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AERC Extra

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Reflections of the Virginia City 100

by Sharma Lynn Gaponoff

This year marked the 45th Annual Virginia City 100 Mile One Day Ride, which is organized by the Nevada All-State Trail Riders club. I'd been encouraged to do this ride for the past couple years, but the timing hadn't been right. This year the timing worked and I was looking forward to the experience. Odette, who was part of my Tevis crew a month earlier, graciously agreed to crew again for Tahoe and me for this 100-mile ride.



Sharma and Tahoe passing by Washoe Lake on the Virginia City 100. Photo © Gore/Baylor Photography.

Virginia City is a quaint and historic town. It is one of the oldest communities in Nevada and is perched at an elevation of 6000 feet. Its history is centered on the discovery of extremely productive ore mines, most famously the Comstock Lode silver in 1859. With the tremendous amount of silver ore being extracted from the Comstock Lode, Virginia City quickly became a boomtown sporting stagecoach and railway lines connecting this important town with other towns in the Wild West and with towns to the east. Virginia City is also where writer Samuel Clemens first penned the name Mark Twain while he was a newspaper reporter in town. Despite the pull of Virginia City's charm, there was no time for this endurance rider to take in the sights of its historic buildings, museums, shops and restaurants. During this adventure, I would have to be content with seeing Virginia City and the surrounding high desert from the back of my wonderful horse, Tahoe.

We arrived at base camp in the early afternoon. The campground was small, but all riders, crews, horses, rigs and ride staff fit snugly. Base camp was adjacent to an historic building called the Ice House. The instant you walk inside the Ice House, you are immediately transported back in time to the Wild West days. The inside of this old wooden building is both comfortable and rustic at the same time. It looks very authentic, which of course it is—complete with a bar you can “belly up” to. The room contains tables and chairs where you can easily imagine rugged folks drinking their whisky and playing poker.

Linda, a newly found friend and fellow endurance rider, had done the Virginia City 100 twice before and recommended we do this ride together. I gladly

took her up on the challenge. She, along with her husband Robert who was crewing for her, had arrived at base camp ahead of us and was able to save us a premium parking spot. Odette pulled into that spot and we soon had our campsite set up and Tahoe comfortably settled in. We then enjoyed lunch together with Linda and Robert at our campsites.

After lunch, Linda and I got our horses ready. We wanted to vet them in and then do about an hour ride to familiarize ourselves with the beginning of the trail during daylight since we would be riding it in the morning darkness.

By 4:00 p.m., the ride veterinarians had not arrived, so Linda and I decided just to hand-walk our horses to the staging area and then down to the start. We figured the vets would definitely be there by the time we returned.

The staging area was in front of the Delta Saloon on the main street of town. From base camp to the Saloon and then to the start of the ride is all on asphalt because you are literally going right through town. The start (and the finish) was at the historic cemetery. I think the Nevada ride managers must have had a great sense of humor to set the ride up like this. It was a 30-minute walk on foot from base camp through town to the cemetery and then another 30-minute walk back. By the time we returned to base camp, the vets had indeed arrived and were vetting horses in.

Dr. Jamie Kerr was the head veterinarian. There were two other ride veterinarians, Susan McCartney and Karen Hassan, so vetting-in was quick and easy. Tahoe got "A's" on everything except jugular refill for which he received a "B+." The pulse criterion was 60 beats per minute (bpm) and Tahoe pulsed in at a calm 42 bpm. Linda's horse, Jamal, vetted in equally well.

After finishing the vetting-in, Odette, Linda, Robert and I ate dinner, and then attended the ride meeting where Dr. Kerr told us a very morbid (but instructive) story about a horse that had dropped dead during an endurance ride with similar air temperatures and riding challenges as the Virginia City 100. Dr. Kerr explained that veterinarians at that ride did an immediate autopsy of the horse where among other procedures, they took the temperature of the horse's liver. It measured an astonishing 109° Fahrenheit. A horse's normal body temperature can vary from 99°F to 101°F. It is worrisome if its temperature gets to 102° F. However, if it rises above 102° F, your horse is in danger—it's a red alert. Jamie told us that based on the post-mortem 109° F temperature of that horse's liver, it meant the horse had literally cooked itself to death from the inside out. We all gasped in horror imagining that tragedy. Jamie gravely warned us not to cook our horses during this ride, as the weather forecast indicated hot and dry temperatures (in the 90s), and to be very careful about our horse's and our own hydration, etc. The ride meeting then ended, and with the image of that tragic story in mind, I bedded down for the evening.

