

The Holiday Gift

by Lisa Wysocky

Tess usually loved her work on the ranch. She loved feeding and caring for the big draft teams that were used for hay and sleigh rides, the trail horses used for rides in the summer, and even the sweet little ponies, who weren't always as sweet or as little as they looked. The hours were long and the pay was minimal, but there was something about the horses, the outdoors, and the people that she came into contact with that was good for her soul. She was happy.

Well, Tess usually was happy. But today was a very cold November morning, just a week past Thanksgiving. The air was so frigid that it hurt her lungs when she breathed. Her fingers were long past numb, and her nose, though covered with a red woolen ski mask, was surely suffering from a severe case of frostbite. Snow was hurtling sideways from the sky and hit the few exposed areas of her face in small, hard pellets.

The morning feeding done, Tess stomped her way into the rustic tack room, a walled off area at one end of the big barn. Here were the dozens of saddles and bridles used for the rides, the heavy harnesses for the draft horses, and blessedly, a small desk with an old space heater parked next to it. She sank into the rickety wooden chair and stripped the heavy, wet mittens from her frozen hands. The heater sent out a very small warmth, but if you sat within a foot or so, it was heavenly.

Now that the chance of her freezing to death was put off for the next hour or so, Tess' inherent good nature quickly returned. She looked at the day's hayride schedule—a brownie troop in the morning, a birthday party at noon, a school field trip in the afternoon and an office party in the evening. Most of the rides required two wagons, the office party looked as if it might even require three. Tess peered out the small window and past the diagonal crack in the pane that had been there longer than she. The snow, thankfully, was lifting, and although the day still promised to be bitterly

cold, there was a break in the heavy gray layer of clouds. Could a hint of sunshine be far behind?

Tess began assigning draft teams and their respective drivers to the day's events. She had a good crew of horses and people. Both, she well knew, were hard to come by. Tess was always on the lookout for a good ranch hand and a quality team. Or, barring quality, a team that would pull a wagon and twenty kids around a field for an hour and return them to their respective parents or spouses in one piece.

She came to Fred and Ethel's names and hesitated. The old pair of horses had arrived at the ranch last summer, smack in the middle of the busiest season they'd ever had. Walt, her boss, who on weekends tried to be a country singer, had found the team at an estate sale and snapped them right up. Tess was skeptical of Walt's musical abilities, as well as his ability to judge horseflesh, but he was okay as bosses went, so she had kept her opinions to herself.

"They're a good team," promised Walt. "They've got a little age on them, but they work real good together. See how they stand right next to each other all the time. Real devoted to each other, they are."

Tess smiled to herself as she remembered how she had looked dubiously at the pair. Fred was a big, scraggly looking red roan. Ethel was a slightly smaller cream colored mare with large roan spots. Both needed to gain a great deal of weight. Both were at least twenty years old.

"Listen, now," continued Walt. "I talked to the caretaker at the place I got them from, and he said they are a good team, except you have to be sure to hook Ethel up on the left. She don't like being on the right, you've got to hook her up on the left."

At the time, Tess didn't pay too much attention to what Walt was saying because she was thinking it was going to be quite a while before

either of them were strong enough to be hooked up to anything. They couldn't pull a teacart in this condition.

But the very next day, fate intervened and Tess wished she had paid more attention to what Walt had to say. The ranch was swamped with hayrides. There were two big rides booked at ten o'clock, each requiring two wagons. The ranch had the capabilities, easily, to provide three wagons, but four was going to be a stretch. In a pinch, a couple of the bigger saddle horses could pull a light wagon, but they had been commandeered at daybreak by Walt and his record producer who were headed to a quiet spot on the river to write songs. It looked as if Fred and Ethel were going to get broken in in a hurry. Hoping Walt was right and the old pair really were a good team, Tess pulled them into the harnessing area and stopped dead in her tracks.

