

# Chapter Three

## Hitch `Em Up

Six weeks later . . . . The harness lay on the ground, a pile of stitched leather pieces, straps and buckles. I scratched my head and pawed through it all. “What do you think?” I asked my little acquaintance standing nearby. “Should this piece go around his belly?”

Star was tied up to the hitching rail. He suspected what was afoot and also detected, as horses do, the inexperience of his new master. Looking at me he flattened back his ears menacingly. Chris Lapp’s daughter gave her approval and came closer to point out something else. “See, that piece there goes under his tail.” She was only nine-years-old but she knew more about horses and wagons than I did.

Together we figured out the mysterious pieces of harness. When I had everything in place I took Star to the wagon, lifted the shafts and backed him into position. “Got you in place, now don’t I?” I told Star after I’d fastened a few more leather straps. I patted his neck happily. Nancy stood nearby, very quietly taking it all in. She must be wondering, I thought to myself. What an unusual thing for a non-Amish man to stay on her families place and sleep in her father’s barn. My wagon was different from the Amish style too. My top was light tan with “Photographic Van” painted in black neatly on each side. Clearly Nancy was enjoying all this novelty. The excitement was brimming over in her eyes. Then a little smile crossed her face as she said, “Going for a drive now?” “Yeah, I think I am,” I replied. I looked things over carefully once again. I was ready, ready to go for that first solo drive. Then I stepped up into the wagon, taking only one long stride, quickly planting myself on the wagon seat, hand break close to my right, reins in hand. That morning, before he left for work at the wagon shop, Chris had suggested, “Why not see if you can take the wagon out by yourself today?” There was such a twinkle in his eye I wasn’t sure if he was serious or not. But I felt like I was ready, twinkle or not.

I waved to Nancy and spoke just a couple key words to my horse, “Git up”. Turning onto the road Star responded like the old pro he was, swinging into a medium paced trot immediately. A car came up, faster and closer than I’d hoped, and passed with a whoosh! But Star wasn’t concerned. He trusted my guidance completely. I tested the tension in the reins and marveled at the communication between my hands and Star’s mouth. It was a thrill.

I’d ridden our family’s saddle horses and donkey out in the desert near Las Vegas where I’d grown up. But this was very different. The wagon wheels rumbled and the horse made a rapid clip clop beat that sounded like music to me. A beat I very much planned to live by for quite some time to come. I watched Star’s body, his shoulders rising and falling and his head swaying a little from side to side. The wind blew over me.

It wasn't particularly fast but a pleasant pace. As we moved along, my eyes swept across the fields of corn, so brilliantly green in the bright sunshine. My mind raced with anticipation as to what would be over the next rise or around the next bend. Earthy scents filled the air and leaves rustled as they brushed against each other in the breeze. I felt like shouting for joy. I was finally doing it! Star was my horse and we were going places. We were going adventuring. I had found a new life.

It was certainly a remade me. But something else should be said to make this description completely correct. The new life I now felt so invigorate with and committed to didn't represent a complete dismissal of the life I'd known before. By temperament I'm intrinsically motivated and have always been something of a free radical. I'd gravitated to this point slowly, fitting together skills and interests. My vision was simple enough. I loved history and particularly, the history of photography. The horse and wagon traveling would enable me to pursue these interests.

The plain white exterior of the Fisher Coach Shop came up on my left. I saw someone peeking out a window expectantly and we waved to each other. Having no place in particular to go, I turned around shortly. When I came back by the shop again the men I'd seen working before, along with a few Amish women, were outside. "I didn't really mean it when I said you should go out on your own!" Chris called out when I pulled up. They all laughed excitedly. Seeing their enthusiasm and sharing this moment highlighted the whole day for me.

From there I toured Amish country some more. It was much better seen from a horse drawn wagon than from a car. Star watched the road and gave me a lot of freedom to look around. I saw meticulous little farms tucked between green rolling hills. Full skirted, white capped women hung out their clothes to dry. They spotted the landscape with color, green to blue to earth toned shades. Manicured gardens bloomed with brighter colors than hung on the line, and there were vegetables aplenty. I was greatly impressed with the vitality of the Amish community.

Children were extra visible, playing outside. Out in the fields the draft horses or big mules labored, their necks arched as they pulled. The sound of buggies and trotters echoed everywhere. A little paddle wheel spun in a stream's current and cranked a tall lever that pulled a cable back and forth that provided energy for something up at the house. I wondered what. Finally we got back to the Lapp's and pulled up the drive. Their home was like many other Amish homes I'd been seeing. It was simple but extremely well cared for, the big white farm house, mowed lawn, maintained and painted out buildings and large garden. On one side of the property was a field of leafy tobacco. On the other was field corn.