Odette and I were up at 3:00 the next morning in order to get everything ready so Tahoe and I could leave base camp early enough for the walk to the Delta Saloon staging area in time to be there by 5:00 a.m. Linda and Robert were awake too, as was the rest of the base camp. We fed our horses and ourselves breakfast, dressed, tacked up and gave them their first dose of electrolyte paste for the day. Linda on Jamal and I on Tahoe headed out from base camp at 4:30 a.m. making the half-hour walk to the Delta Saloon. While we were riding to the Saloon, our crews were driving there. It was an unusual sight to see 43 horses and riders gathering in front of a saloon in the middle of town in order to begin an endurance ride. Only in Nevada can you have this experience. There was a squad car ready and waiting to escort us through the streets of Virginia City to the cemetery. The squad car would serve as our "controlled start."

At precisely 5:00, we all began to walk down the middle of Main Street behind the flashing red and blue lights of the squad car. Our horse's feet clip-clopping along the road were making marvelous percussive rhythms as the sounds of their hooves hitting the pavement ricocheted off the store fronts along Main Street. It was exhilarating and I commented to Linda, "Listen to the sound of all our horses walking through the middle of town—now that's not something you get to hear very often!" It sounded as though the cavalry had arrived.

Once we passed the cemetery we were off pavement and on a dirt road that went out into the desert and we were officially on our way, trotting down the trail in the pre-dawn darkness. Since I was unfamiliar with the trail, I tucked Tahoe and me behind two grey horses that were relatively easy to see in the dark. Linda and Jamal were right behind us. Then, after only about 10 minutes on the trail, both those grey horses suddenly and almost in unison began falling into a deep ditch off the side of the trail. Both riders were immediately catapulted into the air as their horses tried desperately not to somersault backwards into the ditch. Tahoe, being right behind that confusion, spun on a dime doing a 180° turn in order to avoid a similar fate. The centrifugal force of his acrobatics had me grabbing mane and hanging onto my saddle. Re-centering myself back in the saddle, I quickly turned Tahoe back around. I could just barely see those riders, who were on the ground, struggling to catch their breath, and then scrambling to stand up and grab their horses. It all had happened in an instant.

Horses were now rapidly bunching up behind Linda and me. It looked like a rush hour traffic jam on the freeway. Linda and I quickly began to yell, "Riders down! Horses down! Stop!" The two downed riders somehow managed to get themselves and their horses off to the side of the trail in order to let everyone pass. At that point, the trail was a swirling mix of dust and confusion. Once the downed riders and their horses were safely out of the line of fire, I continued down the trail calling out to them, "Are you OK?" They said they were and told everyone to just go on and they'd be fine. I heard later one of the horses had cut its knee open badly enough it could not continue the ride.

After the confusion of the accident, I was hoping Linda and Jamal were still behind Tahoe and me. Although dawn was rapidly approaching, it was still fairly dark, and as I glanced behind me, Linda was nowhere to be seen. I had caught up to a small group of riders who were among the top ten and going at a pretty fast clip. I stuck with those riders until it got light and I could see my equine heart rate monitor. Although Tahoe was easily keeping up, they were riding faster than I wanted him to go this early in the ride. Soon it was light enough for me to see my monitor, and based on Tahoe's pulse, which was just over 130 bpm, I decided I definitely needed to slow him down. I bid those fast

riders adieu—all of who did indeed finish the ride in the Top 10. I slowed our pace to about an 8mph trot and Tahoe's pulse immediately dropped to 105 bpm. All the while I was still hoping Linda and Jamal would appear any moment. I knew they had a good chance of catching up since she and Jamal had just won Best Condition at the recent Wild West 50-mile Endurance Ride in the majestic Tahoe National Forest of Northern California.

As Tahoe trotted along the trail under the beautiful early morning desert sky, the air temperature was quite pleasant so I wasn't worrying about "cooking my horse." The only thing that was concerning me at this point was the plethora of rocks. I thought the Tevis Cup Ride, the only other 100-mile one-day ride I had ever done, had a lot of rocks on the trail. It certainly does, but I think the Virginia City 100 definitely has the corner on the market for rocks on trails. Rocks were everywhere—in the middle of the trail, on the sides of the trail, above us and below us: rocks, rocks, rocks and more rocks. It seemed to me that for most of the ride, there was barely a place your horse could step that wasn't on rocks. I couldn't imagine how a horse could do 100 miles of these rocky trails and roads and not sustain a stone bruise or worse. Then I thought about all the horses that had completed this ride in the past and hoped Tahoe would also be successful. The ride management was wise to advise riders to be sure all horses had additional hoof protection in the form of pads or easy boots for this ride. I was very glad Tahoe had pads on his front feet.

