

## Adventures of a Volunteer Halter-Trainer

- Nancy Kerson

In California, approved BLM Volunteers may take wild horses and burros home from adoptions to halter train for re-adoption.

A few years ago, we took in our first halter project - "Red Colt" – a long yearling who had been adopted but was returned due to the adopter becoming ill. Red Colt was a perfect training candidate – he responded quickly and within three weeks at our place (I had posted photos on the internet) he had a new adopter.

So Jason Williams, our BLM Adoption Specialist, brought us a new one, another long yearling colt who had been returned after an initial adoption. Bay Colt was a little more challenging but he, too, responded in almost "textbook" fashion and we were just starting to be able to handle him when a friend, Julie Steel, came to visit, fell in love, and adopted Bay Colt, who is now Chinook. (Chinook and Julie rode with us this year in our town's 4<sup>th</sup> of July Parade, which was fun and gratifying for all of us.)

So when Jason came to write up Julie's adoption agreement, he brought us a third horse and scheduled us to bring her to the Turlock Adoption in 6 weeks. He also said, "I've only come across one or two horses like this in all my years with Mustangs, but this is definitely one angry mare!"



Red Colt



Bay Colt (now "Chinook")



Red Filly (above: "Before", right: "After")

"Red Filly" was indeed mad as a hornet. Red Filly ran or paced constantly, head high in the air, whinnying at anything and nothing. All night long, all day long. I don't know when she slept, and she didn't let us sleep much. For several days she was so agitated that it was scary just to go into her pen to clean it each morning. If one came too close to her, she would double-barrel kick at the poor pen cleaner, and she was not averse to charging at you with teeth bared. Challenging indeed.

Red Filly came to us in January, and the next several weeks were very, very wet. Where we live in Napa, California, our soil is pure clay – almost potter's quality clay – it doesn't drain. Red Filly's pen became a sticky, slippery mess. In the midst of it all, Mike sustained a knee injury (not horse-related) and had to wear a brace. We started to worry: Time was ticking away and we were getting nowhere. I was frankly too afraid of Red Filly to want to do much with her myself, and Mike was injured. Plus, the weather was not letting up.

Finally Mike could take it no longer. He put on his high boots and went out into the pen with his rope and bamboo pole, ready to take on the Red Filly, come Hell or High Water – actually it turned out to be a little of both.

Red Filly quickly gave Mike her best double-barrel kicks and charges. Mike remained calm but resolute. "I'm just asking her to move in a circle" he would say, over and over. Red Filly would charge into the pen's corners and kick back at him. Mike would pressure her out of the corner, staying just out of kick-range. Then Red Filly would take off, jumping, kicking, bucking, whinnying.

And then it began to happen: Red Filly started moving in a circle, stopped hanging up in the corners, stopped kicking, stopped charging, stopped fighting, just moving in a circle around Mike. She lowered her head and began licking and chewing. Her pounding hooves softened into a light easy trot. When Mike asked her to stop, she stopped calmly, sweat still dripping from her. Soon she started to look toward him when he asked her to stop, and then... She came in to him, softly, with head relaxed, feet relaxed, ready to follow him. The transformation was so complete, so incredible, it still brings tears sometimes to think about it. Red Filly was, in just the time of one evening, a completely different horse.

Once she realized she didn't have to fight, she didn't have to be afraid, she became the sweetest, most willing little horse ever, and she never reverted to her old angry self. With only two weeks to go until Turlock, Red Filly quickly learned to lead, to load into a trailer, to accept hoof care, to stand and be groomed (she loved it, in fact) and to take a bath. She learned all her ground skills like back up, stand still, and step forward. She walked over tarps, accepted being blanketed at night. She stood quietly while tied to the trailer. By the time we took her to Turlock she was a model citizen.

Of course, next came the really hard part – parting with her. At this point Mike was so bonded to her, and feared she was to him, that it felt really weird to be giving her away. But we clearly didn't need another horse – we already had 4 horses (3 of them BLM Mustangs who were young and still needed regular riding and training), 2 Burros, a mule and a mammoth donkey – more than enough to keep us busy!