It all combined to create such a warm, livable kind of environment. Chris's wife, Rachel, was out in the garden. Their pet crow was out there with her, probably not being very helpful. The girls were playing "horse and wagon" with some of the Amish children from across the road. That delighted me. One would be the horse and whiney, as another drove from behind with lengths of bailing twine, their make believe reins. The non-Amish kids the next house down, in striking contrast, imitated the adult world they knew. They were riding make believe cars and motorcycles, revving their engines as they went.

I unhitched Star and opened the barn door. The one pet sheep inside scurried off a short distance, slightly alarmed by the intrusion. She bleated once and studied me with big dark eyes. I spoke to her, unharnessed Star and put him in a box stall with plenty of hay and fresh water. I thought, he'll need his rest now. Our departure isn't far off. I went back outside and studied my wagon for the thousandth time. The words PHOTOGRAPHIC VAN, I had carefully hand lettered on each side, mimicking the lettering I had seen on a mock-up of a 19<sup>th</sup> century photographers wagon I had studied

years before at the Smithsonian Institute. But, I also had made up a cloth banner that I could tie to one side of the wagon that read TINTYPE GALLERY for when I'd be stopped somewhere along the way in my travels and ready to do tintype portraits of any takers.

The actual design of the wagon top I'd come up with myself. In my studies I'd discovered it had been much the same for my 19<sup>th</sup> century counterparts. From the old photos I'd seen, no two photographer's wagons were alike. Once I had the vision of what mine would look like fixed in my head, the building of it seemed to go fairly effortlessly. First I'd constructed a lightweight wooden frame. Over this I stretched heavy canvas. Over the seat area I put a graceful curve in the top to provide protection from the sun and elements. I painted it black on the inside and a light tan on the outside.

The wagon dipped slightly as I stepped up onto the back step. Up in its cubby-hole the tin cup clanged. The kerosene lantern hanging from the ceiling swayed a little. I brushed against my old-time cloths, some of which I would wear and some that were made special as fit-alls for my tintype portraiture customers if they didn't have their own old time duds. I leaned forward against the wooden box that took up nearly half the cargo space in the back end. When the boxes are taken out and set behind the wagon with a canvas tarp over them, the wagon became my bedroom. Or, during a long stop set up for picture business, my darkroom. The top of the wagon has a small skylight/safelight and light proof air vent combination I had built. 7' long, 4' wide and 5' high, this little room on wagon wheels would be my refuge from the weather, my all for all.

Shelves on either side were lined with old zinc capped mason jars and cork stopper bottles. Some of them held condiments like mayonnaise and ketchup. Others sported bold labels like "Developer" or "Hypo". Cloth ditty bags hung from hooks and pegs on either side, filled with necessary items. The black and white calico cloth bag contained toiletries. The navy blue one held harness oil and leather mending tools and thread. There was a small burlap bag for a 5x7 mirror. Just like any filing system, there were some odds and ends that were hard to categorize. Nibs, for my dip pen might end up in a wooden match box with the matches in one of the shelve cubby holes. A small scrub board hung from two small brass hooks on one side near the back end corner.

I reached up to make sure that the strap holding up the back canvas flap was tight. There was one at the front that could be let down to enclose the front of the wagon top as well. When it was time to turn the wagon into a darkroom, flaps were rolled across the floor boards. A folding wooden chair, a board that could be placed on the inside from one side to the other to be used as a table, trays, chemicals and lots of other photographic related stuff were packed in their respective places. In such a compact living quarters, every bit of space was used and accounted for.

Looking things over, I was confident everything was in order. There were a few butterflies in my stomach as I realized, the time had finally come. It was time to head out. But my glory quickly faded. The next day I led Star out to hitch him up. And to my horror he was limping badly. At this time of all times! It was almost hard to

comprehend anything worse happening. How could it be, I wondered. But of course, I knew such things did happen. As long as Chris would bear with me, that was the main thing. To my relief, Chris was very sympathetic.

He brought his horse knowledge to the situation. It was the right front leg that was the problem. There was swelling in the lower part of the leg. But Chris couldn't tell what was the cause, much less prescribe a cure. He thought he detected some thrush disease around the sole of the foot and brought out some medication to put on it. There was always hope it was something simple. That was the kind of person Chris was. He suggested I take Star over to Jonah Helmuth's {not his real name} and get a diagnosis from him. "Jonah should have some interest in the situation," Chris reasoned. Jonah had sold Star to me just a few days before.

