

Mike

Merle T. Haines

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Mike threw up his head to watch the riders who were trotting leisurely toward him and his band of wild horses. Standing on a small knoll, he saw the strangers when they left the timber. He snorted, stamped and held his head high, rolling his big eyes from the horsemen to his band. His nostrils flared as he caught their scent, and he whistled savagely.

Mike was an outlaw. He had been captured when a three-year-old and had been nearly killed by a man who had tried to break him with a club; he had caught the man off his guard, struck him, breaking his shoulder, and had escaped; he had run wild since then, hating and fearing men. These men knew him only as a big, strong horse, well built and fast.

When Mike judged the men were too close he whirled and single-footed across the flat, followed by his excited band.

With wide nostrils thrust out to catch the wind they followed their leader heading for the rough, timbered ridges behind Lava mountain. The riders leaned low over their straining ponies, chasing the cloud of dust that ran before them, scarfs and saddle strings snapping in the wind.

Mike made the timber and ran along a broad trail holding his head low to avoid branches. He was running too hard to see or smell clearly, so he plunged into the blind corral. He sensed that something was wrong before he saw the barrier across the trail. His four legs stiffening, his hind quarters sank back till they nearly touched the ground as he ploughed to a halt, his nose against the logs and brush. The herd piled in upon him, a kicking, squealing mass.

This is probably the best known story written by Merle T. Haines. It was the first of four stories he published in *The Frontier*, A Magazine of the Northwest. Mr. Haines published two more short stories in the *Frontier* in 1929 and then a final story in 1930. Mike was reprinted in a well known Volume "Montana Margins: A State Anthology" by Joseph Kinsey Howard, published by Yale University Press, 1946. The actual title of the story is slightly inconsistent in that the story, as originally published in *The Frontier*, was entitled simply "Mike." However, the table of contents printed on the front of that issue of *The Frontier* listed the story as "Mike, an Outlaw Horse." I do not have access to the Montana Margins Anthology, but it has been scanned by the GoogleBooks Project and can be searched. The story title appears in the table of contents, on the first page of the story, and the index, and it is simply "Mike."

This story has been reset in LaTeX to be more legible and to create a much smaller pdf file than the scanned pdf originally provided by Debra Haines. Please restrict distribution until we are able to check on copyright restrictions. Marv Alme, 10 September 2016.

The horses untangled and ran wildly around the enclosure, seeking a hole. Men were rolling up heavy logs at the entrance. Mike screamed as he leapt at the fence, striking at it with his forefeet and tearing it with his teeth. He fell back; got up; tried again. The sweat poured out of him, soaking his coppery hide and dripping to the ground.

Two men rode inside. Mike rushed them, his teeth bared, his ears flat on his neck. They parted and as he swerved towards one a lariat clutched him around the neck, biting into the hide, cutting off his wind and almost jerking him off his feet. He caught his balance and started for the man holding the rope. The second rider flipped a noose over his head. He fought till he fell. Then the rope slackened and he caught some air. It was heavy with dust but it eased his lungs.

Mike was snaked down to a ranch between two rope horses. If he fought he was choked down and the saddle horses were too wise and well trained to let him get near them. But Mike fought. It was his nature. Occasionally he was forced to take short breathing spells, then he went at it again till his legs trembled under him and his lungs grew raw and sore.

At the ranch they tied him to a snubbing post in the round corral. He stood there in the sun for two days, without water and with a small bunch of hay. He had never eaten hay. It was dry and dusty and smelled strongly of man. His flanks became gaunt, his eyes sank.

The third day Mike was put in a shute and harnessed. As the straps slapped his back and sides he crouched, quivering and snorting—four years ago this same thing had caused him pain. They opened the shute and he sprang out, bawling, bucking and kicking. He lunged against the fence and a rider from the outside beat him back. One foot caught over a hold-back strap and ripped it loose. The breeching slipped to one side and in a minute the harness was broken straps. Another harness was put on and one forefoot was tied up. This time it stayed. Mike hobbled around the corral all day, fighting the bit and kicking at the straps when they touched him. After dark he got down to the water and drank in big sucking gulps. He waded into the creek and splashed water on his belly with his forefoot. Snorting, head up, eyes burning, he scrambled up the bank. Far off in the night a horse whinnied. Mike answered with a piercing cry and strained against the fence, his muscles quivering, his heart pounding.

For several days he wore the harness and hated it as much on the last as on the first. He was nervous, frightened and starved. He'd jump at the least sound or movement. They threw him some freshly cut hay. It was wet and sweet; he ate it and looked for more.