"Does Ethel go on the left, or the right?" she had wondered. She couldn't remember. She thought about calling Walt on his cell phone, but didn't want to interrupt him on the off chance that they were in the middle of creating the next hit for Garth Brooks. As if, she thought wryly.

Left or right? Left. Or right? Tess turned the two horses loose in the small enclosure. They milled around for a few minutes, then stopped nose to tail, Ethel on Fred's right, Fred on Ethel's right.

Right, she thought.

Tess brought them into the barn and turned Ethel around, so she was on Fred's right. But right, she soon found, was wrong. As soon as she had the two tied in the harnessing area, their eyes bulged out and they leaned back into the tie ropes and pulled back with all their ancient might. Their heads cracked together and the ropes strained as Tess jumped over the four foot wall, out of the enclosure.

"Up there! Hiya! Up there!" she had yelled, waving her arms violently from behind them.

The pair leapt forward in unison, bodies shaking, eyes rolling. But before Tess could safely get to their heads to get them untied, they lunged back again, shod hooves sliding dangerously on

the asphalt floor. The tie ropes snapped suddenly and simultaneously, and both horses fell to the ground. One on top of the other. It took them several minutes to sort themselves out and get up, but up they finally did get.

Left, Tess found, was right.

Later that day she had posted big notices in heavy, bold lettering in the tack room, the office, the harnessing area, the feed room and every other place she could think of.

CAUTION: WHEN HARNESSING FRED AND ETHEL MAKE SURE ETHEL GOES ON THE LEFT. YOUR LIFE DEPENDS ON IT.

Tess looked at that note now, as her fingers finally began to thaw. Tess remembered that at first, other people in the barn chose either to ignore the notices or disbelieve them. Or maybe they just plain couldn't read, as Tess almost lost several of her barn crew and a few of the harnesses trying to get the team hooked up. But everyone soon learned. And before long, Ethel's sweet dependency on Fred, and Fred's protective attitude of Ethel won over the most skeptical person of all. Tess herself.

As a team, she found that Fred and Ethel actually weren't bad. They were still a bit weak and they tired easily. Of course, that might have had something to do with their age. But they did try to pull the wagon at the same time, and in the same direction, which was more than she could say about a few of her other teams.

"You reckon they're married?" asked Walt one early fall day, as he leaned on a fence watching them. Walt did a lot of leaning. Didn't do a lot of work, but he was a good leaner. Garth had passed on the song, or so the producer had said.

"I don't think horses understand the concept of marriage," Tess replied from the seat of a small tractor she was using to move some hay.

"But look at 'em. He kinda escorts her to the water trough. An' he allus waits for her to go through the gate first. Have ya' noticed that?" asked Walt. "Then he gives her a nudge to show her which way to go."

"I wonder how long they've been together?" Tess mused, stopping the tractor next to her boss. "I'll bet they've got a great story behind them."

"Yup. Prob'ly do. But wonderin' ain't goin' to git any horses fed," he said turning toward her with a pointed look.

Tess debated arguing the point, but decided she'd rather spend her energy on something useful. But, she had wondered while starting up the tractor, just how long had the pair been together?

Tess had never spent much time in the office. There was too much to do outside, even on cold days like today. Once she was sufficiently thawed, she put on a pair of warm dry mitts and headed out to bring in the teams. Rounding the corner of the barn, Tess was surprised to see an old man in the corral with Fred and Ethel.

"Can I help you?" she asked, sliding through the board fence.

"Oh, they be looking fine, miss. Just fine," the man replied with a pat to Fred's long neck. "Picked up a bit of weight since they've been here haven't they?"

"Uh, yes. They . . . Can I ask who you are?"

"Oh my. Excuse me. Of course, you don't know me," he said. He gave his gloved hands a quick wipe on the legs of his insulated bib overalls and stuck the right one out. "I'm Henry. Henry Bagwell. I used to work at the Cartland estate. Took care of these guys for more than fifteen years, I sure enough did. Sure do miss them."