Tahoe and I ended up riding solo. Linda and Jamal were somewhere out there, too, but we didn't see them. We did pass a rider whose horse had pulled a shoe. She was walking on foot carrying that shoe that also had a pad attached to it, which meant it was likely a front shoe which is a bad one to lose since horses carry most of their weight on their front feet. Despite losing a shoe, her horse was contentedly walking behind her, carefully stepping around rocks with its bare foot. They had a long way to go to the first vet check, 24 miles away from the start. As Tahoe and I continued along these rocky high desert trails and jeep roads, the rest of the way to the first vet check was happily uneventful.

As we rode into the first vet check, Odette was ready and waiting, greeting Tahoe and me with a smile. Looking around, I saw many of the top ten riders already leaving as Tahoe and I were arriving. This vet check is a 45-minute hold, affording horses and riders a good amount of time to rest and eat. Tahoe and I couldn't have wished for a better crew. Odette, with her wonderful Pembroke Welsh Corgi, Daisy, were always waiting for us at each crew spot with kind and encouraging words. She was caring, efficient and effective with both Tahoe's and my crewing needs throughout the 24 hours of this ride. Her quiet competence was reassuring. A good crew is essential on a 100-mile ride.

Odette quickly took charge, leading Tahoe over to the P&R station and then to the vet in area. Tahoe passed with flying colors while everyone complimented me on my riding tights, as they are anything but traditional. The pair I was wearing is an outrageous multi-colored swirling pattern of sparkly faux snakeskin fabric made by Evelyn, "the Tights Lady." She always "has me covered" on these endurance rides.

At this vet check (as well as all the others) Odette was extremely efficient. I even had time to recline in her truck and take a 20-minute "power nap." Linda and Jamal arrived at the vet check about a half-hour after Tahoe and me, but rather than wait, I opted to head out alone on Tahoe. It was still early in the ride and it hadn't gotten that hot yet. I wanted to put as many miles behind us as possible before the day heated up. I still had the memory of Dr. Kerr's story at the pre-ride meeting about the endurance horse that got cooked from the inside out at a similar ride. I wanted to avoid that scenario at all costs.

The challenge on this next part of the trail was to find the turn off to Bailey Canyon. It was quite a distance along a jeep road until reaching the trail junction leading to Bailey Canyon. The air temperature was starting to climb and I became thirsty. I think that when I was gulping my Gatorade and trying to get the bottle safely back into my saddle pack while Tahoe was trotting, I missed seeing the trail junction that branched off the road into the desert scrub toward Bailey Canyon. Consequently, Tahoe and I continued along the jeep road. Looking at the ground, I began noticing there were no longer any visible hoof prints. Nor were there any footprints for that matter. Only tire tracks. Just as I was about to turn around, a man in one of the homes I was riding in front of told me I'd missed the turnoff and needed to go back the other direction. I thanked him for his help and after about 10 minutes retracing our steps, spotted the orange ribbons marking the Bailey Canyon turn off. I figure Tahoe and I lost a total of 20 minutes because of me missing that trail junction.

The trail through Bailey Canyon in my opinion is the prettiest one of the ride even though I think it had more rocks than any of the other trails. As such, I had to ride very slowly and carefully through Bailey Canyon. I heard later at the awards ceremony that the ride organizers and other volunteers had spent many hours clearing rocks off that trail in the canyon. I can't imagine what the trail looked like before they worked on it, so I'm glad for the trail maintenance they did. Since the route through Bailey Canyon was slow going, I had the luxury of enjoying riding next to desert pines, junipers and firs and hearing all the desert birds chirping and flitting around us. There were numerous typical high desert annuals along this trail. I saw a beautiful pale yellow Ranunculus that was actually still in its full and showy bloom even though it is mid-September.

Once out of Bailey Canyon we made up time as we headed down Jumbo Grade, a historical wagon road that transported silver ore and goods to and from Virginia City in the 1800s. To this day, riders may find thrown oxen shoes exposed from the erosion of the road. Most of this part of the ride is on hard-packed jeep gravel roads. We swung around through the Washoe Lake State Park enjoying the best footing of the ride, to the equestrian camp where there was a 15-minute hold and trot out. We crossed the road and were now riding in the direction back toward base camp. Before getting there however, we needed to negotiate what the ride managers had dubbed the S.O.B.s. I had heard this term before and thought it referred to the mounds and swales on multi-use trails caused by off-road motorcycles. That's what I was expecting. I couldn't have been more wrong with my assumption. The S.O.B.s were not 1- to 3-foot ruts and bumps in the trail made by motorcycles. They were in all probability a good two orders of magnitude larger. The first one I came to, I thought Tahoe and I were going to fall off the edge of the world. The road simply dropped off and disappeared before us. I have a rule when I ride—don't ride down anything I wouldn't ski down. And I'm a pretty bold skier. I like doing moguls and black diamond runs. These S.O.B.s were so steep and so loooooong, I would NEVER have attempted to ski them. How steep were they? I figured if they were covered with snow and I was skiing straight down, I would have reached speeds of 80 mph at the bottom of each. No kidding. Since there was no way around those S.O.B.s, off the edge of the world Tahoe and I went. The first one we went down was probably close to a 45-degree slope. I didn't think you were allowed to make roads that steep. Besides, they were full of the proverbial rocks. Tahoe is normally a very fast downhill horse, but here he took his time carefully negotiating each step down this extremely steep, rocky road.

