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Belle, The Horse on the Hay Fork

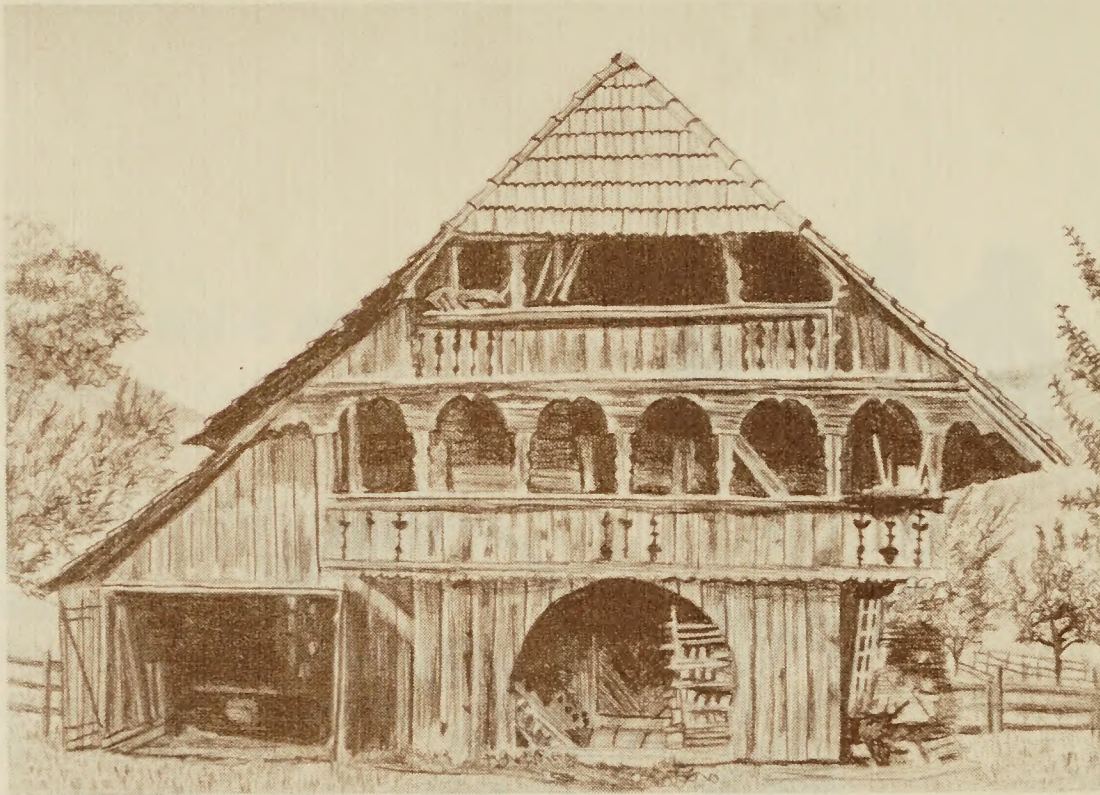
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Lisa Closterides

BELLE, THE HORSE ON THE HAY FORK

Ellen Hoffman

The barn sits on a knoll overlooking a pasture, like an old red hen, feathers ruffled and wings spread, as if protecting a nest full of baby chicks. The limestone foundation is gone, and vain attempts are made to contain its bulging bottom.

An old reliable team, pulling a load of hay, slowly makes its way up the bare sun-baked hill. Three-foot-high weeds skirt the worn machinery-trod trail where, several days before, a river of water had formed a foot-deep gully that weaved its way down the hill, past the machine shed, and through the gate below. The team, traces pulled tight, a horse on each side of the miniature canyon, slowly and faithfully bring the load up the steep incline. They plod across the yard, around to the shady east side of the barn and stop below the enormous gaping haymow-door.

I walk from the house to the barn, taking large, butter-and-sugar-coated bites from the slice of fresh home-baked bread balanced precariously on my finger tips. I stumble as the dog and cats crowd around me. Shep barks, jumps, and hurtles through the air toward the bread. The cats brush their furry bodies and long tails against my sweaty bare legs, begging for a sample of my good fortune. Slowly, mouthful by mouthful, the bread disappears along with my friends, who amble off in the direction of the barn. Shep crawls under the hay rack and sprawls, mouth open, panting. Saliva drips from the end of his long pink tongue.

On the rail, high above the hay rack, the knives of the grab-fork hang empty and useless in the vacant haymow door. A trip-rope hugs the side of the barn and falls to the ground below. A thick heavy rope, attached to the grab-fork, runs up, then across the full length of the barn, down through large wooden pulleys, and out through a small side door where I stand with Belle, a heavy-built old-bay work horse. Belle, head down, pulls and tears huge mouthfuls from a patch of weeds. I speak to her, and she raises her head; her huge lips nibble delicately at the remaining green, hanging from her mouth. I adjust the check-rein, back her into position, attach the loose tug, and with the lead strap in my hand, wait for dad's go-ahead signal.

On the other side of the barn, dad is slicing through the hay with the knives of the grab-fork, jumping on each to assure a huge hungry bite. "Go ahead," he shouts, and steps to the side of the rack, the trip-rope in his hand. Belle pulls the hay-rope, single-tree, and traces, taunt. As the hay sways from side to side above the hay rack, her huge front hooves grab the earth beside me. Her body lunges into the collar and strains at the harness; her gentle eyes are wild with the effort of trying.

The hay reaches the peak of the barn; the fork-mechanism clicks as it meets the rail and, like the graceful sweep of a lady's ball gown, glides through the huge door and down the rail to the back of the barn. Dad jerks the trip-rope, then hollers, "whoa," and the hay falls free to join that in the haymow below.

Behind Belle, the traces, rope, and single-tree grow slack. I speak gently, lean down behind the ominous back-hooves, and loosen one of the tugs. We make a wide U-turn to avoid the thick, heavy hay-rope stretched across the farm yard. It glides slowly along behind us through the fine, powdery, brown dust as Belle and I walk back to the barn, together.