

# MY CONVERSION

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A FARRIER'S JOURNEY TO NATURAL HOOF CARE



J o h n G r a v e s, C P

# MY CONVERSION

A Farrier's Journey To Natural Hoof Care

**John Graves**

PO Box 601  
Pueblo, CO 81003

Telephone: (719) 251-8590

thewildhoof@q.com

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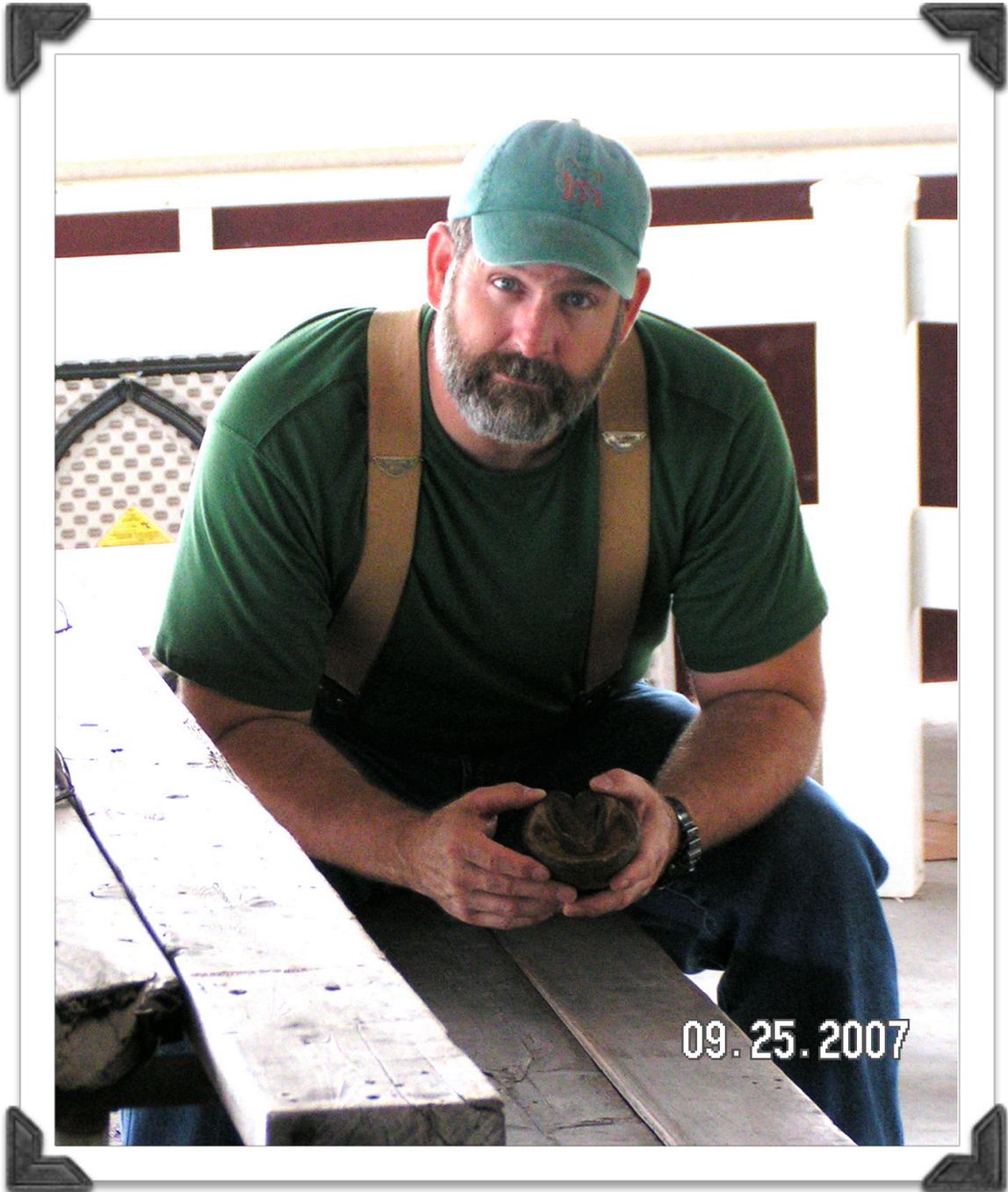
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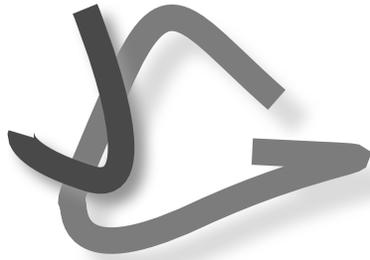
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**John Graves during a Natural Trim Workshop. John is the Natural Trim Workshop coordinator for the AANHCP.**