One morning they led out a sleepy grey and hitched him to Mike, tying their tails together. For two days the team was driven in the corral. Mike dragged Oak, the big grey, and Marks, the two hundred-pound man, all over the corral. He foamed and sweat, circled and backed. Marks, cursing, jerked and sawed on the lines.

The alfalfa was ready to cut. Marks was short on work horses so he and Little Bill decided to hitch Mike to the mower. They milled for an hour to get Mike backed up to the machine. Marks held the lines while Little Bill tried to hitch them up. He got the neckyoke in place but in reaching over to snap it to

Mike's collar he got in front.

Mike's right frontfoot flashed up, out and down. Little Bill tried to jump back. The ragged, unshod hoof slashed down his chest, skimming clothes and skin from it. Little Bill landed on his shoulders, a scream of pain and fright in his throat. With agility born of terror, he rolled under the fence and lay gasping for breath.

Mike snorted and plunged forward, eager to bite and trample. Marks dug his heels in the dirt and leaned back, seesawing on the reins. The bit clamped on Mike's lower jaw, bringing the blood, cutting his swollen tongue. It forced him to rear, shaking his head and pawing at the air. He came down with one foot over the neckyoke and another straddling the tongue of the mower. In a mad effort to free himself he fell and was unable to get up.

Marks wrapped the lines around a post and ran to Little Bill. When he got there the boy was sitting up, cautiously exploring his bruised and bloody chest.

"I'm all right," he told Marks, trying hard to smile.

"Better go to the house and get fixed up," said Marks and turned back to the team.

He soft-footed up to Mike's back. He hesitated a moment to take a deep breath, then quickly planted one knee on the horse's neck, just behind the ear. Grasping Mike's nose in his right hand, he twisted it back until it pointed straight up. Mike groaned and writhed. Marks unsnapped the breast strap with his left hand, loosening the neckyoke and freeing Mike's front foot. Then he leapt back and got the lines firmly in his left hand. In his right he held a ten-foot blacksnake.

The heavy whip hummed through the air and snapped as it bit into Mike's hide. It brought him to his feet with one movement. He tried to run away but could only follow the corral fence. Marks pivoted in the center, jerking on the lines and swinging the whip.

"Swish-snap! Swish-snap!" The blacksnake writhed back and forth through the air.

When Marks' arm grew tired and his anger cooled he stopped the horses. He forced Mike into the barn and tied him with a heavy rope hackamore. When the harness came off Mike shook himself, a long breath of relief whistling from his lungs. But Marks came back. Mike grew tense. His muscles bunched, ready to snap into action. Marks climbed up on the outside of the stall and leaned over, sliding a broad, heavy strap over Mike's cut and bloody back. Mike flinched and crouched in anticipation.

It came in a minute, before he knew what to expect. Marks reached under his belly with a long wire hook, drew the strap-end to him, slipped it through the end-buckle and reared up on it. Mike's breathing was restricted; the strap hurt his back. With a bawl of rage and pain he threw himself backwards. The hackamore tightened over his ears and around his nose. His eyes bulged. He crashed forward into the manger. He kicked and struck, threw himself and floundered up again. But the band still cut into him. He stopped from exhaustion, his breath rasping through his nostrils, sweat dripping from his belly and flanks. As he stood with legs braced, Marks buckled a hobble strap on each front foot.

Then he put the foot rope on, running it from the right hobble, through the ring on the belly band, down to the left hobble, back through the ring and on out behind him. He threw the harness back on and holding the foot rope, led Mike out.

The hobbles and rope frightened Mike. He walked awkwardly, throwing his feet far to the side to get away from them. He made a startled leap, jerking away from Marks, when the harness scraped the side of the door. Marks pulled on the foot-rope. At the third jump Mike's front legs snapped up to his belly. He went down on his nose. A grunt was wrenched from him as his neck twisted back. Then his feet were released and he got up. He started to run, and again his feet were pulled up.

All afternoon he was driven around the corral; every time he tried to fight he was jerked to his nose. He was put in the barn for the night and given a very little hay and water. In the morning he was more gaunt and wild-eyed than ever, and still vicious. When Marks tried to go behind him he slashed out his right hind foot, barely missing him. He tasted the whip for that and bruised and battered himself in trying to break away.

That morning they got him hitched to the mower. Oak, the big grey, pushed and dragged him where he didn't want to go, and bit him when he fought too much.

So they went around and around the field of alfalfa at a tiresome plod with a noise dragging behind them.

Green, damp hay lay under his feet and waved in the breeze beside him, tickling his shoulder, but he couldn't get a mouthful. His tongue was swollen, his jaws and mouth tender and raw from the clamping bit always pressing tightly on his lower jaw, crushing it. His shoulders, under the collar, were sweaty and sore; the hobbles dragged at his feet, chafing them.

