State	50
Grier School	52
Louie's Lounge	56
Storm on the Mountain	59
Tunnel	62
Rainy's Twin...and the News	64
Dead Head	66
Animal Rights	67
Country Club	69
A Sign	72

PART THREE

<b>On the Road</b>	<b>75</b>
Locusts	79
Brad	80
Danger on the Road	82
Goodmans	84
Jump Aboard	88
Ice Cream Shop	88
On Saddles	89
Cowboys for Christ	91
Shadows	92
Welcome to Indiana	93

Golden Boy	96
Construction Site	97
Sundays	99
Revival	100
Land of Lincoln	103
Carlyle	105
Big River	108
A Mystery	110
Diamond Jim	111
Soothing Sunsets	113
Luxenhaus Farm	113
Good Dog, Bad Dog	117
Serendipity	119
Copperhead	120
Inside Horse	123
My Rainy	125
Nannie and Anthis	126
Deerfield	128
Delays	129
Vet Call	133
Oh No	135
The Worried Walk	137
Twists and Turns	138
Tom and Barb	141
Haying	143
Days	146
Kansas Time	148
Phone Call	149
Three Simple Words	151
A Meeting	153
Getting to Know Her	155
Time Is Ours	156

Gone Down the Road	157
Morning Star	158

PART FOUR

<b>The Road West</b>	161
Amanda, Gypsy	165
Flint Hills	166
Little Guardian	167
Diamond Day	168
Round House, Round Moon	169
Wide Open Lonesome	170
Reunion Road	171
Heat and Sweetness	173
State Line	175
Winning Over the Mule	175
Borders	176
Texas	178
Nowhere	180
Along the Tracks	182
Signs	184
The Darkest Night	185
Full Circle	192
Antelope	195
West	196
Tucumcari	198
Hitchhiker	199
Cuervo	201
What Gypsy Uncovered	203
Goodbye Road	205
Skins	207
Cold Night Near Grants	208
An Old Man, His Cowboy Hat, and His Son	209

The Great Divide	211
Lines (Cattle Guard)	213
Unplanned	216
Fort Wingate	217
Feelings for New Mexico	219
East of Gallup	220
Sidewalks of Gallup	221
Navajo Woman	225
Kindred Spirit	227
Here and Now	229
Near Lupton, Arizona	229
A Different View	232
Douglas Sky	233
Friend Amanda	235
Sunsets, Seasons	236

PART FIVE

<b>The Road Is Ours</b>	239
Chambers, Arizona	243
The Only Direction	244
Rest Stop: You Never Know	245
Rest Stop West: Circle the Wagons	249
Literal	251
Canteen	252
Highway	254
Winslow	256
Teepee Rock Ranch/Turquoise Ranch	258
Moonrise at Two Guns	259
Truck Stop Diner, Twin Arrows	261
Nuts...and Grateful	263
Gold in the Day	266
Trust	267

Beauty Large and Small	270
Saddle Tramp	272
On the Wild Trail	275
Cheers, Peace	278
The Road Is Ours	279
Hualapai Diner	280
Hilltop Honkytonk	282
Closeness	285
Camera-Conscious	287
Decision	288
Kingman	289
Haunted	291
Black Mountains	295
Wild Watchers	296
Davis Dam	297
Casino Night, Laughlin	298
Nevada Silver	301
Sign in the Desert	302
Near	304
Needles, California	306
About Ending...	310
At "Home," in Kansas	313

PART SIX

<b>After</b>	315
Love Goes On	319

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	325
-----------------	-----

ABOUT THE AUTHOR	329
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## GOODMANS

Once in a while, you meet someone, and there's an instant connection. I was lucky to experience that when I stayed with Butch and Nancy Goodman. After they showed me where Rainy could be settled for the night in their spacious barn, Butch and Nancy had pizza delivered. Nancy, Gypsy, and I sat on the floor, pizza boxes open beside us, long after Butch got tired and went to bed. Nancy shared stories about the first time she traveled alone and asked to see the pictures I carried of Mike and my family. She and I talked so late into the night that I spent an extra day with them...just to rest!

When I woke up late the next morning, I hurried to get to Rainy. I wasn't used to sleeping in these days, and I was supposed to meet a local reporter at the Goodmans' barn. Rainy's nicker greeted us when we walked in. There was something about that sound that made me happy.