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his article relates the events that brought about my conversion from a conventional farrier to a natural, barefoot hoof care practitioner and what led to my out-and-out abandonment of the practice and art of horse shoeing. It is my desire to relate, to anyone willing to listen, the myth and misinformation that has been prevalent for centuries concerning the need to shoe horses. Horse shoes are not necessary under any circumstance if proper attention is given to the horse's physical and psychological needs. The pain and suffering I've seen domestic equines endure through "well

intentioned" conventional hoof care needs to be ended. To start at the beginning, I believe, is necessary to shed the brightest light on this reformation.

Equine hoof care was a second career for me; my first, was as a mechanic in the United States military. I spent twenty years in the military. But I grew up on a cattle ranch, spending my entire youth around cattle and horses until I was 19 years old. I spent my summers in 4-H, raising, grooming and showing livestock. I also spent a lot of time moving cattle as necessary on horseback. I have many fond memories of those days, but now, try as I may, I cannot remember ever being concerned about the hooves of the horses I came to know and ride. These horses spent most of their day living a very natural lifestyle on 360 acres of relatively sparse, rocky terrain, being fed hay occasionally and they were never grained except to get them to come to the gate. They were never wormed and I can't recall a veterinarian visit. Yet the spirit and vitality of these horses was exciting and they never failed to perform their required duties. I do remember that they were never shod and the only memory I have of a farrier was one occasion when the horses were trimmed prior to moving the cattle fifteen miles to a mountain pasture down both asphalt and gravel roads.

It was these reflections of my childhood that prompted me to research employment in a rural environment when deciding on the next chapter in my life following military service. My choice to go to horse shoeing school was not immediate nor taken lightly. I did have a family to support by this time and so my investigation of

the industry and it's ability to provide for my financial needs was lengthy. The possibility of a career in natural hoof care never came up. But one overriding concern that weighed heavy on my decision was working with horses—I knew it was something I wanted to do.

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## F A R R I E R S C H O O L

When I made the decision to become a farrier I wanted to attend the best “farrier college” I could find. To me that meant finding the teacher with the best credentials. At this point in time, even though my previous experience was only with barefoot horses, shoeing horses seemed completely logical and historically correct. I had no basis on which to assume it was done any other way, horses were just shod. This mindset is entrenched in the psyche of the vast majority of the horse owning public, propagated by the movie industry and advertisements in every horse publication out there for “something” (read snake oil) that will make your horse’s hooves better.

The horse shoeing school I ultimately chose has one of the world’s finest and most certified blacksmiths as it’s owner and primary instructor. He is certified by the *American Farrier’s Association (AFA)*, and a *Certification Examiner* for the organization. He is one of only three Americans to become a *Fellow of the Worshipful Company of Farriers (FWCF)* of Great Britain, an organization that has been around for 700 years. He also has five college degrees, one is a Master’s Degree and two are in education from universities in Kansas and Missouri. To this day I believe the way I was taught to trim

and shoe a horse by this man made my conversion to natural hoof care a very easy process.

This school offered courses, ranging from two to six months, in blacksmithing as well as in horse shoeing. All of the programs were very heavy in the academics of the farriery science. Anatomy had the greatest importance placed on it. I will always be grateful for that. History, metallurgy and lameness pathology were also given much classroom time. There were weekly written quizzes and two comprehensive written tests in addition to practical exams which had to be passed for graduation.

Next, the emphasis was placed on forging, work at the anvil, being able to make our own tools and the various types of shoes that would become our stock and trade. Hour after hour was spent in front of a glowing forge in the Missouri summer heat and humidity, hammering on yellow hot steel until long after dark. There were many graded forging projects such as hoof picks, clinch cutters, center punches and pritchels that had to be completed. And, of course, there were long hours of practice making horseshoes. All of this happened in the evenings and on weekends. The weekdays, Monday through Friday, were spent shoeing horses—many, many horses.

