

## **John Sharp: The Fiddler's Legacy**

**By**

**Ryan Thomas Bell**

This is the story of a “horse musician” – a fiddler, more precisely – who doesn’t play a conventional instrument but instead makes music with the body of a horse. To central-Oregon’s John Sharp, horse training is like a fiddle song played with a bamboo pole for a bow and horse for a violin.

At 92 years of age, Sharp has trained thousands of wild horses. He started each one from the distance of 12 feet, the horse’s first physical contact with humankind the soothing feel of a bamboo pole gently drawn back and forth across its back and withers, a motion Sharp calls “fiddling”. The method has proven itself to be a safe, low-stress technique for gentling wild horses.

Sharp has been using this method for 70 years. He can’t quite recall how the idea presented itself, but he’s spent a lifetime perfecting the technique and the past eight years sharing it with wild-horse enthusiasts, for whom Sharp’s method has become a key part of the curriculum for gentling mustangs and other hard-to-handle horses.

### **Tough Horses**

Sharp was born in 1914 on an Indian reservation in Oklahoma’s Cherokee Strip. His grandfather, a Missouri native, arrived in Oklahoma following the Cherokee Strip Land Run of 1893, a follow-up to the famous “Sooner” Land Rush of 1889. In addition to land-rush homesteaders, the region saw settlers from Texas, mostly ranchers and cowboys, who discovered the territory’s prairie grasslands on the great cattle drives that followed the Chisholm Trail between the Rio Grande and Abilene, Kansas.

By the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Oklahoma had become ranching country and fine horses were a premium.

“My dad was a horse trader,” John Sharp says. “A man he worked with had been to the Indian reservation doing a little trading with them and came back with a Choctaw pony. Dad had a pistol that man wanted pretty bad. So, I traded my dad out of his pistol and then traded the pistol for that pony.”

John Sharp was just 7 when he trained the Choctaw pony, a formative

experience that triggered his lifelong passion for wild horses. Ten years later, Sharp followed that passion to central Oregon.

“I came out to Oregon back in the late 20s, when it was wide-open country,” he remembers. “Some friends stopped by the house (in Oklahoma), driving an old Model-A Ford on their way out to Oregon. I happened to have enough money that I could go in on my share of the gas, and I was on my way. I just knew there were lots of wild horses in Oregon and that’s what I was looking for – lots of horses.”

“You don’t learn horses unless you’ve got a lot of them to work with.”

Sharp traveled one Oregon ranch to the next, cowboying and proving he “knew what a horse looked like.” At each outfit, he found ample opportunities to interact with other horsemen, learning what he could from each.

“I learned most of what I through trial and error,” he claims.

### **Horse Fiddler**

While Sharp doesn’t remember how he first got the idea of using a bamboo pole to gentle horses, the memory of his first “fiddled” horse is still vivid today.

“In 1936 I gentled my first mustang with a bamboo pole,” he recalls.

At the time, Sharp was working as a cowboy on a ranch he describes as “nothing but sage brush, juniper, rocks, and bunch grass.”

“They called it Twelve Mile Table because it was twelve long and twelve wide. When I was riding out there I saw lots of wild horses. There was this one mare with a yearling filly. She was just as purdy as a picture. I never saw a prettier horse. She was a red sorrel with a white strip in her face and four stocking legs just as even as they could be.”

Sharp asked around and learned something of the filly’s breeding. The grandsire was a top harness horse in the Northwest and the sire was a Standardbred of good reputation. The first chance he had, Sharp traded with the ranch owner for the filly.

“I heard somewhere or somehow about using a bamboo pole to start a horse,” Sharp says. “I went down to the store and got me a couple of bamboo fishing poles to begin training that filly with. She was the first one I tried the idea of a bamboo pole on.”

Sharp explains the basic idea behind fiddling, saying, “It makes your arm a lot longer. You can stroke a horse with it and rub his back and belly and not get close enough to scare him. I like a 10- or 12-foot bamboo pole. That way, it makes for a

pretty long arm to reach out and rub a wild horse.”

He recalls laying the bamboo pole across the filly’s back and starting to “fiddle” it back-and-forth across her neck and withers, where horses nuzzle one another. Once she calmed to that, he moved the pole across her hind quarters and barrel, and under her belly. Soon, the filly was putty in his hands, even dozing as he massaged her.

Next, Sharp half-hitched a 35-foot length of cotton rope to the end of the pole and draped it across her back. With some creative use of the bamboo pole, he was able to loop the rope around her neck and pull the tail end back toward him. He pulled the rope back and forth in a rubbing motion to further desensitize the filly – a technique similar to sacking out a horse.

All the while, Sharp worked his way up the pole, inch by inch, until he was within arm’s reach and made first physical contact with the horse. The filly remained calm as Sharp haltered her and, soon he was leading the filly around at will.

“By the time I got through she followed me every place I went,” Sharp remembers. “I led her across the highway – which was just a dirt road then – and into the front yard of the boss’s house. In front of the porch was a big flat rock that made a good front door step. I opened the screen door onto the porch, propped it open, and told her to ‘come on.’ She walked up on that rock and stood there with her head inside.”

“The boss was in the front room where he was reading. He came out and I wish I had a video of him and the look on his face when he saw this horse that was plum wild the day before. He stood there shaking his head and said, ‘Son, you amaze me.’ That’s all he ever said.”