I hitched my lame horse up and drove him to Jonah's but still didn't get a diagnosis. He said Star was lame. That was all he could tell me. Some of the things running through my head at this particular moment we best not discuss. But both of us behaved like perfect gentlemen. I had so little experience with something like this. For all I knew I had done something stupid to cause the problem myself. I wondered intensely what the outcome of this sticky situation might be, as I drove slowly back to Chris's.

It wasn't easy for Chris to suspect underhanded horse trading on Jonah's part even though Jonah was a full time "horse jockey," as they called people who bought and sold horses for a living. He was in his church and a neighbor. He would never have sent him to me if he thought something bad could have come of it. But by evening everyone agreed on Star's condition. His affliction was probably a chronic one and not the kind to pass away any time soon if at all. Now Chris recalled hearing about Jonah picking up a lame horse at a sale barn. And as much as he hated to admit it, he was willing to guess Star was that same horse.

"Jonah should get John another horse," Chris suggested to his friend and close neighbor Dave Stoltzfus. Dave, about my age, had just walked up the driveway barefoot. He was a stocky, energetic man. "If he sold John a bum horse then he'll have to do something about it". I was looking at them with wonder. I naively had believed that such things didn't happen amongst the Amish. And if they did, since when did someone accept a return on something like a horse? "Besides," I realized to myself. "I'd never go back and take it up with Jonah anyway".

The next day was horse jockey day. In the morning Jonah came by the Fisher's Coach Shop with an old badly battered nag. He said he'd give it in exchange for Star. He was obviously somewhat concerned and maybe even penitent, I thought. But only up to a point. The horse was small to begin with and on the skinny side. "She's not much to look at," Jonah admitted. "But she's a good horse." I noticed her scabbed up knees and wondered if she had been falling down a lot. "No thanks," I told him. No one could blame me for refusing.

Later on Chris saw an ad in the paper for an eight-year-old driving horse.

So I used the phone in the Amish barn across the road and called a man who had a taxi service for the Amish. Chris came along to help me decide whether the horse was a good one or not. Neither of us had thought finding a horse would be so much trouble. We were a little impatient perhaps because of this and gave our hasty approval of Buddy. "Not that it really matters if Buddy's a good horse or not," I thought. My wallet was almost empty.

But Chris and Dave had another idea. Maybe I wasn't up to a showdown with Jonah, but they were. The hard part was that Jonah was their friend. But it was something they felt had to be done. Driving Chris's horse, with Star tied up behind the wagon, the three of us headed to Jonah's that evening. Jonah came outside and very quickly the conversation came round to the heart of the matter.

"Looks like you've sold John here a no good horse," Chris started in.

"Why, no, it was just fine when it left here," Jonah retorted. He was a short man, dressed, of course, in a similar fashion to Dave and Chris. He was about Chris's age, in his thirties.

Dave was sitting on the back end of the spring wagon, making himself comfortable and planted for however long it was going to take. His legs and bare feet were propped up against one side of the wagon and he rested his back solidly on the other side, arms folded across his chest. The look on his face was one of determination. "Give him his money back," Dave commanded Jonah.

But Jonah held his ground. "I've never sold anyone a bum horse and never given anyone their money back."

"Till now," insisted Dave. "We aren't leaving without the money."

To me, it didn't seem like there was much else to say. But I was wrong. They were just getting started. Dave looked Jonah straight in the eye and told him quite a few things, none of which can be repeated here, because it was all in Pennsylvania Dutch, the Amish people's first language. They all seemed more comfortable in this tongue and that's when things got going.

I didn't understand a word of it. But I did notice that after awhile Jonah started getting quieter. Dave, now standing up on the wagon, was talking most of all. From the tone of the conversation and expressions on their faces, I suspected Dave was shaming Jonah into it. Pretty soon Jonah was just nodding. Then he said a few words quietly and headed for the house. "Where's he going," I asked. "He's going for his checkbook," Chris told me. No one could prove whether or not Jonah had actually been in the wrong. But for the sake of fidelity he was willing to rescind his deal with me. I was awed by what had just happened. The way they'd worked it all out was impressive. But I dared not smile. It was, after all, a very serious matter. Not that I could help but be happy. Thanks to Dave and Chris I could get a fresh start with another horse. . . . Buddy.