For most of the students the beginning of school was baptism by fire. Starting on the third day of school, we were put under horses, “assisting” more senior students, performing the trim we were taught to do on the second day of school, preparing the hoof for shoeing and completing the finish work. Anyone who has ever stood in the

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farrier's stance with a horse's hoof in their lap can attest to its physical difficulty; it's one of those things that works muscles you never knew you had but that you will be reminded of for days afterward. It took weeks for your



body and your hands to become accustomed to the labor, regardless of previous experience or physical stamina. I recall taking very long hot showers, just letting the water run on my back, and soaking my

I won this shoe at school as a prize for the best results in a forging project. The shoe was made from a "horseshoe sandwich" which is two old horseshoes forge welded together, then folded and hammered many times (kind of like Japanese sword steel). It's then heated and hammered into a piece of bar stock (this was the forging project) that is then made into a horseshoe. This shoe was made by Kyle Ballard. His name is stamped into the toe. Kyle was one of our instructors at the school. Due to the lack of steel the South used this technique during the Civil War to keep their cavalry mounts shod. It's very labor intensive and requires a lot of time and energy. Too bad the South didn't know about natural hoof care; it would have been one less thing to worry about.

hands for long duration in *Epsom Salts*. And there were several twenty-something year old men doing the same right beside me. The summer I attended horse shoeing school is a summer I will never forget. It will hold a place in my mind right next to military boot camp ... and in many respects it was much more difficult.

I tell you about my summer learning the Farrier's craft because you should know about the time, effort and money, as well as the blood, sweat and tears, I spent gaining the knowledge required for this archaic art. I left Missouri that fall with not only a

completely new education but with a confidence, determination and eagerness to solve all of the lameness woes of the equine species with my newfound ability to make and apply horseshoes. I would find what had eluded the rest of the farrier world for a thousand years.

Luckily, I also developed an ability that summer I had no idea I possessed—an ability that is very hard to express in words but is best described as relating emotionally with horses. I just feel right around horses. I always have. I'd like to think it's part of my heritage. My maternal grandparents were Native Americans born in Oklahoma in the late 1800's. My grandfather farmed with horses and was a muleskinner driving produce to markets in town. As a child I can remember reveling in the stories my grandmother would tell of horses she had owned as a girl and young woman. I had no comprehension of it after horse shoeing school but I believe now it is this ability to empathize on a similar plane with the horse that brought me to where I am today.

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## **A G R O W I N G   S E N S E   O F   U N E A S I N E S S**

After graduation, I felt very strongly about continuing my education in the farriery science. I attended clinics and seminars given by reputed clinicians and farriers on the malady *de jour* including club foot, navicular syndrome, white line disease, laminitis and founder, to name a few. Always taking away from these schoolings the latest and most efficient methods to deal with these problems as determined by the conventional hoof care world. I would strike off refreshed with new weapons in my repertoire to

build a new type of shoe or trim a hoof a different way to attack the epidemic of hoof problems I was seeing on a daily basis. Almost every hoof I worked on had serious problems of one sort or another: wall de-lamination, white line stretching or separation, bloated rotting frogs, sole bruising, etc. I'm afraid I followed blindly behind a smokescreen of longstanding farrier and veterinarian conventional wisdom and all the time just implementing job security not really any type of true remedy for what ailed the horses.

I could never really put my finger on it but there was always something in the back of my mind, every time I drove a nail into a horse's hoof, making me uneasy. Initially I chalked it up to a lack of confidence. The potential to seriously injure the horse with a "hot" nail driven into or too close to the quick is always very high. But that was silly. I had driven thousands of nails. I would quash those feelings and march along smartly espousing all the blacksmith's logic that had been drilled into my head, shoeing horses and attempting to correct the hoof problems I ran up against with "orthopedic" and "special" shoes that would fix things...temporarily, as I was to discover.

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## **E N L I G H T E N M E N T**

Then, in the fall of 2003 I met "Doc," a Haflinger gelding in his teens who was foundered in all four hooves. He had been rescued from being sold at a meat sale by

some sort of pony ride attraction. His new owner brought him home in the attempt to save his life.

Then the owner contacted me. She had been told by two veterinarians and as many horseshoers to euthanize the horse. She wanted to know if I had been formally trained and if I thought I could help. Of course, at this point in time, I had only been shoeing long enough to think I could shoe anything with hair on it and fix any hoof problem. The number of pathologies I had seen and made failed attempts at correcting had not yet made a dent in my consciousness. So, I told her that I would come and look and let her know what I thought.