When a grouse, springing from the alfalfa with a hum of wings, jarred Oak from his sleepy calm, Mike shied against him and plunged forward. Marks yelled, dropping the foot ropes and lines as he fell backwards off the seat. Oak was frightened and tried to keep up with the running sorrel. The mower bounced and jolted behind them.

The sickle guard caught a rock and snapped off; a wheel broke on another rock. They jumped a ditch. A trace parted, the tongue dropped, plowing into the ground. There was a ripping of leather, a crashing of iron and wood as the mower rolled free. The team gradually slackened, their terror lessening. They stopped in the corner of the field, crowded against the fence.

Marks caught them there. He punished Mike, with a fence pole. Mike kicked back and got more for his resistance. He was taken to the barn half dead.

"I'll put you on the merry-go-round tomorrow. I'll damn well show you," Marks promised.

The merry-go-round, a contraption for taking the fight out of bad horses, had never yet failed. It was made up of two sixty-foot logs bolted to a center post and extending outward in the form of an A. On the end of each was a wagon wheel. About the middle was another wheel fastened between the two to keep them from sagging. On one log was a seat. Between the logs, at the outer

ends, the horses were hitched. They were tied to the log in front of them. As long as the harness held the horses could do nothing but go forward in a circle. After dragging the heavy logs around the center post a few hours almost any horse would “stand without hitching.”

But in the morning Marks had to help his men rush in the hay, so Mike had a reprieve. There were no men around, no horses. . They were all out in the hay field. An old rooster strutted across the corral talking foolishness to the hens following him. Mike was too tired to chase them out. He stood with his nose on a fence rail to protect it from stinging nose flies. There was no shade then, but in the afternoon the barn would lay its shadow across the corral. Already it was beginning to creep out.

The sneezing of the work horses and the rattling of the harnesses as they came in at noon aroused Mike. He watched them go to the creek and drink deeply, then trot back to the barn, whinnying for oats.

The men paused to look at him.

“He’s sure a hell-bender,” said one.

In the afternoon Mike stuck his head in the shade of the barn and slept, as peaceful as though he were under his favorite pine tree out on the range. He paid no attention to Little Bill as he sat on the porch whittling. He flipped one ear forward when the cook stepped out slamming the door behind her, then he flipped it back again.

Evening, and the men came in from the field. They watered Mike and fed him a little. Night, and the cool air drifted down from the mountains. Morning—

Marks blindfolded Mike to hitch him to the merry-go-round. With the lines and the whip in his hands he braced himself in the seat. Little Bill was around again so he rode a saddle horse alongside of Mike and jerked the blindfold.

Mike ran till he was winded, dragging Oak and the merry-go-round with him. Then he tried to stop and fight, but Oak went ahead, forcing him along. Marks pulled on the lines to get him used to them.

Around and around they went. The sun was hot. The merry-go-round dragged heavily. The day wore on—slowly! One hour, two hours. The wheels groaned and sent up the choking, pulverized dirt. Blood dripped from Mike’s mouth making little spots in it. He got a short breathing spell while Oak was taken out and a fresh horse put in. They started again, around and around on the endless trail.

When Mike lagged he got the whip. Then he would run awhile, fighting the bit, kicking at the man. Finally the whip failed to arouse him. He had no feelings. His feet mechanically carried him around in a circle like a locoed horse trying to catch the shade around a bush too small to throw any shade. Unless stopped, he would go like this till he fell.

At last he was pulled up and driven down to another mower. A fresh horse was put with him. Mike gave no sign. Marks could see he was about done for. He leaned carelessly over to hook the breast strap. Mike’s eyes blazed, his muscles quivered as his upper lip curled back. A cry came from Marks as Mike’s teeth crushed his arm. The ragged hoof was a blurred streak as it went out.

Marks was thrown several feet and lay crumpled in an unnatural position. Mike was an outlaw!

Men came running and they carried Marks away. Then Little Bill got a rifle. He leaned it against the fence, mounted his saddle horse and riding alongside of Mike cut the harness straps with his jackknife. Guiding his horse with his knees, the rifle in one hand and the hackamore rope in the other, he led Mike up the lane. Out on the flat he slipped the hackamore over his ears.

Mike backed away and stood free with the open range stretched before him. He shied and started to single-foot across the prairie. Little Bill jerked down the lever and watched the shell slide into the barrel. He looked up. Mike was running now, running smoothly, with his head up. Bill lined the sight on the coppery streak and squeezed the trigger.