That evening, I accompanied the Goodmans to a local horse show. Trucks and trailers filled the parking lot of the show grounds; wooden bleachers filled with people. Butch, along with his sons, Greg and Jeff, competed in barrel racing and other timed events. Butch was in his element in the friendly show atmosphere—he knew everyone at the event, and everyone knew him. He kept stopping and introducing me to people, bragging about how I'd ridden my horse from New York all by myself. Gypsy stood patiently beside me as I shook hands with dozens of people.

Then I heard my name over the loudspeaker.

"We have a special guest with us tonight, folks," echoed the deep voice across the big arena. "Her name is Missy Priblo, and she's ridden her horse here all the way from New York!"

I heard some scattered claps and a few whistles. Then the announcer continued: "Let's give Missy a big loud welcome because tonight is going to be her first speed event ever!"



I looked at Nancy helplessly as Butch dragged me out to the middle of the ring and grasped my hand in his, raising it high, while his other hand pumped the air like he was Rocky or something. I knew my face was red as a tomato—but I was laughing, too, kind of enjoying Butch’s act.

And then, suddenly, it hit me... *What did that announcer say about me riding in a speed event?*

There was no turning back, it would seem, because Butch was dragging me over to a leggy sorrel gelding that his son Jeff was holding by the entry gate. The horse danced around in excitement. The whites of his eyes showed as he pawed the ground. I’d been traveling literally at a walk on the back of a steady-paced, calm-headed horse, for weeks and weeks. The difference between my kind of riding and this amped-up running machine was like the difference between your granny driving you to church and going shotgun in an Indy car. I pulled back, telling Butch rather frantically, “I don’t know what I’m doing!”

“Yes, you do,” he calmly reassured me. “It’s just a flag race, no big deal. Just reach over and pull the little stick out of each barrel when you ride by it, and let the horse do the rest. On the stretch home, just let him go. You’re gonna love it, I guarantee.”

Even as I protested I knew I was going to do it. I could hear the crowd yelling, urging me into the saddle. Butch gave me a leg up, and suddenly I was holding the reins. My big sorrel horse pawed and jiggled in place in anticipation of what was to come. I swallowed and tried to sit deeper on his back, taking a real feel of the great force of energy I was holding back with just my fingers and a set of thin leather reins.

“You rode that horse of yours out here for an adventure, didn’t you?” Butch asked with a grin, slapping my leg.

I barely had time to nod at the timers, and then we were flying through the gate, headed for the first barrel with a bucket on top, the little flag sticking up, waiting for me to grab it.

The sorrel horse knew his job. His hooves pounded, dirt flew, and with one hand clenched tightly round the saddle horn, I leaned in...but missed the flag. Tears streamed straight back from the corners of my eyes as the sorrel leaned in low to the ground—awfully low—around the next barrel, but...I got the flag! I held it tightly in my hand as we ran for the last barrel and then the straightaway home, galloping full out.

I reined the horse to a stop, laughing. “That was a blast!” I admitted as I jumped off. Butch beamed and the crowd applauded as the announcer read my time. I reached out to pat the neck of the gelding, breathing hard beside me. We left the ring together, Butch clapping me on the back as I acknowledged that he was right: *this* was an adventure.

Butch stood by, watching thoughtfully as several people came over to us to say hello and have a chuckle about my run on the fast sorrel.

“You tell everyone how good the people you’ve met have been to you and your animals,” Butch said to me later as we drove back to the Goodmans’ home. “Well, maybe you’re doing something good for them, too.” He paused as he guided the truck along the night-dark road. “I think your trip brings people together, and it makes *them* feel good to help *you*. It gives people a little piece of your dream.”

I liked to believe what Butch said was true. It gave me a sense of purpose and happiness to think of my trip that way.

It was dark when we reached town, but to Butch Goodman, the night was still young. He proudly informed me that Lancaster, Ohio, was home to The Charlie Horse, the third largest country dance bar in the nation (second only to Gillie’s and Billie Bob’s in Texas).

“We feel it’s our duty to take you there,” said Nancy.

There was a big crowd at The Charlie Horse, and we parked far from the door. Country-singing legend Kitty Wells was performing. The place was so big, and there was so much going on, I didn’t

know where to look. Unfortunately, on one of his trips to the bar, Butch spotted something for me that he just could not resist.