The first time I saw Doc I had to walk across his paddock to the manure pile where he spent his days lying down. He had open sores on his hip points, hocks and knees—bed sores really, from lying all the time. Doc refused to stand. Most of the time he would defecate and urinate on himself instead of getting up and standing on his feet. His water and food were brought to him.

Doc's hooves were in horrible shape—five inches long, the white line was at least an inch wide and the soles were bulging to a point below the hoof wall. I was initially taken aback and my first thought was: "OK, I've bitten off more than I can chew here."

But the owner was a certified homeopathic healthcare provider originally from Aztec, New Mexico professing to be steeped in both New Age and Native American spirituality. She claimed she knew the horse's will to live was still very strong. I was



This is the only picture I have of Doc. It was taken in the summer of 2006, about a year and a half after the last time I saw him.

thinking I had really stepped in it with this one, but she did have other horses that had, supposedly, made comebacks from death's doorstep: a Navajo reservation horse that survived West Nile; a miniature horse that had been foundered and was walking around the yard; and some mammoth donkeys that had survived this or that.

All that notwithstanding, I really made the decision to attempt to help this horse because of what I saw in his eyes ... there was still a spark, they were clear and bright. I also felt a strong desire from him to live when we made eye contact. Inexplicable in the

conventional sense and yet here we are. I agreed to help Doc with all the acquired knowledge I had and told the owner we'd get started right away.

My conventional training told me that I had to relieve the pressure on the lamina due to the length of the toes and prevent the coffin bones from "rotating." Initially, I nailed ordinary keg shoes on backwards in an attempt to prevent the sole from touching the ground and artificially reducing the break over under the toe. Doc slowly shuffled around his paddock for a few days. Then was down again.

My second attempt was a pad under the shoe that was on backwards to protect the entire sole of the hoof. This came to the same end.

Third, I tried a "W" shoe which is basically a backward shoe with a frog plate that is supposed to provide support for the frog and prevent the coffin bone from pressing down into the sole. The intended effects of this shoe lasted little longer than it took me to drive home.

Next was a "G" bar shoe which looks like a normal shoe but one branch turns at the heel and comes up the center of the hoof under the frog. Again, nothing.

Not being one to accept defeat so readily, I sought out and attended a clinic by a nationally known veterinarian who was claiming the "*Heart-bar shoe*" was the panacea for founder, and with this new piece of artillery I returned to the war. It was while I was waiting for the heart-bar shoe to fail that I started in earnest to research the causes and remedies for laminitis and founder.

It was during this search that I found the work of Jaime Jackson, specifically his book *"Founder: Prevention and Cure the Natural Way."* At that time I had no idea that Jaime was the tip of the spear in a movement that has since spread like wildfire throughout the domestic horse world. I initially read his book thinking it was going to tell me how to trim the hoof to "cure" the founder. As I skimmed through it the first time, looking for a procedure, I can remember thinking, "This is pretty bogus." There was absolutely nothing in that book that told me how to trim the hoof.

But, obviously, despite my preoccupation with trimming the hoof, there were pieces of information making their way into my subconscious and shedding light on those shadows of doubt I had always had about what I was doing. I went back and read the book the second time determined not to expect or look for any particular enlightenment. Yet, as I read, enlightenment is what I got. It was one of those "light bulb" moments, and I knew things were going to change. At that point in time, during a period of significant experimentation within the natural hoof care movement, which I had no idea I was coming into the dawn of, a man named Pete Ramey had written a book called: *"Making Natural Hoof Care Work For You."* I obtained the book which was more nuts and bolts and gave a little more practical guidance for his interpretation of the natural trim developed by Jaime Jackson.

With this new found knowledge I headed for Doc's house. Doc's owner was more than willing to attempt anything that might alleviate Doc's misery. She gave me the go

ahead to try whatever I thought might work. With Jaime's *Founder* book in mind I had come to realize, and I began to explain to her, that the hoof was the least of Doc's problems. We were looking at a necessary change in Doc's entire life way. It was all the facets of Doc's life that were producing his pathology. We adjusted his diet to more closely regulate/ eliminate sugars. We encouraged him to stand and walk, slowly at first. His food, salt and water were spread around so he had to move to get to them. Companions were put in his paddock.