### **Wild Horse Workshop**

In July 1997 John Sharp met the man who would help him gain national recognition as a wild horse trainer, Idaho-based horse clinician Frank Bell. While visiting his niece in Denver, Sharp learned Bell was hosting a clinic at a local therapeutic-riding facility. Sharp’s niece worked for a local horse-rescue organization that had a Bureau of Land Management mustang in need of training, so the Sharps decided to attend Bell’s clinic.

“At one point this little old cowboy in the crowd asks, ‘What do you do if you can’t catch the horse in the round pen?’” Bell recalls of the first time he spoke with Sharp. “I said, ‘Find a good cowboy that can rope, have him rope the horse and hand it to me.’”

Sharp immediately liked Bell for his humor and his ability. After the clinic, he introduced himself to Bell and told him about the pole-gentling method he'd been using for decades. Bell recognized an opportunity for wild-horse handlers.

“John Sharp’s forgotten more about horses than most of us will ever learn,” Bell says.

Later that year, Bell was approached by a California-based non-profit organization, Least Resistance Training Concepts (LRTC), about attending a workshop on training wild horses. LRTC is a grass-roots organization of wild-horse enthusiasts dedicated to supporting the BLM mustang-adoption program.

At the time, in the late 1990’s, several high-profile instances of failed mustang adoptions had led to the animals’ sale at livestock auctions, which meant that they were destined for the slaughterhouse. LRTC was formed to combat the high occurrence of failed and troubled adoptions, in which adopters – often first-time horse owners – quickly become disillusioned by the reality of working with mustangs more difficult to train than expected.

LRTC developed the idea of an annual horsemanship seminar to demonstrate the broad spectrum of training approaches available to the adopting public. The Wild Horse Workshop was created, and a group of trainers were invited to attend as guest clinicians.

In 1998, the first workshop was held in Antioch, California, and Bell was asked to be a clinician. Bell agreed, on the condition that LRTC invite Sharp to be part of the five-person clinician team.

“He stole the show with his bamboo pole technique,” Bell recalls. “He had three horses gentled to every one of ours. We were using ropes and doing the best we could, and he’s out there using a bamboo pole and getting better results.

“By the end of the week, I’d learned the technique from him. We were taking horses that had never been touched and, in two hours, on average, they were leading right behind us.”

His disarming nature and a stream of clever one-liners made Sharp a crowd favourite at the workshop. By 2002, though, the years had caught up with him and Sharp was relegated to a wheelchair. Physically unable to enter the training corrals to demonstrate his techniques, he coached from outside the training pen while participants worked hands-on with wild horses.

Sharp returned for seven consecutive years to serve as guest clinician at the

workshop. Thanks to that exposure, his pole-gentling method is considered one of the safest and most effective techniques for starting wild horses. Today, the method is found in use everywhere from BLM-approved workshop sites to prison wild-horse programs, in which inmates work with mustangs and start them under saddle.

### **Next Generation**

Any horse trainer that owes their wisdom to the horsemen who came before him understands the obligation to impart what he or she has learned to younger generations. Sharp is keenly aware of this fact.

In 1966 a local 4-H extension agent from Sharp's adopted hometown of Prineville, Oregon, asked the horseman to write and illustrate a kids' manual on the use of knots and ropes. What resulted was a 104-page handbook titled *Knots, Hitches and Their Uses*, covering a range of topics including how to tie a rope halter, tying a double-diamond packsaddle hitch and how to tie down a trailer load of hay bales, among others. Now in its 10<sup>th</sup> printing, *Knots* has sold nearly 20,000 copies through equine supply stores.

Perhaps Sharp's proudest legacy, however, is his granddaughter Kitty Lauman. Ever since she was a baby, when John first picked her up and put her on a horse, Lauman has never strayed far from her grandfather's guidance.

"I grew up under his wing and my whole dream in life was to be a horse trainer," Lauman says. "When I was 9, he helped me train my first horse. What I've learned from him is that you have to be smarter than the horse and learn to work with them. Brawn won't get you anywhere; brains will."

Lauman now runs her own horse operation, Lauman Training, just down the road from Sharp's ranch. Of course, she employs the pole gentling method as the foundation of her own wild-horse training program.

"I continue doing the stuff he did and learning from other people," she says. "Anytime someone talks about the bamboo pole, it makes me smile, because that's my granddad. I hope the legacy of John Sharp will never die."

In 2000, Lauman began working alongside her grandfather as a clinician at the Wild Horse Workshop. Today, she carries on the family tradition, teaching the pole-gentling method in Sharp's absence. His age now keeps him close to home. "My granddad wants this knowledge out there for people," Lauman explains. "If nobody continues with it, it's wasted."

Through Lauman, Bell and other horsemen who Sharp has inspired, his technique will live on. The bamboo pole's 12-foot length represents the final distance to be closed between a wild horse taken off the range and that horse's brand new life under saddle.

This is the legacy of "Horse Fiddling" John Sharp.

"Ain't no better way to start a horse that I know of," Sharp says. "Of course, I'm only 92, and I don't know too much."

*Ryan Thomas Bell is a writer currently based in southwestern Montana. For more information on John Sharp's book, Knots, Hitches and Their Uses, visit [www.laumantraining.com](http://www.laumantraining.com); for information on LRTC's Wild Horse Workshop, visit [www.wildhorseworkshop.org](http://www.wildhorseworkshop.org).*