“There’s something over here you have to try,” he said, motioning for me to follow him. I caught him winking at Nancy as I got up from the table.

The “something” was a mechanical bull, complete with a crowd gathered round to watch those crazy or drunk enough to give it a try.

“Oh...no, no, no,” I said, shaking my head at him as I watched would-be cowboys get tossed to the mat.

“No, c’mon, it’s easy,” Butch insisted. “People who ride horses can stay on these things. It’s just like when your horse feels good in the spring and gives a couple of crow hops.”

I gave that mechanical bull a long, hard look. I bet I could stay on the dumb thing. “All right,” I said to Butch, and in a blink he was paying my entry fee and pushing a form at me to sign.

“Don’t turn it up to the highest level or anything,” I insisted.

“Of course not,” Butch replied, grinning as I climbed on. The last thing I saw before the bucking got going was my host, making a turning motion with his hand, telling the guy operating the mechanical bull to *crank it up*.

You know what? I think Butch was right. Riding horses did help. I didn’t get tossed for a few really long seconds. And I won a Charlie Horse t-shirt out of the deal.

I sat at our table afterward, catching my breath. Kitty Wells’ band started in with the opening chords of her signature hit, “It Wasn’t God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels,” signaling the near-end of her show. And there was Butch, waiting up by the stage, getting her autograph for me.

It was the middle of the night when we finally headed home. My sides hurt from laughing so much. Nancy started to explain why I should plan on staying another day, to rest and recharge.

“Besides,” said Butch. “You haven’t tried water skiing yet.”

## ■ LINES (CATTLE GUARD)

Things were going our way. We had the name of someone who'd offered us a place to stay for the night, and just as daylight faded, I saw a group of houses up ahead, on the other side of the new highway being built. There was an open space in the fence line that marked a cattle guard crossing.

Cattle guards are usually made of steel beams that cross a narrow pit in the ground, although some cattle guards are created by simply painting three-dimensional lines on the pavement to create the same effect. Because cattle, horses, and other livestock have less detailed vision than we do and have difficulty with depth perception, a cattle guard can create a visual barrier that prevents the animals from stepping across a fence line. This means you don't have to have a gate that needs to be opened and shut behind you.

The fence meant to keep livestock off the interstate was not built to accommodate a traveler on horseback—there was no gate that I could see. With a sigh I urged Rainy and Amanda forward toward the cattle guard, as if getting closer and staring at the problem would help me figure out a plan to get across it.

My relief was great as I looked down at the cattle guard and saw that this one was made up of lines painted on the pavement. Hallelujah! My horse and mule could walk right over it.

Rainy stopped and planted his hooves right at the “edge.” I gave another little squeeze; he only extended his neck, lowering his nose to the pavement to inspect the “cattle guard” more closely. I gave him a moment, assuming my smart horse would figure out that it was not real and step forward across it. My assumption was wrong. I felt him shift his body slightly back, away from the painted lines.

I dismounted and stood near Rainy and Amanda, patting each of them in turn. Reins in my hand, I stepped onto the false cattle guard in a casual manner. My horse did not step along with me.

I tugged a little, murmuring reassuringly, and again asked him to walk forward. He would not move.

I dropped the reins and walked back and forth across the lines on the road to show Rainy and Amanda that they wouldn't get their feet stuck, but they weren't buying it. I pulled Rainy's reins until they were stretched to the other side of the cattle guard and tugged again. Nothing. Neither horse nor mule would budge.

A man came out from one of the nearby houses and offered to help get my horse across, but I knew that a strange person pulling at him would just annoy Rainy. Soon the man's wife came out, too, and together, they suggested putting Amanda in front to see if she'd take the lead, but I knew better. There was no way she'd move from Rainy's side, not when he'd communicated his distrust of the situation in no uncertain terms.

I ignored my growling stomach and the growing dusk. A few lights glowed in the homes across the way. A truck stopped and the driver offered his thoughts on getting my animals across. Then, all on his own, Rainy reached his left front hoof out and laid it on the first line of the cattle guard grid. He looked down as if he was making sure, then the other hoof came forward. *Clip, clop*—slowly, lifting each hoof with care, Rainy finally walked across the painted lines.

*Hooray!* I thought. *Problem solved!*

Except it wasn't.