The next day I counted out my money, still amazed to find the \$700 back in my pocket again. I called the taxi driver for the Amish and headed out, alone this time, to see about getting Buddy. For the ride back I brought along Dave Stoltzfus's saddle. On this morning I felt just a touch of melancholy. Not having a car wasn't what bothered me. In fact, there wasn't any convenience I'd left behind that I particularly missed. Getting this new life on the road was a struggle. Not that I had any regrets. I knew what I wanted to do and wasn't the sort of person to easily relinquish a decision made. What made me feel a little blue was how quickly I'd lost Star. I'd already grown a little attached to him in those couple of days I'd had him.

Buddy was owned by an Old Order Mennonite family that, like the Amish, are horse-drawn. The farmer was glad to see me and hitched Buddy right up so we could go for a drive. Buddy was finely built but had some height and muscle. He was sorrel red with a dark mane and tail, and a very attractive horse, especially when he moved out down the road. I wasn't so concerned about his looks though as I was about his soundness and temperament. Buddy seemed to be in excellent condition. He took long strides and trotted at a fast pace everywhere we went.

What concerned me a little was Buddy's spirit. He seemed to have too much of it. But what do I know, I thought to myself. I wasn't certain the kinds of questions to ask the seller and the heck with any intuitions I might have. I feared I'd test Chris's patience to the limit if I came back empty handed. Reluctantly, I paid the farmer, saddled Buddy and headed for the Lapp's. It was about eight miles away.

As we went, we passed the New Holland Sale Barn. A place the Amish told me I would never want to take a chance on buying a horse or mule at, as rarely are the good ones sent there to be auctioned off. Then it started to rain, lightly at first and then harder and harder. Soon Buddy and I were soaking wet. We stayed off the road as best we could, keeping on the shoulder, which wasn't much in a lot of places. I had my hands full a number of times keeping Buddy calm and steady. The worst moment was when an 18-wheeler truck roared past us, spraying us with water from the puddles by the edge of the road. Buddy completely snapped at this and would have run away except for the tight rein I kept on him. We spun around in a small circle before he calmed enough to continue on.

I figured that maybe Buddy just needed a good work out and the long ride back to Chris's would be just what the doctor ordered. But by the time we got there the rain stopped and the clouds had mostly departed and Buddy was still raring to go. So, I spent the rest of the day riding him around the fields and farm lanes. This seemed to have more of an effect on my rear end than anything else. Latter after supper time Dave came over and we hitched Buddy up to Chris's spring wagon and went for a drive. As usual Buddy set an awesome pace, up and down hills. He seemed to mind well enough. So, I decided to keep my misgivings that had been welling up to myself.

Buddy needed new shoes so I planned to attend to this the next day. The horse-shoer's shop was a couple miles on the other side of Intercourse. I was a little bit squeamish about driving him over there solo. So, I decided to saddle him up and ride him instead. I eased my sore rear into the saddle and off we went at a quick trot. We headed into town.

In years to come, after traveling out West, I'd think often of the old time charm of Intercourse. There was more "Old West" in that little eastern town than any I came across out there. The historical architecture, hitching rails up and down the street, horses and buggies coming and going, men wearing broad brimmed hats and long skirted ladies with bonnets are what gives this town the look. Well, that's how it was in 1978, anyway.

I tied Buddy's lead rope to the hitching rail in front of the post office. I needed to mail some letters and post cards out. A big noisy truck went by and instantly Buddy swung up on the side walk in a state of panic. I talked in every soothing tone I knew, but nothing could ease the tension inside this horse.



I mailed my letters. Some were personal some were not. At this time my only bill in the world was \$40 a month rent for my warehouse space back in Florida. One letter was to my friend, Gary, who I was keeping abreast of things. The other letter was to a woman in Atlanta, Georgia. She was a beautiful and talented folk singer I'd dated from time to time over the years. I hoped to see her again when I came through Georgia. I returned to Buddy and we continued on our errand to the horseshoer's shop. Buddy stood as calm and nice as you please getting new shoes nailed on. Not so when tour buses and big trucks passed us on the way back to Chris's.

Chris and I took another long drive that evening. I learned to keep the reins tight, even when Buddy was walking. I'd gotten a little spoiled with Star's easy going ways. Driving Buddy was work. The next day we took another long drive. Chris was kind of quiet. He didn't have much to say about Buddy like he once did. We were walking on a thin line of hope and we both knew it. That thin line was soon to break. Buddy shied badly away from another passing bus. Chris announced, "Don't worry. I'll buy him from you for the full price if he doesn't calm down." We both knew it wasn't safe for me to go on any long cross country trip with Buddy. But passing him off on Chris didn't seem right either. As we headed back to Chris's place, my heart had sunk to an all-time low. I felt like I had just painted myself into the proverbial corner. "I could trade you my horse," Chris said next, sensing my melancholy. "Mine drives as nice as you please. He could get you to Florida, no problem." His offer was more than kind, too kind. The next day we started looking at horses again.