"Well, Mr. Bagwell," Tess said, warming to him. "I'm glad to meet you and I'm sure Fred and Ethel are glad to see you, too."

This, she thought, may be a chance to get some background information on the team. Not that it made any difference one way or the other. But they stuck so close together, surely there was an interesting story somewhere. So she asked him about the team.

"Oh my. Fred must have been seven or eight when they arrived and Ethel, I think, was a few years older," Henry recalled, scratching his head.

Good heavens, thought Tess. We had placed their approximate ages at twenty, but if what

Henry was saying was true, Fred was well over that and Ethel was nearing thirty. Ancient, to say the least.

"Yep," he continued. "They arrived as a team, and you know, they were just as devoted to each other then as they are now."

Tess invited Henry back to the tack room. As they walked he told a story about the time Ethel stepped on a nail and developed an abscess in her foot.

"Why, I was more worried about Fred than I was the mare," he said. "Fred just pined and pined until she got well. He wouldn't eat—lost a lot of weight if I remember. I kept telling him Ethel would be just fine in a few weeks, but that old Fred, he wasn't right until Ethel was sound."

"Do you know where the Cartlands got Fred and Ethel?" Tess asked, wiping tack dust from the coffee mugs with a paper towel.

"No, miss, I surely don't. I just took care of the horses, and the gardens, too. I didn't ask where things came from. I was just glad to have them around. Toward the end there, there wasn't a lot of money and the horses, they lost all that weight and the gardens went to seed. I did what I could, but . . ."

Tess sighed. With old Mr. and Mrs. Cartland both having passed on, there was little chance of tracing the history of the team any further. She thanked Henry for stopping by and invited him back to see Fred and Ethel any time he wanted.

The weather stayed cold, and the entire ranch staff was busy the next few days keeping snow and ice off the roof, and water melted in the tanks. Tess didn't have much time to think about Henry Bagwell. In fact, she was so busy that she didn't even have time to think about Fred and Ethel. So it was with some surprise that she learned they had been the source of yet more trouble.

"They broke down the corral gate last night, sure and if they didn't," complained Walt early one morning, blowing on his hands and stomping his feet to stay warm.

"Who broke down the gate?"

"The draft horses. That's who. And it's all Ethel's fault."

Despite the early nature of her job, Tess always had problems thinking clearly before six a.m., and although it was a full ten minutes past that hour, she still wasn't clear on what Walt was trying to tell her.

"I was letting the draft teams out to pasture for the night. Yesterday evening it was," Walt explained as if she were a moron. "The Clydes pushed the others around to get out first, y'know, like they allus do and in the process they got between Fred and Ethel. Ethel went nuts, she did. Hollerin' and hollerin' for Fred and Fred was goin' nuts tryin' to get to her. Then every one of them horses got upset and they all just pushed right through that big cast iron gate. Came off them big hinges like a candy wrapper. Now my accountant ain't goin' to like that one bit, I can tell you."

No, Tess agreed. Walt's accountant didn't like much of anything and this was sure to be something else to add to his list. Oh well, she sighed. The horses apparently were not hurt and she guessed that was what was important.

That afternoon she was on the phone getting prices on a new gate (on inspection the old had proved irreparable) when she saw Henry Bagwell drive up in a vintage Ford pick-up. Afraid he'd run into Walt and get an earful about his beloved team, she hurried out to meet him.

"My missus found someone who might know more about Freddie and Miss Ethel," Henry said eagerly, in place of a greeting. "She thinks she found where they came from, my missus did."

Well, this was interesting news, Tess thought, but the timing was not good. As of this morning, she cared a lot less about the old team's past, and a great deal more about their future here on the ranch. Let's see, Tess mused, walking with Henry back to the tack room. The team was dangerous to the staff if not handled properly. They were destructive to property. They were in frail health. Not, she told herself, one of Walt's better buys.

"My missus," Henry said as a reminder when they sat down, "thinks she found where the old team came from."

Henry's missus, it seemed, volunteered several days a week at a local nursing home. And there

was a woman living there named Ethel Weeks.