For the very first time since she'd joined us, Amanda decided she wasn't going to follow Rainy. She's decided that if it wasn't safe to walk across before, then it wasn't safe to walk across now. And this created an even bigger problem: Now that Rainy had crossed the painted surface and she hadn't, the rope I had casually wrapped around the saddle horn was stretched so taut a circus performer could have danced across it. The pressure of the mule's backward pull had caused Rainy to pull up short, and there we stood, more

stuck than ever, with Rainy on one side not moving, and Amanda on the other...not moving.

By now, several cars and trucks had stopped on the side of the highway. Everyone seemed to have an idea of how to get us out of our predicament. One cowboy suggested blindfolding Amanda, so a helpful fellow ran to one of the nearby houses and returned with an old rag. I covered the mule's eyes, tucking the ends of the cloth in her halter straps to be sure she couldn't see. She still refused to give an inch.

Another man had a rake in his truck, which he offered to use to prod Amanda from behind. This only earned him a few kicks from her back feet that he just barely managed to dodge, along with laughter from the small crowd that had gathered.

Another guy claimed he could get any horse on a trailer. He produced a coil of rope from behind the seat of his pickup. "This always works with horses that won't load," he assured me. He asked two people from those gathered to get on either end of the rope, and then slowly had them close in, putting forward pressure on Amanda's rump. The mule didn't seem to be anywhere near changing her mind.

It was fully dark. Some people left, new ones arrived, and some offered a few unexplored ideas. Several trucks were parked along the side of the road, lighting up the scene. I was still contemplating our predicament when I noticed Amanda make an odd motion, tipping her head slightly and looking down. Before I could think about what she was cooking up, Amanda shifted her weight back a little and then leaped into the air from a complete standstill, flying over the entire width of the cattle guard and landing neatly and precisely on the other side.

A collective gasp rose from the small crowd, followed by exclamations of disbelief, and then a smattering of applause. We were past the obstacle—those simple yet immensely complicated lines

painted on the road. When the last of the truck doors slammed and we were left alone in the darkness, I picked up the packs I'd taken off the animals earlier. Rainy, other than looking sort of surprised when Amanda suddenly landed beside him, appeared no worse for the delay. I loosened his girth and we all started to walk toward the houses nearby.

I cast one last look at the lines on the road. The cattle guard must have been at least ten feet across. I ran my eyes over Amanda's little body and shook my head. The mule had decided she wasn't going to step on those lines, and she hadn't. In her own time, she'd found her own spectacular way across.

## ■ UNPLANNED

On a dirt road, we came upon a trading post. The small store looked like someone had tacked a creaky porch onto an old cabin. I jumped down and tied Rainy's neck rope and Amanda's lead to the railing out front. Gypsy sniffed about, showing interest in an old gum wrapper and other debris the wind had distributed. I let her go about her dog business while I went inside.

I was in the store only a few short minutes, but when I stepped back out, I was greeted by a horrifying sight: There was my little Gypsy, in the middle of being bred by a big, furry, black dog.

I yelled at them without thinking, and Gypsy turned her face toward me. But she remained coupled with the black dog. I did not want to believe what I was seeing.

After what felt like far too long, Gypsy and the big dog separated, and he casually ambled off, disappearing as quickly as he'd materialized. I was traumatized. I had seen no signs of my dog being in heat. I clung to the hope that Gypsy was so young, it would be an unproductive mating.

I carried Gypsy in the saddle with me for the rest of the day.

## ■ SIDEWALKS OF GALLUP

Old 66 became the main street of Gallup, and arriving in the afternoon put us right in the middle of a mix of people and traffic in the little city. It was busier than I expected, and Rainy, Amanda, Gypsy, and I had to work our way around parked cars and wait for breaks in traffic to cross side streets. We made slow progress.

We came to a point where a concrete wall on the north side of the road shielded the commerce area from the railroad tracks, and the road narrowed and made riding on that side of the busy street difficult. We crossed over and stepped up onto the sidewalk, so we were passing just a few feet in front of the neon signs and storefronts squeezed in tight together in the downtown blocks. People stepped around to let us pass. No one seemed to mind the horse and mule downtown, and I tried to be extra careful of pedestrians.

