

THE WESTERNER

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Post by Frank DuBois, November 30, 2014

Issues of concern to people who live in the west: property rights, water rights, endangered species, livestock grazing, energy production, wilderness and western agriculture. Plus a few items on western history, western literature and the sport of rodeo...Frank DuBois served as the NM Secretary of Agriculture from 1988 to 2003. DuBois is a former legislative assistant to a U.S. Senator, a Deputy Assistant Secretary of Interior, and is the founder of the DuBois Rodeo Scholarship.

Mountain girl and Equine ambassador

Tissy

Joyce (Shelley) Loomis-Kerneck

By Stephen L. Wilmeth



I have an A.D. Seitzler saddle that I simply won't sell.

It was made for my great-great Aunt Izzy, Isabelle (Moss) Kinney. It came to me along with a pair of her size 4 shop made boots.

On its left side jockey is a permanent stain. For years, I looked at that stain and cringe acknowledging it was the only blemish on that beautiful old saddle. As I view it today, however, that stain is as much the defining feature of the heirloom as the saddle itself.

I always knew where the stain came from. It came from packing a deer off 74 Mountain in 1959. The packer was a girl. More specifically it was a beautiful young lady who now suggests those mountain influences shaped her life permanently. Her name was Joyce Shelley.

To this day, we call her ... Tissy.

Tissy

Tissy was born in 1942 to Lawrence and Rosemary Shelley. She was named for her Aunt Tink, Rosemary's sister. Her older brother, Buster, was a year old when she was born. He couldn't say sister. She was 'tister.' It later became Tissy.

In 1947, younger brother, Terrell, was born. From the earliest imaginable times, they became the cowboy crew for the latter day remnants of the famous 916 Ranch which their great grandfather, Peter Shelley, established in 1884 (See "The 916 Ranch" article. The ranch was the first target for what now must be recognized as the grand American Wilderness Crusade starting in 1944, and the family has subsequently and indelibly become the First Family of American Wilderness. It is a mantle that has caused immense grief and family and societal disruption).

To keep what remained of the ranch viable, Lawrence had to work out and the distance from their headquarters on Mogollon Creek to the outside world created long absences. Ultimately, he became one of the last great frontier county sheriffs in New Mexico.

There is a Tissy biography that claims she learned to ride before she learned to walk. She discounts the claim as trivial, but admits she doesn't remember a time when she didn't ride. Her surviving brother, Terrell, acknowledges the same.



Buster, Tissy, Terrell

The siblings were seasoned cowboys by the time they started to school. Their headquarters imparted a theme of the difficulty of the ranch life they lived ... it was rocky and uphill in every direction!

Long before any of them had a license, they drove themselves to school. It was 16 miles from their front door to the pavement where they caught the bus. Tissy remembers driving with her brothers in the "old hoopi" only to get sidetracked and chase antelope across the mesa top.

It was nearest neighbor and owner of the Double S, Eddie Allison, who gave Tissy a glimpse of the more sophisticated horse world. She read the *Western Horseman* issues he gave her cover to cover. She became fascinated with barrel racing long before she competed. It started with getting her dad to get her some barrels. She set them up and ran everything on the ranch at them. That included the mules they used to hunt lions and bear, pack salt, and work cattle in the mountains.

About 1954, a friend of her dad's gave the ranch a palomino colt. They called him Pal and nobody but Tissy could ever ride him. She broke him and 'trained' him to run barrels. Terrell remembers a morning the siblings mounted to go move some cows and he watched Pal pitch with Tissy from the bench above the house down through the flat to where the old historic picket corral stood. Pal then turned and pitched through a gate in the corral where he finally unseated her. When the brothers got to her she was sitting in the dirt in the gate laughing. She still had the candy cigarette hanging out the corner of her mouth that she was 'smoking' when she mounted him!

In 1956, she won the first barrel race she ever ran competitively on Pal at a Cliff rodeo. It was a hint of things to come.