"Mrs. Weeks says she and her husband bought a horse and cart to entertain their grandchildren when they came to visit," said Henry. "Claims the grandchildren named the mare Ethel, after her. Must have been more than twenty years back the way the missus says she tells it, so the time fits. And they just lived over to Smithville which isn't all that far away. You think it might be our Miss Ethel she used to have?"

Honestly? Tess thought it was a long shot. A real long, long shot. There was no telling what kind of shape this woman was in. Her mind was probably totally gone. Mrs. Bagwell must have mentioned horses and this Weeks woman was hallucinating. Tess was ready to shut the theory down when she looked over at Henry and saw the hopeful expression in his eyes, the tremor in his lips. She hadn't realized until then that the search for Fred and Ethel's roots had become very important to him.

"I cared for them for fifteen years, miss," he said quietly as if reading her thoughts. "I'm retired now, you know. Don't have a whole lot to do. And, well, I do miss them."

"I know you do, Henry," Tess said, standing up and holding her hand out to him. "And I think there's only one thing to do."

"What's that?" he asked uncertainly.

"Why, let's get in that old truck of yours and drive over to that nursing home and pay a call on Mrs. Ethel Weeks. What else?"

The receptionist at the home assured Tess and Henry that Ethel Weeks would be glad of their company.

"She's in the morning room, or should be anyway," she told them.

Tess and Henry followed her down a brightly scrubbed hallway decorated with festive, seasonal garlands and holly to a sunny room at the end. Their attention was directed toward a tidy gray-haired woman in a wheelchair chatting animatedly with two elderly gentleman of similar seating.

"Mrs. Weeks?" Tess ventured. "I don't know if you are the lady we are looking for."

"My name is Ethel Weeks. But I don't know if

I am the lady you are looking for either," she said with a twinkle in her eye. "How can I help you?"

Tess took in the deeply lined but highly intelligent face, the quick movements of her eyes, the vibrancy of life surrounding this woman and quickly revised her approach to the situation. This was no addled person the verge of death. Tess had no idea why Mrs. Weeks was living in a nursing home. All right, the wheelchair did give her some idea. But Ethel Weeks was as far from senile as one could be.

Tess explained who she was and told her about Fred and Ethel.

". . . and Henry Bagwell here cared for them for fifteen years," Tess explained. "His wife volunteers some here and thought. . .um. . .Mrs. Weeks? Are you all right?"

There were fat tears streaming down the old woman's face and her bright eyes shimmered in a futile attempt to hold back more of the same.

Ethel Weeks reached out a shaking hand to Tess. "Are you telling me you have Freddie and Miss Ethel—that they are still alive after all these years?"

"Yes," said Tess.

"Oh, my," Mrs. Weeks said, starting to laugh and wiping away the tears. "Oh my, indeed. What a wonderful holiday gift this is."

Mrs. Ethel Weeks was, obviously, the lady they were looking for.

"My husband and I bought a young mare and governess cart to entertain our grandchildren when they came to visit," confirmed the now smiling Mrs. Weeks. "This must be, my goodness, almost twenty-five years ago. The mare was, oh, I don't know, three or four when we bought her. And she was the sweetest thing. So careful with the children. They named her Miss Ethel, of all things, after me."

Ethel Weeks went on to explain that however sweet Miss Ethel was, she must have committed a 'slight indiscretion' before they bought her.

"We soon found out that she was 'in the family way', if you know what I mean. Well, when the colt was born, the children just had to name him after my husband. Freddie they called him."

"You mean. . .do you mean that Ethel is Fred's *mother*?" Tess stammered.

"Yes, dear," Mrs. Weeks said, patting Tess on the knee. "That's just exactly what I am telling you. Oh the children loved him so. We just tied Freddie to the shafts of the cart when he was small and he followed right along side of his mama."

"Let me guess," Tess said with a wink at Henry. "You tied Fred to the right side of the cart. So Ethel was on the left."