The bottom of that S.O.B. leveled out briefly and Tahoe was able to take only about four trot strides before we were going up the other side that was nearly as steep and even longer than the road we had just ridden down. I lost count of how many S.O.B.s we went down, then up, then down again. Neither Tahoe nor I liked having to do them. I heard later, that in previous years, this S.O.B. portion of the trail started at mile 90 in the ride on the original loop trail, from which the canyons earned their name. I think that would have been very cruel to do to both horse and rider at the end of this ride and was very glad they were now in the first loop instead.

After getting through the S.O.B.s we came to a refreshing water trough that ride management kept filled to the brim for our horses. From there it was an easy five miles more of trotting to base camp for an hour hold and a vet check with tack off. Tahoe and I caught up to three other riders and after a short while, we found ourselves stuck behind a gigantic cement mixer truck going extremely slowly down the same jeep road we were on. Didn't he know we were on a 100-mile endurance ride and that we were on the clock? What was he doing on that road anyway? That cement mixer truck was so big, it literally took up the entire width of the road and we absolutely could not get past. We yelled, whistled and waved at the driver, but that truck's engine was really loud. The driver never heard us. Finally, he glanced in his rear-view mirror, saw us and stopped. In order to get around his truck, we had to ride up onto the embankment on the inside curve of the road. We scrambled past his truck and picked up the trot for the rest of the way back to base camp, leaving that lumbering truck in our dust. This first loop was a total of 51 miles.

As she had been at the first vet check, Odette was here to welcome Tahoe and me as we rode into base camp. She immediately began crewing in her most competent and delightful manner, taking Tahoe over to her horse trailer. I sat down in a chair to rest and watched Odette at work with Tahoe. I was beat. I felt as though I'd already ridden 100 miles. I was puzzled as to why I was so exhausted already. I'm not normally this tired after 51 miles. Perhaps it was the altitude. Perhaps it wasn't. Tahoe and I had completed the mighty Tevis Cup 100-Miles One-Day Trail Ride just five weeks earlier. Here we were doing another 100-mile one-day ride. Even though I'd had five weeks of rest, apparently my body hadn't had enough time to fully recover from the strenuous effort it takes to successfully complete the Tevis Cup Ride. I was extremely tired. I hate to think that my fatigue may be due to my age catching up with me. I don't know if other riders who are over 60 and had just completed the Tevis felt as tired. I was knackered. I really didn't think I had the energy to continue. Tahoe felt great, however—he looked and vetted-in as though he'd just taken a walk in the park.

Linda and Jamal came in a short 10 minutes after Tahoe and me. Linda and Jamal had also completed the Tevis five weeks earlier and she confessed she was just as tired as I was and not that keen about heading out again either. We knew we needed to do the last half of the ride together. "Misery loves company," as the saying goes. Linda and Robert took off Jamal's tack, sponged him down and went to the vetting area for his exam. Unfortunately, the examining veterinarian observed that Jamal was a bit off on a hind leg so pulled him from the ride. The veterinarian indicated that although it was a minor sprain, since this is a tough 100-mile ride, he considered it prudent to allow Jamal to rest rather than take a chance on further injury if they were to continue. Linda agreed. She and Jamal were able to rest and Tahoe and I would be on our own. Ugh. I was so tired I didn't know how I could possibly make it through the last 49 miles of this ride and didn't relish the thought of tackling it without Linda and Jamal's company.

Odette heard my grumbling and gave me a much-needed pep talk. She had also found me two other riders to go out with on the second loop. I couldn't believe my luck. Odette hooked me up with Connie Creech, the ride manager and her friend who was riding another one of Connie's horses. Odette correctly suggested that if I rode with

Connie, I would not get lost. Connie and her friend were wonderful company. They talked, sang songs and had a great time all the way through this second loop. Tahoe and I were thoroughly entertained.