Not the least thing I had learned from Jaime's book was that now that the triggers for the founder were being eliminated we had some time to naturalize his hooves. I muddled through the first few trims on Doc after removing his shoes, trying to gauge and measure things by eye. Then, to my amazement, Doc began to move within weeks.

I had to find out more about what was going on here so I started looking up all I could on natural hoof care. There wasn't much, just a few websites here and there. The largest trove of information on the subject seemed to come from Jaime Jackson and other practitioners taught by him in an Association they had started called the *American Association of Natural Hoof Care Practitioners* (AANHCP; later to be renamed the *Association for the Advancement of Natural Horse Care Practices*). I scoured through all the information I could find including additional books by Jaime Jackson such as *The Horse Owners Guide to Natural Hoof Care*.

With this new information in hand, and what felt like a weight lifted off my shoulders, I began to apply this methodology to horses' hooves that were already barefoot with astounding results. As time went on, horse owners began to report less forging and stumbling, more agility and stamina and by no means least of all, fewer vet visits and bills. Everything I had read about in these books on natural hoof care was actually happening ... flying in the face of all I had been taught heretofore about horses' hooves. I wanted more, and I wanted it from the source.

I found out that Jaime Jackson gave clinics and instruction in Arkansas, where he lived at the time. I registered as soon as I could. Having been studying his books I found some information at his clinics a refresher but most of the knowledge he imparted personally, although alien then, was a true epiphany. I returned home in a state of what can only be called *a professional rebirth*.



Jaime Jackson at work.

I told my wife I was going to quit shoeing horses, much to her dismay. Her concern was financial. She knew trimming didn't pay nearly as much as shoeing where we live, but I told her I didn't care. I felt true remorse for what I had done to so many horses and what had been done to horses for centuries.



My wife, Karen, and I in Nevada. Photo taken by Richard Drewry.

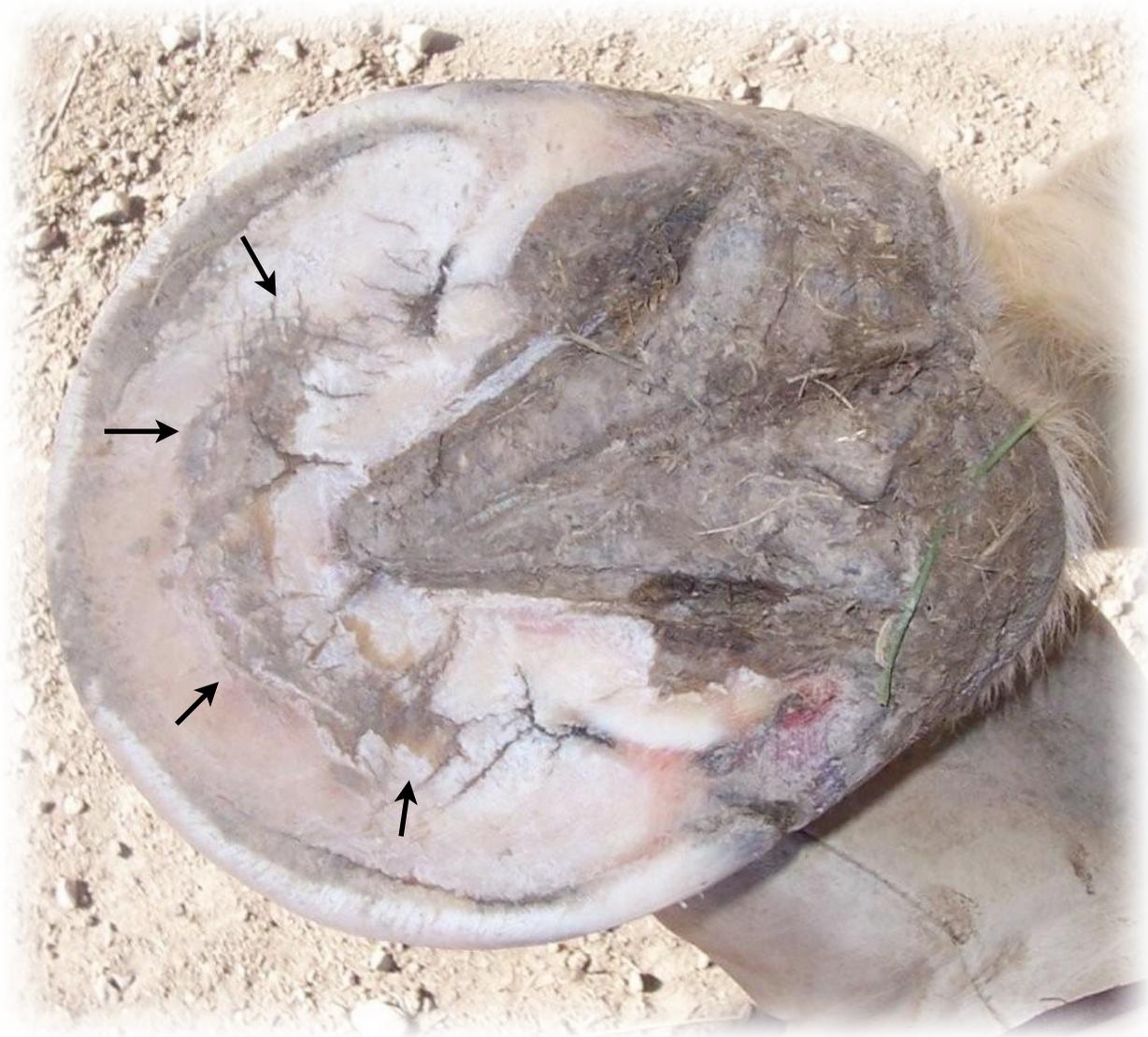
As I made my scheduled rounds I informed my clientele that I would no longer be shoeing horses within a couple of trim cycles. I had made my plans to enroll in the AANHCP Training & Certification program. Shoeing would no longer be a service I would care to provide. If they had wanted to continue shoeing their horses I would help them find a horseshoer, but to my surprise approximately 80% agreed to go natural. It was if they were waiting for someone to tell them to take the shoes off their horses.