"Why yes dear, we did. That way Freddie was out of the way of traffic when we went on the roads. Not that there was all that much traffic then but we wanted him to be safe just in case."

The Weeks' raised Fred, eventually pairing him with Ethel as a team. They kept the two until Mr. Weeks' death, when both the horses were sold by auction to the Cartlands.

"The grandchildren were bigger then, more interested in other things. And I, well I just couldn't keep the farm, so I sold everything. I never knew where Freddie and Miss Ethel ended up. I guess I didn't want to know. I was afraid they were someplace where they were treated badly. . ."

"Oh, ma'am, no. I treated them like my own children, I did," said Henry for the first time.

"I can see that you did and I am so glad," said Mrs. Weeks.

Henry and Tess invited Mrs. Weeks to the ranch to see Fred and Ethel and she said that someday, somehow, she would come.

Tess never found out if Mrs. Weeks ever came to the ranch, for not too long after that, she left the ranch for a good training job further west. It was time to move on to bigger and better things. But Tess knew she was leaving the horses in good hands.

"You come and visit us anytime you like, now, understand?" waved her replacement as she drove down the ranch road one final time.

"Thanks," said Tess. "And, oh, Henry, just one last thing. See that you take special care of Fred and Ethel. Mrs. Weeks and I are both counting on you."

Author's Note: The Holiday Gift is based on real events. Fred and Ethel, Mrs. Weeks and even Henry, are now long since gone, but their memories and the joy they brought to this world will live on forever. Please check back at www.powerofhorses.com for new stories periodically throughout the year.

About the Author: Born and raised in Minnesota, Lisa Wysocky had early success on the national and world championship horse show circuit. She soon was asked to begin speaking and writing about horses. A knee injury cut short Lisa's career as a trainer, but she quickly ventured into music. Six years with Nashville's afternoon paper, the *Nashville Banner*, and a reputation in the music industry as a writer of quality biographical and promotional material, piloted Lisa to a career in public relations.

Recently, Lisa served as general manager of the independent record label, Scarlet Moon Records, and authored the **only** book about country music stars and their horses, *The Power of Horses: True Stories from Country Music Stars*. *The Power of Horses* features true horse stories and original photos from 18 of country music's top artists. A mystery, *The Opium Equation*, is due out in 2003. Lisa is also active in assisting clients with their public image and with their interview skills.

A witty, down-to-earth speaker, Lisa gives her audiences 'news they can use', along with step-by-step advice on how they can create their own success stories. Former UCLA basketball coach John Wooden once said, "More often than we ever expect, the lives of others we affect." Author, speaker, trainer, and publicist—Lisa Wysocky positively affects those who have the opportunity to hear or read her words.

Also by Lisa Wysocky

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(Fura Books, 2002, ISBN: 1-890224-10-3)

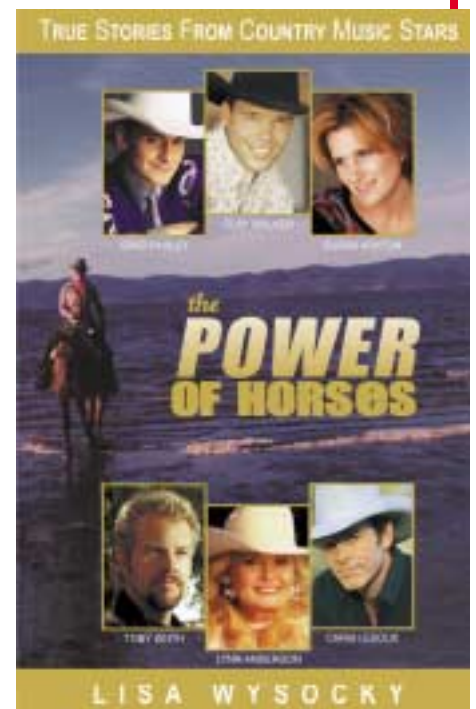
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