It was during this second loop that the trail zigzagged several times across railroad tracks and the highway. Luckily, no trains came along and the traffic on the highway was sparse. After riding about 20 miles we caught up with two other riders, a mother and daughter. I couldn't believe how well the child was riding. She rode like she was absolutely weightless on her little horse. She made it look effortless. It wasn't until the awards ceremony that I embarrassingly realized that wasn't her daughter she was riding with. It was her young son. He rode so well, I thought he was a girl! I continued riding with all these folks until we completed this second loop, enjoying their company all the way back to base camp. I must say, the Nevada riders are very nice people to ride with. It was quite relaxing riding the trails with Connie and her friends and not having to worry about getting lost out there in the desert.

Returning to base camp at the end of this loop, we rode back through town again. Virginia City was in full swing. As we passed the saloons, we could hear Country and Western bands playing, singers singing, people dancing and could smell dinner cooking in the restaurants as we ambled along. When we arrived at base camp I actually felt better than when Tahoe and I had left camp 25 miles earlier. I'd gotten my second wind.

Odette met us at the entrance of base camp and escorted Tahoe and me to our campsite where she had made each of us a delicious dinner—Tahoe got mash and hay topped with carrots and I had my quinoa medley. This was another hour hold where the vet check would be with tack off. Once Tahoe vetted in, we settled down to eat our dinners and rest for the remainder of the hour. By now it was dark. Although I felt better after having just completed 76 miles of the ride than I did at the end of the first loop at 51 miles, I still was very tired and consequently uninspired to do the last loop of 24 miles in the dark. And dark it was. There was no moon, not even a sliver, only starlight for our horses to see by. I rested for longer than the hour minimum, stalling and not really wanting to continue. Odette gave me another pep talk. She said, "You need to get on that wonderful horse of yours and finish this ride. That's what you came here to do. Tahoe will take care of you. Now, muster up all your strength and get going!"

There I was, back on Tahoe, heading out alone again, this time in the darkness of a moonless night—in the desert—the BIG, wide, disorienting (to me) desert. There were no other riders leaving base camp yet. Since I had taken longer than an hour for this vet check, Connie and company had already left. Tahoe and I were on our own. I had about 7 1/2 hours to do this last 24 miles, so I was not worried about finishing before the cut-off time even though we would be on the trail by ourselves. The nighttime portion of the ride is marked with glow sticks in the trees and bushes and large splats of dolomite powder on the ground, so I was fairly confident I could follow the trail and not get lost on one of the numerous intersecting trails and jeep roads.

The first part of this final loop was actually identical to the beginning of the ride. We would walk through Virginia City again and past the cemetery where the finish line would be. At this late hour, Virginia City was winding down for the evening. It was much quieter than when I'd passed through a couple hours earlier. As Tahoe and I walked on, we saw a herd of wild mustangs and wild burros down in the parking lot by the new hotel. They were walking the opposite direction through town toward some unknown destination. Tahoe neighed a greeting but they didn't answer. I don't think they understood his Arabian accent.

As Tahoe and I passed the cemetery we came upon the volunteers that were at the finish line. They had erected a set of big bright lights run by a very loud generator that illuminated the road for a few yards in each direction and you could easily see the dolomite finish line spanning the road. They cheerfully wished Tahoe and me a good ride on this last loop. I was looking forward to seeing them again in several hours and crossing the finish line.

Though there was only starlight to ride by and I could barely see anything at all, I knew Tahoe was having no trouble seeing the trail. Horses have excellent night vision. They have to. They are prey animals. If they could not see an approaching predator coming after them at night nor see a quick escape route, they would have become extinct millions of years ago. The secret to a horse's extraordinary night vision is a special layer in their retina called the tapetum lucidum. We humans do not have this special layer in our eyes, which is why the nighttime is so very dark to us. In the horse's eye, the tapetum lucidum acts like a layer of millions of microscopic prisms that greatly enhance the ambient light enabling horses to see exceptionally well in the dark.

Tahoe was heading down the trail with confidence at a good working trot. I tried to spot the dolomite blobs on the trail as well as the glow sticks in the trees to make sure we were following the correct trails. It was difficult for me to see the dolomite by starlight, so I relied more on the glow sticks, which were very easy for me to see. We were making great time. Then, after riding for an hour and 40 minutes, We Crossed The Finish Line! The volunteer cheered us and said "congratulations!" I was aghast and exclaimed in frustration, "This can't be! This isn't right! We haven't been out here long enough—there is no way we could have ridden 24 miles in the dark this fast. I must have taken a wrong turn. I missed the @\$% trail!"