Tissy finished high school in 1960 at Silver City when Lawrence was Grant County's sheriff. From there she went to NMSU and was a member of the school's rodeo team. In 1962, she and a friend were alerted to the annual Miss Rodeo New Mexico pageant. Along with the title, the winner was going to get a set of luggage. Tissy wanted that luggage in the worst way. In response, the friends entered the contest.

Tissy won, and ... got the luggage!

Miss Rodeo America

As Miss Rodeo New Mexico, she was eligible to compete for Miss Rodeo America. Almost a birthright, she was always elegant horseback. Many people reminded her of that, but she was becoming more intrigued with the nuances of horsemanship that the ranch couldn't teach her. She could ride bucking horses, pack game, and ride mules in the rocks, but the subtlety of flying lead changes and training were becoming her fascination. She set her sights on winning the pillar of her interest in the 1962-63 Miss Rodeo America competition ... the horsemanship.

It was her mom's genius and creativity that provided the wardrobe. Rosemary sewed it, and the state of New Mexico flew Tissy to the Las Vegas competition in the governor's plane. It was there she signed the contact requiring her to begin using her given name, Joyce. Many times she failed to respond to being called Joyce during the competition. She was Tissy!



Our family's notification of her earning not just the horsemanship but the title of Miss Rodeo America 1963 was couched around her dad's reaction. Lawrence sat there with his hat off, elbows on his knees, and looking at the floor.

When the name "Joyce Shelley ... from New Mexico" was read, he paused, stood, and within a fluid motion threw his hat and whooped to the sky. He whooped again when the parents of Joyce Shelley were asked to stand.

The whirlwind only grew in intensity. During the year of her reign, Tissy was based at the Sahara in Las Vegas. She would fly to engagements. Her mom still provided the basic wardrobe and would continue through the first of Tissy's World Championships. That also factored into her earning "Best Dressed Cowgirl" every year she competed at the National Finals Rodeo.

The girl who once found solace by being alone horseback in "her mountains" would become a significant feature in the world of horsemanship.

Joyce Loomis-Kerneck

Through her first husband, Hall of Fame roper Barry Burk, she was introduced to the equine world she glimpsed in those old issues of Western Horseman. In 1969, she bought a gelding she called Dude. Dude and Tissy were barrel racing's World Champions in 1970. She would also win roping and flag racing world championships during that time.



Through her second husband, Hall of Fame reiner Bob Loomis, she was introduced to the equine world of the AQHA. She continued world championship titles in competitions sanctioned by that organization. It started when Tissy and Man O War Leo won the very first AQHA World Championship show as well as the year ending championship.

Her accomplishments fill sheets of paper, but that is only part of the story of Tissy.

She remains the only world champion barrel racer to win the first rodeo of the year and remain in first place through the finals. She is also the first to adopt the practice of running two horses to spare her main horse through hectic national finals week. She is the only Miss Rodeo America to win multiple world championships in multiple disciplines.

Held in conjunction with the National Finals Rodeo, there will be a gathering in Las Vegas this week celebrating the 60th Anniversary of the Miss Rodeo America Pageant. Tissy, celebrating her 51th anniversary as Miss Rodeo America, will not be there. She has several conflicts, but what she has accomplished doesn't need a reunion of celebration.

If asked about her life, she won't talk about the trauma nor will she mention the fact she was named Dean of the Christian Horseman College in Texas or that she was the first inductee into the Brazilian Horse Trainers Association Hall of Fame. She will discuss the charities she oversees in Brazilian favelas where thousands of people live in dire poverty, the church she helped build, the cowboy church services she started at AQHA world finals, the creation of Barrel Futuries of America, the 140 horses she rode that compiled points and wins in AQHA competitions, and the project she has embarked upon to reacquire and refurbish the old pump organ her grandmother, Hattie, taught her to play by ear as she hummed the old hymns.

She remains special to us. The harshness and the tumultuous history of the 916 shaped her. She embraced that heritage and brokered it into substantive achievements, but, in the end, she remains ... Tissy.

Stephen L. Wilmeth is a rancher from southern New Mexico. "When Tissy was eight, she wrote in her diary she was going to grow up, live in Oklahoma, and train horses. Today, she lives in Wayne, Oklahoma where she continues to ... train horses."