It was not a cakewalk, transition reared it's ugly head in more cases than I was expecting, having had little experience with it: When the shoes are removed from a

horse that has been shod for nearly any amount of time, or has been barefoot but receiving conventional or no trims, and true natural trimming is commenced, internal hoof support mechanisms begin to function properly again. This increases blood flow through the hoof causing increased healing and nerve sensitivity. For a while, a period that varies with many factors, such as, initial hoof health, diet and amount of exercise, to name a few, the horse may experience discomfort ... "ouchyness." And, I still had much to learn, primarily in the school of hard knocks. Unfortunately some horse owners went back to shoes before I learned it.

But the successes were many more than the defeats and growing steadily. Doc was the first. Through a change in environment, diet and exercise, he eventually recovered. The last I saw him, before he moved back to New Mexico, he was running with a band of 14 horses on a large number of acres of wooded canyon land.

Frankie was next. She was a Paint mare that had been shod most of her life. Her hooves were the shape and size of some of the smallest shoes made, #00. Her feet were being kept small artificially with shoeing and her heels were very contracted. Transition hit Frankie like a ton of bricks. The de-contraction of her hooves had to be something like putting frost bitten fingers into warm water. In addition, the lamina holding the hoof capsule to the coffin bone was stretched, equating to what I envision as a marble in a tin can, allowing her coffin bones to press against sensitive tissues with each step.



This is Frankie's left front during transition, the position of the coffin bone is very evident (arrows) and she was tender for about 6 months. Boots during that time helped while she was being ridden.

Her owner became very skeptical and asked me to put shoes back on Frankie more than once. It was during one of these phone calls that I remarked to her that if she had swam half way across a river, swimming back was no different than swimming the rest of the way across. We got Frankie some horse boots, made to provide some additional yet elastic support for her hooves, very much like an ace bandage on a sprained ankle.

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They can be put on during periods of exercise or work then taken off during turnout and the rest of the day.

Frankie came through transition with flying colors, and now, to look at her hooves,



you would think she Frankie in her new boots checking out the hoof stand. The boots gave her temporary support and padding while her hooves healed after years of horse shoeing.

was part Draft Horse as large as her hooves have gotten. The diameter of her hooves has increased over  $\frac{1}{2}$  an inch and she has the ability to go anywhere anytime. The concavity of her sole increased significantly, providing for much greater shock adsorption and traction. She grew all new hoof capsule attachment tissues eliminating any propensity for "ouchyness" and her hoof wall thickness doubled making a much more durable protective covering.