I was quite upset. I did not like being out in the desert darkness by myself on a trail I was unfamiliar with and clearly could not follow. I was frustrated from having ridden over an hour and a half on this loop, only to end up in the right place at the wrong time. I was tired and sore and my eyes were very scratchy from the wind and straining to see

in the dark. I think it was close to midnight. Truth be told, I was so frustrated and disappointed, I felt like giving up. It took me a couple minutes of deep breathing and mental gymnastics, and somehow I calmed myself down. I asked the volunteer if there were any other riders close by. She told me there was a group of riders about 20 minutes ahead of me. I said I'd never be able to catch them in the dark. Then she said, "Wait a minute . . . I'm getting a text message. Hmmm. Ah! You're in luck. The last three riders are just now leaving base camp. They should be here in about 25 minutes." I told her I couldn't possibly have my horse standing here for 25 minutes waiting in the cold. That would not be good for him or me. We'd both stiffen up.

Now I was in a frustrating quandary. I was clearly behind schedule, and didn't know if I could finish this last loop fast enough to make the cut-off time of 5:00 a.m., let alone follow the correct trails the whole time. Poor Tahoe. Counting the 20 minutes we were lost in the morning, and now this hour and 40 minutes going in circles, we'd clocked an extra two hours and at least 15 extra miles. I did not like the idea one bit of venturing out by myself again, but there was no way Tahoe and I could wait for 25 minutes for the other riders. I needed to decide whether I would try to finish the ride or call it quits. I was angry and disappointed with myself for having flagrantly missed the trail, wasting so much time and precious energy. I really didn't want to continue, but I've never been a quitter and didn't want to start now.

I could feel that air temperature had dropped and it was now quite cool compared to the daytime temperatures. Tahoe loves it when it's cool like this and I could tell he was still feeling great. Because Tahoe was in such good shape, I thought there was a slight chance we could finish the ride on time. I gave myself another little pep talk, then got down to business and began to ride this last loop for the second time that night.

This 24-mile section of the ride was the shape of a lopsided collapsed lollypop. You ride away from base camp along the "stick" part where there could be two-way traffic from horses on their way back to the finish line. At the top of the "stick" the trail formed a lopsided and vertically compressed loop that terminated at the last vet check before the finish. Then you ride the "stick" part of the trail again eight miles back to the finish line at the edge of the cemetery.

Although Tahoe is good at seeing the trails in the darkness, he is not 100% at reading the dolomite markings nor the directional arrows or glow sticks. That is my responsibility. This time, I used my micro-flashlight. I was determined not to make the same mistakes again and miss the correct trails. Tahoe did not like it whenever I turned on my little flashlight. It made it very hard for him to see because it would blind his night vision. I tried to use my light sparingly, turning it on only when I thought I saw a junction of any type.

Soon we were being passed by a group of frontrunners that were heading the opposite direction from Tahoe and me on the "stick" part of this loop. None of them was using flashlights or headlamps and very few had glow bars on their horse's breast collars. One of them, who did not use any type of light, swiftly trotted past us in the darkness on a remarkable horse that had vision in only one eye. These experienced endurance riders trusted their horse's night vision, and more importantly, even though they were all familiar with the trail, had not ventured out alone in the desert at night.

As Tahoe and I were nearing the top of the "stick," I heard a familiar voice heading in the opposite direction. I asked, "How long did it take you to ride the loop part of this trail?" The answer in the darkness came, "Two hours, but we walked." I recognized the voice. It was the mother with her young son. Since I had ridden with them earlier, I knew that their walk was as fast as a slow trot. It was around 3:00 a.m., and I thought if Tahoe and I could keep up a working trot, we might be able to do this part of the trail in 1 1/2 hours instead of two. We just might make it across the finish line before 5:00 a.m.

Tahoe and I trotted on. Suddenly he snorted, simultaneously taking several side steps to the left. There were definitely things going "bump in the night." (They were probably the wild horses.) Even I could hear them—big steps crunching through the desert shrubs. I fumbled around for my little flashlight and directed its powerful beam to where the sounds were coming from. I thought it might be coyotes or even a mountain lion. There goes my imagination. Duets of glowing spots stared back at us reflecting the light of my flashlight. Tahoe and I hightailed it out of there. About 30 minutes later, Tahoe snorted again, and again sidestepped to the left. I didn't need to turn on my flashlight this time. I knew that unmistakable sound. A rattlesnake. It seems as though we aren't really alone out here after all . . .

We continued along the lopsided loop portion of the trail following the glow sticks and dolomite splats. I would have liked it better if those glow sticks were spaced much more frequently. Tahoe and I would pass one, and continue for what seemed to be a long time and I'd think, "Are we still on the right trail? I haven't seen a glow stick or dolomite for quite a while." Each time I thought this, and just as I was about to turn around and go back to the last glow stick I had seen in order to verify I was still on the right trail, there would be a new glow stick. Whew. In fact, when we hit the apex of this loop, the ride management had decorated a little pine tree with numerous different colored glow sticks so it looked like a Christmas tree out there in the middle of nowhere.