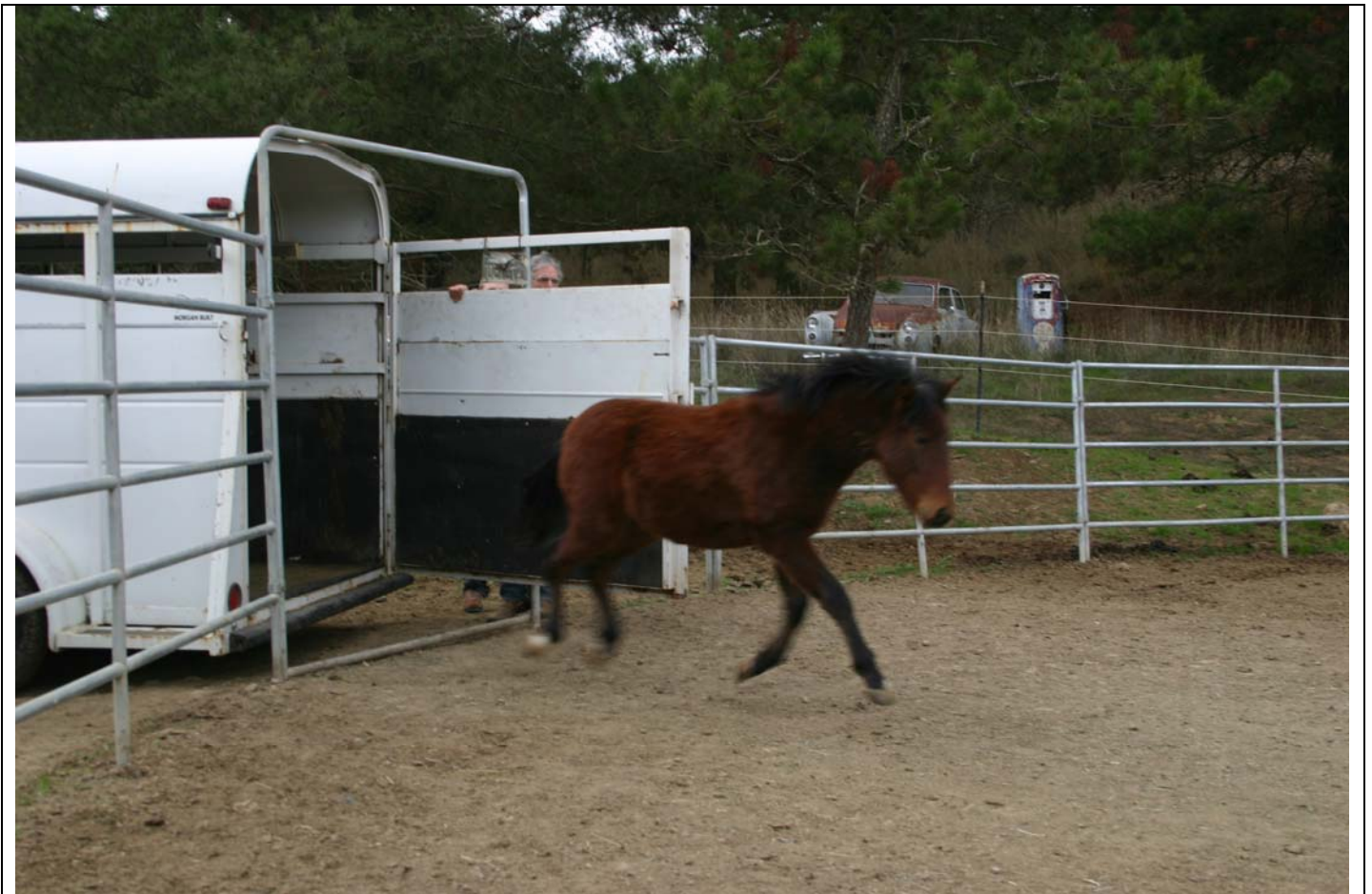


Red Filly and her new adopters and Mike

Luckily, she attracted a fair amount of adopter interest, and we felt that any of the three parties in the “mini-bidding war” of the silent auction adoption seemed like they would have been a good home for her. I got myself a bidder number for “just in case” but in the end, I couldn’t watch the auction – I didn’t know who to root for! And Mike said he was at peace with letting her go to any one of them. She was adopted by a man in a nearby city who had been actively studying up on wild horse gentling and training and seemed well prepared for the task. He sends us occasional updates, and last we heard, Red Filly (who is now “Lucy”) was being started under saddle and doing well.

It was hard to part with her, but it felt great to know that we gave her a chance in life that she wouldn’t have had otherwise. For Mike, the Red Filly experience was a great confidence-builder for himself as a horseman, and for me, it was wonderful to see that even the supposedly “worst” horses can come around and turn out great. That spring and summer we took another halter project and helped start several Mustangs for new adopters.

And then? About Thanksgiving time, I heard about a little Pine Nut HMA pony who had already been to two adoptions and no one adopted him. So I said that if anyone in the BLM Volunteer network went up to Litchfield and had room in their trailer, I would take him as another halter project. Edona Miller did go up to Litchfield and did have extra room in her trailer coming back...



And that pony? He was adopted immediately – by me!