There was a long list of them. One was a tall Standardbred supposedly only 12 years old with puffy back legs. "Why, this horse has been to Florida and back if you could add all his road miles. And it's ready to do it again," the owner boasted. "Too much trotting on the pavement," Chris said, looking at the puffiness.

I called about another horse and the man told me, "I've got a really good horse here. It's just a trifle underweight, that's all." I went to look at it. Underweight was a serious understatement! This horse was just bones. Its breathing was labored and it coughed a lot. The owner would take only \$450. The horse was not a bargain at any price. One idea was coming through loud and clear. People held onto their good horses and sold their sick and bad ones.

I'd been at Chris's a week. I felt that my presence was a weighty reminder to Chris of a commitment he wished he didn't have to keep. I tried to keep an ever lower profile. Buddy stayed in a stall near my room in the barn. On one particular evening I went in to sit on the old dusty couch and didn't hardly look in Buddy's direction. Not that I was giving up. I'll pull that wagon to Florida by myself if I have to, I thought. It was about dinner time. I put together a sandwich and was eating when a spring wagon pulled up Chris's driveway.

Chris came out of the house to greet his visitor. There was nothing unusual in this. It seemed to be the custom among the Amish of this area to not keep their visitors wondering or waiting. I recognized Little Jake, a farmer I'd already met a couple days before in our wanderings around asking about horses for sale. Jake and Chris talked by the wagon. That wasn't unusual either. But the horse he was driving was.

It was a very stout chunk of a workhorse. I was surprised because I'd grown accustomed to seeing the Amish drive a light weight horse out on the road. This horse was chunky all over, especially his stomach. He had quite the barrel. All of a sudden, Chris was grinning ear to ear and looking toward the barn, with the same grin on his face. I jumped up and went to the doorway. Could it be, I thought.

"John!" Chris started. And without explanation, went on to shout out, "This is the horse for you!" I walked out to take a closer look. How could *this* big brown teddy bear of a workhorse be the one? My smile wasn't as broad as Chris's. I needed a little reassurance. But after Jake came over to me and we discussed a trade, it seemed to suit everyone involved. Jake would try out Buddy over the weekend and I would see how I liked Brownie. If either party wasn't satisfied we would trade back again.

Not wasting a bit of time, I rode Buddy over to Little Jake's that same evening. Getting the girth strap around Brownie's round belly required some doing. As I surveyed the situation I decided that this obese stomach had its roots in some very indulgent eating habits. "Maybe that's why Little Jake is willing to part with you!" I talked affectionately as I eased things in place and got myself up into the saddle. In the poorest of humor Brownie gave his reply, ears back, throwing his head around angrily. I knew Brownie would rather be out in the pasture with his other plow horse buddies.

Brownie was far from being the most handsome horse I'd ever met. He had a big rectangular head, a thick neck, and a wide chest. Well, Brownie was just thick and big all over. The long feathery hair around his ankles and his luxurious black tail were two of his more attractive features. I also decided he had an expressive, honest face. But when we headed back to Chris's at a slow, slooow walk, I found myself missing Buddy's spirit. Brownie continued to amble along lethargically despite my urgings to the contrary.

Chris and Dave were waiting for me when I finally rode in. We immediately unsaddled Brownie and harnessed and hitched him up to Chris's spring wagon and went for a drive together. Chris and Dave radiated with absolute optimism. This bewildered me a little at first. "He handles nice as you please," Chris exclaimed. "That calmness comes from the draft blood in him", Dave added.

Now that they mentioned it, I realized it was true. I felt completely at ease

driving Brownie. Cars and big trucks roared past and he never even flinched. As far as I knew it was only Brownie's second time being driven like this on the highway. He plodded down the road like he was pulling a plow down a furrow. He seemed to be completely safe and sensible. I looked at Chris and Dave's shining faces and smiled back.

Brownie would even trot some when asked to. But Dave pointed out something more important, "See all that muscle? He's got power to spare. You'll need that on the steep hills." I had to admit he was by no means all fat. The muscles bulged in his legs and rear quarters as he strode along. Maybe he's not so lazy after all, I thought. I couldn't have reasoned it all out by myself. Thankfully I had Chris and Dave there to help me along. After awhile I had to admit it to myself and them as well, "He's perfect." Chris and Dave nodded their heads in agreement, their smiles as big as ever. I could see my horse-drawn life finally gelling before me. I was sure I'd found the sturdy, reliable traveling partner I'd been looking for.

Brownie was the one.