As we rounded the loop, both Tahoe and I could tell we were now heading back in the direction toward base camp. Finally. We picked up a little speed and then all of a sudden, for no reason apparent to me, Tahoe spooked. Big time. He zigged and I zagged. He took off and I fell off. Boom. I had the wind knocked out of me, although before landing, I managed to yell out a string of expletives! I heard Tahoe trotting away through the bushes and then didn't

hear him any longer. I was hoping he had stopped. I finally caught my breath and realized that by some miracle, I hadn't landed on any rocks! Oh joy, however was that possible? Somehow, I'd landed on a soft mound of sand, which was now in my mouth (serves me right for yelling), down my blouse, in my gloves, my shoes and in my helmet. True grit.

Catching my breath and staggering to my feet I thought I could see a silhouette about five yards away that looked a lot like my horse. I took stock of myself and once I emptied out most of the sand, realized I was fine. That was a close call. I'd been very lucky not to get hurt. I spoke to the shadow, "Tahoe, is that you?" He nickered back. "Don't move," I said. "I'll come to you. Stay where you are." I caught hold of the reins and lead him back onto the trail. I spoke to Tahoe some more. "We definitely can't be stranded out here alone, me on foot and you running around all tacked up. This is the middle of the desert in the middle of the night. That would be really bad for both of us."

We walked along the trail for a while until I could find somewhere to remount. Tahoe is 16 hands tall. I'm less than five feet small. I need an escalator in order to get on him. Soon there was enough of an embankment I was able to scramble up onto the saddle. Although grateful that I was not hurt after my fall and still able to ride, I was miffed at Tahoe for dumping me. I kicked him into a faster trot. We had to make up time. At this point I began hearing intermittent voices in the wind. Other riders? I hope so.

The jeep road we were traveling on looked pretty smooth. It was not as hard packed or rocky as most of the other roads we'd been on during the ride. Rounding the next bend, Tahoe skidded to a complete stop. There was a shallow puddle spanning the width of the road and was too large for him to jump over. In the darkness, he could not tell if it was two inches deep or 20 feet deep and he was not going to step into that puddle. I tried everything I could to get him to go, but to no avail. From his point of view, it just wasn't safe to step in that water. Surveying the area with my little flashlight, I could see no other safe way to proceed except across that puddle. Worst of all, there was no escalator in sight either. The landscape was flat, flat, flat, disrupted only by desert bushes and small trees. Despite the lack of topography, I dismounted, resigning myself to the fact that it might be a long hike before finding something tall enough in order to remount Tahoe. By the light of my flashlight, I guessed the puddle was probably two inches deep at most. Sloshing through it on foot, I pulled a reluctant Tahoe behind me. After successfully navigating the puddle, Tahoe and I walked for a long time before there was an escalator that I could use to get back on him. I silently thanked the ride management for placing it there for me in the middle of the desert. Ah, you say—she must be hallucinating. On his back again, we only had to trot for a few minutes until we arrived at the last vet check, which was at mile 92.

Tahoe and I entered the vet check that was set up with bright lights around its perimeter and a huge campfire blazing in the center, I noticed everyone was sleeping. I felt bad having to wake up someone, but I really wanted to get through the vet check as quickly as possible. I had no time to spare. I guiltily yelled a loud, "Hello!" Instantly the sleeping volunteers sprang into action. There was someone taking Tahoe's pulse and at the same time the in-timer was giving me a time card and another volunteer was putting a blanket over Tahoe so his muscles wouldn't chill. Although the pulse criterion at this vet check was 64 bpm, because of the nice cool air temperature, Tahoe pulsed in at 52. There was a 15-minute hold here.

Once we had our pulse time, the volunteers directed us over to the vet's truck and instructed me to yell to her so she would wake up. She and the vet secretary emerged bleary-eyed from the cab of the pick-up truck. However, by the time they waked over to Tahoe and me, they were in full swing. Tahoe easily passed his vet check. The volunteers then gave him water, hay and carrots, all of which he drank and ate with gusto. They offered me hot chocolate, soup and sandwiches. Yum.

The out-timer soon told me my 15 minutes was up and a gallant volunteer took the blanket off of Tahoe and gave me a leg-up. As I was leaving, the three riders that had been 25 minutes behind me arrived at the vet check. Rather than wait 15 more minutes for them, I decided to head out instead. I figured they would definitely catch up with me soon. I guess I had been hearing voices on the trail after all—theirs.

