

# JESSIE

Jessie was my babysitter. She was my best friend. She was my grandmother. She was my grandfather. She was my sister, my cousin, and my aunt. At times I wished she were my mother.

Jessie, like me, was a mongrel: half **Welsh pony**, half nondescript horse. She was tall for a pony, around 12 hands high, if I remember correctly. This compares to the **Shetland** that measures from 7 – 11 hands high. She was a black and white pinto who looked more like a horse than the roly-poly image of the standard kid's Shetland monster. Jessie was ancient when she came to us—beyond reliable **dental aging**. She had a wise old look about her too. I, on the other hand was young—five or six years old. We spent many hours together, usually just the two of us. I was safe with her, there was no need for a baby sitter. Even in the company of my mother and sister, her short legs had difficulty keeping up with the horses so we lagged behind—me lost in my daydreams, Jessie patiently watching for gopher holes. I learned most of what I ever knew about horses from Jessie.

As a child I thought she had long shaggy hair because of the “Welsh” part of her breeding. Hey...it's cold in Wales. Animals from that part of the world evolved with thicker coats and longer hair, right? That made sense to me. But I always fretted over her shaggy summer appearance. She'd lose some of her winter mat, but she always had a longish, scruffy looking coat.



Now, I realize poor Jessie probably suffered from something called **Equine Cushing's Disease (ECD)** which is a malfunction of the endocrine glands, the pituitary gland, in particular. ECD is usually found in horses fifteen years old or older, which would be consistent with Jessie's case. Jessie had also been **foundered**, we were told. This explained the tendency of her hooves to grow long and shovel-shaped. But laminitis, often a precursor to founder, is also a marker for Cushing's Disease. And once a horse develops laminitis, it is more prone to founder thus initiating a potential cycle of misery.

Untreated laminitis - <http://vetmoves.com>

I don't think Jessie suffered too much from her condition. We fed her carefully, curbing her access to overly rich feed. We kept her feet trimmed so she never displayed signs of pain or lameness. Sure, she got a bit warm during the summer months, but she/we were lucky to be living at a high elevation where summer temps rarely exceeded the mid 80's.

I hate to admit that I suffered more from Jessie's shabby appearance than she did. When other girls my age had graduated to sleek, impeccably groomed and papered Quarter Horses, my mount was a pony who looked forever in need of a shave and a shower. I was such a shallow brat. By contrast, Jessie was a loyal pony with a heart larger than my over stuffed ego. For years we competed in weekly **Little Britches Rodeos** at the county fairgrounds. We competed based upon *my* age, not *Jessie's* age. Each week, sandwiched between the hip girls whose artfully lined and shaded eyes skipped over the top of my insignificant head to gaze at each other in teenage fits of envy and snarkiness, Jessie and I waited our turn to run the **barrels**. Meanwhile, I ogled our competition—those beautiful sorrels and bays with the **roached manes** and



painfully plucked tails that were the height of equine fashion at the time. And each week, Jessie and I entered the arena, me with an unquenchable desire to win; Jessie with a steady desire to be the best she could be. Her short legs churned the dirt and she slipped deftly around each barrel with my legs crashing against her ribs praying to knock off five-tenths of a second from our time. A yellowed Russel Stover candy box sits in the back of my closet, jammed with white ribbons. There is one red ribbon. I believe one of my competitors was absent from competition that day. I should have been immensely proud of those third place wins. The length of Jessie's legs was an insurmountable handicap in a field of five to ten competitors .



Eventually, I graduated to a full-sized horse. But Jessie hadn't quite earned her retirement yet. She continued to nurture a host of neighborhood kids who learned which end of a horse to treat with caution and which end to romance with a handful of oats. Her heart was so big that she just kept giving, year after energizer year. I have no idea how old she was when her face began to break out in nasty abscesses which would expand until they burst and oozed pasty mucous and later, blood. She was diagnosed with cancer. I was in junior high by then. Every day I bathed her face in warm water, gently cleaning the sores and wiping the tears that dampened the hair below her eyes. As fall blew into winter, her sores spread down her neck and across her back.

It was time. I rode in the trailer with her as mother hauled us to the vet. I held Jessie's gentle, shaggy head and caressed her black ears a final time before she received the long-awaited shot that would relieve her of her misery and send her to her well-earned retirement.

If there's a shred of humility in my competitive soul, it was cultivated by that indefatigable pony. She taught me to ride, she taught me responsibility, she taught me patience, she nurtured the tiny grain of tenderness that I fought to hide with pride and bravado. She did this at a time when I trusted no one, when I felt alone in a complicated world of bickering grownups and unreliable friends. She did all this with never a harsh word, never a nip or a kick. She worked her magic with love and patience. It may sound silly, but no death since has ever been more difficult than the death of my truest friend, companion, and mentor Jessie.



Sadly, the only image I have of Jessie, there in the background, with my mother preparing to bridle another horse in the foreground. Circ. 1961