

## A kid and a horse

by Bruce Masterman

Equine Canada, a federal agency, estimates that the four western provinces are home to 616,760 of Canada's 880,000 horses. About half of the West's horses are in Alberta where the average owner has 15 of them! We have just one.

Chelsea's obsession with horses started when she was four. "It'll pass," Karen and I thought and kept thinking, even when our daughter covered the walls in her bedroom with horse pictures, devoured stories about horses, collected horse figurines and watched every horse movie ever made.

Many a family drive through the countryside around High River came to a skidding halt so Chelsea could pat every horse she could coax to the fence.

When she was nine, we told her we'd buy her a horse when she turned 11 if she still felt as strongly about horses and could learn to ride by then. We signed her up with instructor Tim McLean who pronounced her "a natural," after a few lessons. As her 11th birthday loomed, Chelsea started reminding us of our promise. Well, she'd never actually stopped reminding us; the reminders just got a little more, shall we say, intense. And when she turned 11, Chelsea was ready for her horse.

Tim helped us buy *Lady*, a little palomino quarter horse, from local rancher John Scott, who provides mounts for many of the Hollywood movies filmed in Western Canada. Tim recommended a used saddle he'd spotted in a local feed store. Bridle, blanket, etc., etc. soon followed. We boarded Lady with the wonderful McLeans and enrolled Chelsea in the Meadowbank 4-H Light Horse Club.

Chelsea groomed Lady lovingly before and after every ride and competition, brushing her, feeling for sores and picking dirt out of her hooves. In return, Lady helped to teach Chelsea responsibility, confidence, patience, courage and a whole lot more. Chelsea would ride that little horse for hours, sometimes with friends, sometimes with Mom and younger sister Sarah on borrowed horses.

But mostly - going on 12 years now - it's just been Chelsea and Lady, crossing streams, galloping through meadows of wildflowers and stopping to watch coyotes, circling hawks or whatever else they come across in their travels.

### Sidebar

*I asked Chelsea to write a "few" words describing how she felt about Lady when she was a youngster. Here's part of what she wrote:*

A little girl can form a relationship with this huge - graceful, powerful, gentle, loving - animal who'll do what she says, and take care of her, and run *waaaaay* faster than she could ever hope to run by herself.

There's freedom and there's the sense of a special friend who's totally her friend and special to her and she's special to the horse. Mostly there's this big soft, beautiful, shiny, intelligent creature with a pretty mane and a pretty tail. This wonderful animal belongs to this little girl and loves her as a friend, a friend who looks at her with liquid brown eyes and nudges her to let her know that wherever she wants to go this horse is ready for the ride.

Of course, there's also reality. Horses will make you cry, and frustrate you. Learning to ride isn't as easy as it looks; you'll fall off and have to get back on again no matter how mad or scared you are, but it's worth it. Some kids played piano. Some played hockey. I rode Lady.