December 2022 Merri Melde (by Elayne Barclay)

Our PNER family is like a tapestry with a network of connecting threads forming a bigger whole. We don't always know what threads will lead where but they all start with a love of horses. The story thread of the PNER member featured in the next focus intertwines with a diversity of horse enthusiasts from near and far.

If you've been to a ride in Idaho you have probably seen this PNER member along the route somewhere taking photo. Merri Melde is a fixture at rides in the PNW, but she has been all over the country and the world documenting endurance events, although her introduction to the world of horses came via an emphasis on speed rather than distance.

Merri was born in a small town in Texas into a family that didn't share her innate obsession with equines, although she states, “my dad would take me driving around our little town so I could visit horses over the fences. I had names for all of them.” Not unlike Ralphie in the classic movie, A Christmas Story, Merri devised an ingenious scheme to get her heart's desire. She recalled, “In our little local newspaper I’d look at the want ads and circle the horses for sale and slide the page to within my dad’s view over breakfast. My parents never took the bait and they never bought me a horse, but the love/obsession never diminished.” With her wish unfulfilled, Merri satisfied her need as best she could with the alternatives available to her, “I collected Breyer models and I doodled horses in my notebooks and talked about them in junior high and high school but nobody else had or rode horses or cared about them. Everybody knew I loved horses though and expected me to have a life with them!”

It would be a few years after high school before Merri was able to find a way to have a life filled with horses. After college Merri moved out of Texas, “I moved to Seattle where my brother lived, and worked in the innards of a bank (a bank!!!), and met his neighbor, Mike Tice, a Seattle Seahawk football player, and better yet, a racehorse owner at nearby Longacres racetrack! I got to go on the backstretch and immediately fell in love with it, and a friend of Mike’s set me up with a job as a groom the next season.” Merri worked there for six years, “The track is where I finally got my horse fix - 7 days a week starting at 4:30 am for 8 month of the year, and that’s where I really got my hands-on work with horses, and got to know and understand them. I really wanted to gallop horses, but I tried it once or twice and was too scared to do that, so I stayed a groom.”

The track closed in 1992, but before that Merri met a key person in her life's journey, PNER member Connie Holloway. “Connie galloped horses in our barn, and our paths (both horses and traveling and as housemates) have crossed and merged ever since!” Another racetrack opened in 1996, Emerald Downs, and Merri, arranged by Connie, went back to work as a groom for the next three years with a wonderful trainer, Alana Goff, while Connie galloped horses for her. Working in Alana’s barn is how Merri finally met her first horse. Merri fell in love with Stormy while grooming him for 2 years, even though he went to another barn and Merri went to another job, she didn't forget him. “In 1998 I got a seasonal job working trails, and doing packing/wildlife/botany/archaeology for the Forest Service in Bridgeport, California. I ended up owning Stormy a year later but it was another year before I could get him down to California where I rode him for fun and led FS pack strings on him for the next 9 years.”

Merri's job with the FS was seasonal and she spent the winter in Texas with family. While in Texas she met an endurance rider (Shelley Bridges) and immediately fell in love with the sport, “I hadn’t ridden much before, but I rode quite a few horses for Shelley, and did my first endurance ride in 1999. I’d still not gotten over my fear of galloping on a horse, but I didn’t have to gallop in endurance. Trotting was just fine with me!”

Not long after she started catch riding, Merri had what she refers to as “my super accident”. While on a conditioning ride in Texas some ducks flushed up from a pond spooking the horse she was riding. She described what happened next, “I came off and landed on my feet in a squat behind my horse, still holding onto the reins, he pulled me up by the reins, saw this scary thing flying up behind him and in all the excitement he kicked out, caught me in the face, flipping me up and over in the air backwards. It shattered my jaw, I lost some front teeth, tore my lower lip off, major long emergency surgery, intensive care for 4 days, lots of stitches, jaw wired shut for 2 months, 7 more subsequent surgeries, blah blah blah. I’m terrified of the dentist now. Fortunately in my mind I was able to separate the accident from the actual riding, so it never affected my desire to ride and I wasn’t ever scared to ride afterward.”

Merri took a year to heal up before being able to continue catch riding. In the mean time she found out that where she was in CA during her seasonal summer work was a hotbed for endurance. She met endurance icon, Jackie Bumgardner, “I rode a lot of horses for Jackie, started riding a lot of endurance miles, and met people who led me on to my next phase(s) in life. I started staying at Jackie’s in Ridgecrest, CA in the winters. While staying at Jackie’s I met John and Steph Teeter, (another wheel hub for all things and people in US and international endurance and founders of Endurance.net). As my seasonal FS jobs shrank and shrank, Steph and John asked me to come work for them and Endurance.net. I conditioned and rode Steph’s horses in Idaho when I was not traveling around the world covering endurance events for Endurance.net.” When asked what countries she has traveled to while covering endurance events she listed the following: Malaysia, Australia, New Zealand, Spain, Portugal, France, Netherlands, Germany, Italy, Belgium, Sweden, Egypt, and UAE. It is fitting she has been writing a blog since 2006 about her experiences called The Equestrian Vagabond ([https://theequestrianvagabond.blogspot.com/](https://l.facebook.com/l.php?u=https%3A%2F%2Ftheequestrianvagabond.blogspot.com%2F%3Ffbclid%3DIwAR2hNqCF-DX31Rsvu6sPTjl4BTfNuQOfVxr_E1IuOJEeUzls2Nrtg_p2oyw&h=AT2didMb8Y-9vhZHw84Tc_-KJMOBs6QhcazVs-kSQxr3a8kJt8gahHKV21OGAabPGNBxxRyxLIkv04KepUQcO2iW3kgmUkZdzSvSfTIrQBn2kSKSvpI-A80HrZcrdO8whg&__tn__=-UK-R&c%5b0%5d=AT0elGOKpYmkxJ5caPi7BU8dL58MzSZrFukOL8seCG6XdW6XifbQ1paKgo25ROmL9cl3y8ZOqMSuXnMiF88Z5jSaipSXyJzwSh-vg1frMASy6BOTELriMihPq-PSuB7h_2ayQgxksNsy840gO7g3cUb0dfZ02aTWtbiarr8))

Merri has completed over 9,000 endurance miles, 8,500 of them before ever owning her own endurance horse! She elaborated on the acquisition of her first endurance horse, “Willie, now Hillbillie Willie (registered name Owyhee Shotgun Rider), was given to me by Steph when she quit endurance and horses last year. He’s a Standardbred (!) ex-racehorse who’s A Lot Of Horse, and he’s been a lot of work to get him how I like him, but he’s fun and funny and really likes being out on the endurance trails.”

In conclusion, Merri says, “I consider myself very lucky in my endurance ‘upbringing’. I’m so not competitive, I could care less where I finish in a ride and mostly never even know. I appreciate riding a horse year after year after year, mile after mile, and they just keep going.”