Tahoe and I were out in the middle of the desert in the dark again—alone. It had taken me all night, but I finally figured out how to use the planets and stars to help me stay on course. I could see Venus and Jupiter to the east. I also knew dawn was only a few hours away because below those two planets, Orion was oriented sideways. In late summer, Orion is always just above the eastern horizon just before dawn. As long as I kept Orion, Venus and Jupiter on my left, I knew I was heading in the direction toward the finish line. We trotted down the trail with newfound confidence.

That confidence didn't last long. We came upon a junction I couldn't decipher. I picked a direction and kept going. I looked up at the night sky—we were heading directly toward Orion and I knew I'd gone the wrong way. I switched on that little light of mine and shone it on the ground confirming I was on the wrong road because there were no hoof prints. As I turned around, the three riders that were behind me had arrived at that junction and were trying to puzzle it out. I signaled and called out to them that I'd taken a wrong turn, not to come this way. Tahoe and I quickly caught up with them, and joy of joys, they were familiar with the trail. This would be one of those gal's 15th time doing the Virginia City 100. I asked if I could join her escort service to the finish line and she heartily said "yes."

She was using a headlamp attached to her helmet, so Tahoe and I tucked in at the end of the line. Everyone slowed down to a walk. Our escort said there was a fairly long stretch of rocky trail ahead and she wanted us to walk. At this late stage of the ride, she advised, we need to take it easy on our horses. It was 4:30 a.m. I asked if she thought we'd make it to the finish line in time and she assured all of us that we would. We kept walking.

We finally came to the "water buffalo" (a large horizontal water tank that emptied into a 100-gallon trough), the last water stop before the finish line. All our horses drank thirstily from the trough and we drank too, from our water bottles. Refreshed, we crossed the paved road and found the trail on the other side. It was not far to the finish line from here. We picked up the trot and soon were able to see the bright lights of the finish line—we were indeed the last four riders to cross. Remarkably, we'd made it with 10 minutes to spare. I was amazed Tahoe and I actually finished in time to qualify. We could never have done it without the help of all the wonderful Nevada riders along the way and especially these gals at the end.

After a brief celebration with the volunteers at the finish line, the four of us continued past the cemetery and onto the pavement for the 25-minute walk back to base camp through the streets of town. At this early pre-dawn hour, Virginia City was quiet as a ghost town. We arrived at base camp and bless her heart, Odette was there with a smile to welcome Tahoe and me. She took care of Tahoe, and presented him for his final vet exam. Tahoe's completion exam scores were nearly as good as his pre-ride vet exam scores. With that, the ride logistics were over. Odette settled in Tahoe and sent me to get some sleep before all the morning activities began, such as judging for best condition, breakfast and the awards ceremony. I don't even remember hitting the pillow. I was out like a light.

I woke up in time to take a shower in the back of Odette's horse trailer and put on clean clothes for the post-ride events. The Nevada All-State Trail Riders club is extremely generous in giving awards to all the finishers and especially to the top ten riders and weight division winners. The winner of the ride, Kelly Williams on Diamond Ruler L, earned an engraving on the Virginia City Cup perpetual first place trophy, as well as a beautiful embroidered blanket. The winner of best condition, Fred Emigh on the stallion RTR Rimfire, won a custom-made hand sculpted bust of his horse, as well as their name engraved on the Mapes Cup perpetual trophy. The artist was there in person (NASTR member Michaele Tristram with 14 VC100 completions) to take photographs of his horse so she could sculpt his wonderful prize. All of us who finished the ride were given a Virginia City 100 long-sleeved sweatshirt and a completion certificate qualifying us for an option of the beautiful Virginia City 100 sterling silver progressive belt buckle or sterling silver bracelet.

With breakfast and the ceremonies now over, Odette, her wonderful Corgi, Daisy, Tahoe and I headed home to California. Lesson learned from this ride—don't venture out into the desert alone on a moonless night when you are not familiar with these trails. In the end, you will not save any time and you could potentially put you and your horse in great danger. This ride is much safer when ridden with a buddy.

The Virginia City 100 is not a ride for the faint of heart. It is a beautiful desert ride, with a lot of challenges specific both to high desert riding and night riding. However, after successfully completing this ride, I definitely appreciate that it was well worth the effort. I am happy to report that none of the horses on this ride were pulled for metabolic reasons. We all listened to Dr. Jamie Kerr and none of us "cooked our horses."

Sharma Lynn Gaponoff is the author of "Tevis, From the Back of My Horse."

It is available online through the Tevis Store, at SharmaGaponoff.com and on eBay.