We rode by one place where the only windows were small and set up high, about seven or eight feet off the ground. Beer signs cast colorful reflections in the glass. I always thought windows like this were meant to keep a bar dimly lit, and probably keep the patrons inside from being on view to sidewalk passersby. On Rainy, I was high enough to look in, and I did as we rode past.

A second or two later, I heard a door pushed open hard and wide enough to hit the wall and the sound of voices behind us. I turned in the saddle and looked back.

A stoutly built American Indian followed by a few other bar patrons had spilled onto the sidewalk. He had a long-neck bottle in one hand and oddly, a top hat on his head.

“OH, WHOA!” he blurted loudly. “Lady, you had me going for a minute there!”

His friends, also holding beer bottles, laughed and jostled him with their shoulders. They walked over to where my animals and I had stopped.



“Lady,” he said again, looking up at me, shaking his head in disbelief. “I’m just sitting there, having my beer, right?”

I nodded to indicate I was listening. His lilting soft accent, where he rolled the Ls, made me smile and completed the comical picture of his round squat body with the incongruous hat on top of his head and the incredulous expression on his face.

“I’m having my beer,” he continued, “and I look up at the window and there is the *tallest* lady on earth walking by! I thought I was dreaming or something, but then I look to the next window, and there she goes, walking by again! I said to everyone, ‘Run outside! I want to see the ten-foot-tall lady that just walked by!’” Then, as if he was just figuring it out, he added, “And it’s you!”

The small crowd laughed; I did, too.

“I’m only five-feet-something,” I assured the man, “except when I’m sitting on this guy.” I patted Rainy affectionately.

“Yeah! Yeah!” he agreed, raising his beer bottle in salute. “Man you got me going!” He and a few of the others came closer and reached out to touch Rainy and Amanda. Top Hat noticed Gypsy in the saddle, calmly observing the scene. “Look at your dog, riding the horse, too!” he marveled.

“Yep, she’s something, isn’t she?” I replied proudly.

“What’s up? Like, what’s this all about?” one of the other guys from the bar asked, tipping his bottle toward my animals and packs. “Where’re you from?”

“I’m from New York.”

Top Hat’s mouth opened in surprise. “New York!” he exclaimed. “I didn’t know they had horses in New York!”

A few more minutes passed as questions were asked and answered; it was a genial little group. Then my bar buddies realized they’d emptied their beers, and so wished us luck and headed back inside.

As I started Rainy forward again, Amanda stepping beside us, we heard the *whoop* of a siren, and the heads of the people around

us turned toward the street. A police car barreled toward us, lights flashing. Vehicles on the street pulled over to the side, and the squad car came at us at an angle, stopping with one front tire up on the sidewalk, uncomfortably close to me and my animals.

There was no choice but to stay right where I was. The front doors of the police car opened simultaneously, and a uniformed officer stepped out from each side, then strode toward me.

People all around me froze in their steps, waiting to see what was going to happen, wondering what sort of crime had been committed. I was wondering the same thing.

One of the policemen stepped right up to Rainy's side and looked up at me. "You'll have to get off the sidewalk," he commanded in a deep, stern voice. "Now."

I smile nicely at him. "What?" Buying time. "Why?"

"You can't ride a horse on the sidewalk. It's unsafe," he answered. "It's a violation."

More people gathered, beckoned by the flashing lights.

I pointed across the main street to the lack of shoulder along the cement wall. "Look," I said. "It's more unsafe for us to be in the street." Rainy and Amanda stood perfectly still, as if watching the scene unfold around them, unfazed.

"You can't be on the sidewalk with a horse. This is a commerce area!"

"Okay. Just let me go up to there," I tried, pointing up ahead, not knowing but hoping there was a spot where the wall and the railroad tracks veered away and made the roadway a little wider.

Before I got a chance to argue further, my top-hat friend from the bar reappeared, stepping in quite close to the cop. "Aw, leave her alone," he said. "She ain't hurting nobody."

A murmur of agreement rippled through the curious crowd. I heard someone say, "Don't you have anything more important to do?" and someone else call out, "Leave 'em alone, they got a right to walk through town!"

It was an easy guess that the police weren't very popular with this group. I didn't know whether to laugh at the commentary or worry that the cops were really getting mad. The verbal back-and-forth got a little louder, and the two cops seemed unsure about their next step.

