

An Ode to Manure Movers

BY ALLISON SCHULTZ

"Cleaning stalls is good for the soul." – Anon.

We're past that time of year when hauling out horse cookies can be tedious and cumbersome. The extra snow and the adverse weather this past winter made mountains of the mole-hill tasks of keeping pens and stalls clean. In winter, the golden nuggets freeze rock hard and impenetrable into the ground. The fully loaded wheel barrow gets stuck in the thick snow and ice ruts on the way to the manure pile, sometimes it's the contents blowing away before making it to the dumping grounds. Spring brings boot-sucking mud, followed by the sweltering heat and endless flies of summer. We've all been there, participating in the less glamorous aspects of horse ownership: manure moving, a discipline that has no off-season.

Back before I got my first horse, my father tried to discourage my horse habit early on by pointing out all the backbreaking work that needed tending to at both ends of the day, but my horse-owning desires could not be diminished by the ever-present reality of apple picking. At the tender age of 11, I took to the twice daily barn ritual with the fervent diligence of a nun to vespers. My barn was immaculate with the incense of fresh pine shavings and the subtle, soft fragrance of warm horses lingering in the air. Cleaning stalls was a meditation practice that grounded me with clarity for the day. As I raked and shifted through the Zen gardens of the stall floors, I found solutions to problems, eased the circling of my mind, and learned the valuable lessons of impermanence.

My dad called me "Road Apple Al," and my clean barn fetish never waned during the prolonged subzero winters of west central Wisconsin, though I certainly learned the limitations of the cold and snow. Dad had carved out a manure pile 50 yards from the back of the barn which wasn't always plowed when the powder fell by the foot and the wicked wind that would register minus forty degrees below blew a crusty layer across the top. On these seemingly impassable excursions with a wheel barrow piled high, I would push, pull and drag the load as far as my little self could. And then, I would dump it wherever I stopped. This exercise would eventually create a pile that kept creeping closer and closer to the back barn doors, which would infuriate my father.

The dedicated among us persist come wind, rain, or four feet of snow and frigid temperatures. We do it out of stewardship and good horsemanship, for the health of the equine critters in our care so they can breathe more easily through the cold months that tend to cramp their indoor living conditions. We slave in the summer's heat and dust for the same reasons, and then some: we try to keep the flies down, to keep parasites at bay, and to prevent the inevitable green spots on our horses' sleek coats.

Come winter-spring-summer-fall, manure movers stand behind the horse 100%, knowing full well that as long as there are healthy equine bowel movements, there is a healthy horse, as well as job security. Never a day goes by that they are not an integral part of the barn necessities, and with grit, calluses, a lingering farm fragrance and apple pickers in hand, manure movers know that old motto "it's the same shit, different day" all too well. Theirs may seem to be a thankless job, but I would like to amend that saying. It's time that these folks get the credit they deserve. On behalf of the trusty equines in our barns and paddocks, I tip my hat to the keepers of the stalls and hope that they continue to find the magic of their daily routine.