Harley is a text book case. He was a competitive performance horse diagnosed with *Navicular Syndrome* that no amount or type of "orthopedic" shoeing would correct. When I met him he was being given to a horse rescue that I was trimming for because his owners couldn't stand the thought of euthanizing him ... which was their next

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resort. After pulling the shoes and commencing a natural trim regimen with 24/7 turnout and making Harley move for his food, it wasn't nine months before all "navicular" symptoms were gone. In fact Harley regularly jumps out of his pasture to be chased down gravel roads. I believe it's his favorite game.



**ABOVE LEFT:** Harley in Nov. 2004 before his first trim done by me. He had just been delivered to the rescue as a last resort. He stood stretched out like this, in my opinion, to keep weight off his heels.

**ABOVE RIGHT:** Harley's left front from the first time I saw him, Nov. 2004. His heels had been left to grow long under the belief it would relieve navicular pain. The toes had been squared off to dictate break over and a shoe with that shape and a pad had been applied. His shoes had been off for about a month when I met him and this picture was taken



**LEFT:** Harley in Aug. 2005, his vitality restored. We came to learn that he was a very highly trained penning horse and he is once again used for that purpose. **RIGHT:** Harley's left front after a trim in Aug. 2005. True natural Life Way and natural trims had reshaped his hoof, alleviated all navicular symptoms and restored healthy function. He was living on very rocky ground and his maintenance trims became very minimal, removing a little Bar and rasping his hoof wall

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Laddie is one of the financial disasters I often come across. He had wall cracks running from hairline to ground in three places on two hooves. His owner was paying \$120/month for “special” shoes to prevent the cracks from getting worse and had been doing so for over two years. In reality the shoes I pulled were nothing more than keg shoes with toe clips hammered in, a job that probably took the horseshoer ten extra minutes. The horse owner wanted to know if I could help because the cost of this shoeing would soon make keeping Laddie prohibitive.



This is Laddie's right hind. Notice the crack that had been there for years. The horseshoe kept the crack open and prevented healing.

I informed her that what I do, with her help, would definitely improve Laddie's ability to correct his own hooves. So we pulled the shoes, started performing regular natural trims and within two trim cycles the cracks, that had been there for years, were over an inch below the hairline. Within eight months the cracks were completely gone.



This is a picture I took recently of Laddie's right hind. Notice the crack which had been there for years is completely gone (see photograph above) thanks to removing his shoes, providing a more natural diet and environment and 24/7 turnout. The cracks in his other feet are also completely gone. It took about a year for the cracks to heal.

These are some glaring examples, and I come across more daily, flaunting in my face the beauty of true natural hoof care. And with the horse owner's attention to naturalizing and enriching their horse's environment every horse's quality of life can be vastly improved. I see it everyday and in hundreds of horses.

I know why horseshoers do what they do, and why most veterinarians prescribe what they prescribe. I was taught the exact same methods and belief system. For some it's ignorance of hoof mechanism function and physiology. For others it's job security

and financial need. For others still, it's an addiction to the iron—they must feel the job satisfaction received from performing well at an art that is very old and very difficult to master. Almost all farriers will tell you, "It's all about the horses" at some point in any discussion about what it is they do. Some are sincere in that belief. Some are giving lip service. They all believe their antiquated occupation is a very noble, honest, "salt-of-the-earth" endeavor. And that would be true if it weren't based on a foundation of misinformation stretching back a thousand years.

I often tell horse owners, when asked about why I believe horse shoeing is wrong, that when horse shoeing was invented, they thought the world was flat and the center of the universe. I think we can all agree that we've come a long way since then. Although I am quick to resist modernization at many turns, horse shoeing is something I have come to know as not a necessary evil but truly unnecessary. Horse shoeing, like fashion, has fads that come and go. Many have proclaimed that natural hoof care is just a new fad and will soon be gone. The fact is, natural hoof care is so old it's new. Xenophon, a great Greek Cavalry General, proclaimed its use in his treatise of horsemanship over 2,000 years ago. We must remember the lessons of all the great horse cultures of the past, the Greeks, the Romans, Hannibal, the Mongol, the Moors and the Native American, to name some, which performed the things we read about in history books today, all on barefoot horses.

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**L I B E R A T E D**  
**H O R S E M A N S H I P**<sup>TM</sup>

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