"It's okay," I announced. "I'll go back on the street." I looked directly at the policeman nearest to Rainy and me. I turned Rainy to the right, he stepped down over the curb, and we began to weave around parked cars. I waved goodbye to my crowd of defenders, shouting, "Thanks, you guys!" with a smile.

After watching me ride in the street for a minute, the policemen got back in their car and drove away. As soon as they were out of sight, I cued Rainy to the left, and we got back on the sidewalk to make our way through the rest of downtown, safe from the traffic. We were stopped a few more times—now by friendly passersby, offering their coats and hats. By the time we reached the western end of Gallup with the wind swirling grittily around us, I had three or four of each tied to my packs.

We'd been surprised a few times by unexpected bursts of hard rain, so when the sky got gray, I dismounted and unrolled my rain poncho, laying it across Amanda and the gear she carried. Not two minutes later, I was back on Rainy, and a blast of wind peeled the poncho back, wrapping it around the mule's hindquarters and back legs.

She exploded, bucking and kicking like crazy. Someone yelled, "YEE HAW!" from a passing pickup as Rainy twisted around to stay with her, and I tried to keep the lead from tangling around his legs. Amanda hopped and twisted in the air, tossing her head while her back end moved in a different direction. I held onto the lead rope and the reins and did all I could to stay in the saddle.

Finally, the rodeo was over. Amanda stood still again, breathing hard, with Rainy beside her, braced for more shenanigans. She was docile once more, waiting calmly for me to untangle the poncho that dragged behind her. I removed the offending article, rolled it

up, and tied it behind my saddle. I'd take my chances on our stuff getting wet.

## ■ NAVAJO WOMAN

We had crossed paths with a lot of different people as we rode through Gallup. One old Navajo woman caught my eye as we made our way because of her blouse—it was a beautiful rich velvet in a deep shade of midnight blue, and I had wondered, in passing, how she could be warm enough without a jacket on such a blustery day.

I hadn't thought of her again, but as I fixed Amanda's packs after her bronco routine, I noticed the same woman standing nearby, smiling at me. I said hello, and her smile got wider as she started to chatter, but she was speaking Navajo, and I couldn't understand her. I just smiled again.

Seeing more room on the opposite side of the main road, I looked over my shoulder to see if it was safe to cross over. The old Navajo woman was there. She crossed the street, too.

We were past the main part of town, but whenever I looked back, there she was, behind us, smiling and waving. I smiled and waved, too. Her pace was much slower than ours, and a couple times she fell quite a ways back, and I lost sight of her.

Outside of Gallup I stopped to give the animals a brief break, jumping down from the saddle and loosening Rainy and Amanda's girths. I rubbed Gypsy's belly when she rolled over, feet in the air, then reached into my saddle bag for the McDonald's hamburgers we'd been given and unwrapped one for Gypsy. I jumped when I turned and found the old woman standing right behind me.

"Oh, hi," I said, startled.

She smiled. "Hello," she said in English.

She was carrying two tote bags. I could see a few colorful skeins of yarn poking out the top of one. She was round—chubby in a

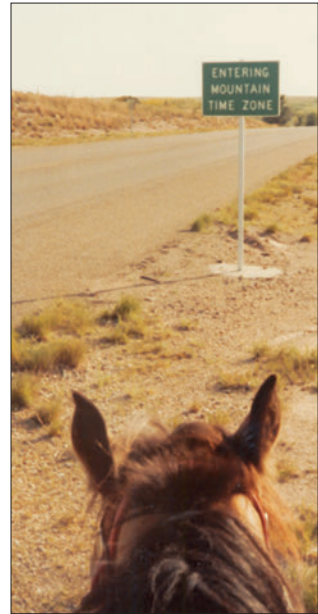


15. A good view of the packs Rainy carried and how Gypsy rode across the front of the saddle much of the way. An estimate of the weight Rainy carried at this stage of the trip, including me, Gypsy, my saddle, and our packs is about 190 pounds.
16. We spent several days riding strip mine roads in Ohio.
17. With Butch and Nancy Goodman at a horse show in Lancaster, Ohio.





36. At an unplanned roadside stop that offered shade trees along Route 54 in the Texas Panhandle. We stopped and rested often during each day's ride.



37. My typical view was from between Rainy's ears. Here we are crossing into Mountain Time Zone in western Texas.

38. At this stage of our journey, the animals were so used to posing for the camera, they would stand patiently as I clicked shots at landmarks.

