

# HORSEBACK ACROSS THREE AMERICAS



by Verne R. Albright



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**HORSEBACK ACROSS THREE AMERICAS**

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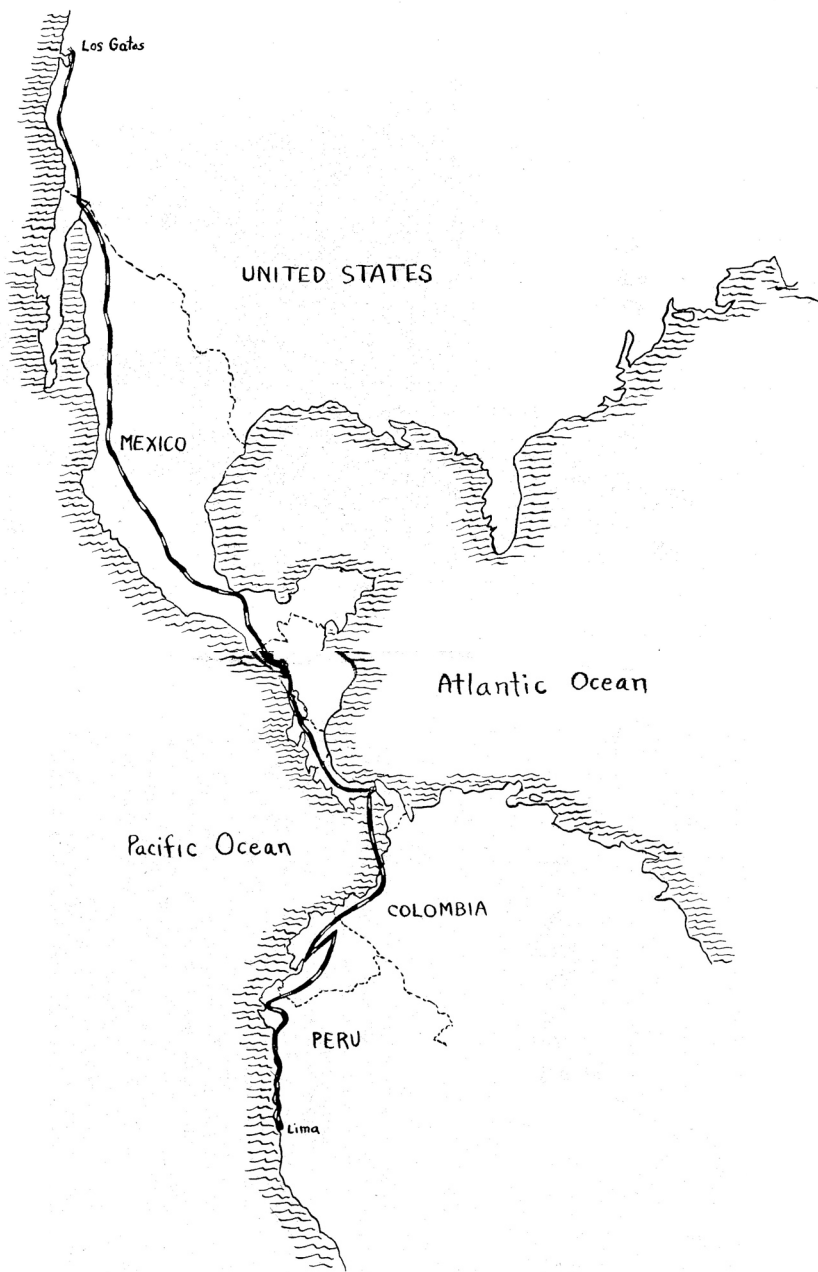
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# PROLOGUE

## Be Careful What You Wish For

**S**ince my horses and I had left Peru and entered Ecuador, I'd been made uneasy by prominent posters in every village that urgently recommended inoculation against malaria. When I reached a large city I went straight to the Peace Corps office and spoke with an American nurse.

"I can't give Americans medical advice," she said. "I'm authorized to work with the local poor only."

"Can you recommend a doctor?"

"We're not supposed to do that," she replied in the same monotone, "and to tell the truth there aren't any I'd go to if I were sick."

"Thanks for your time." I turned to go.

"What brought you to Loja?" she asked.

"I'm on my way to the States on horseback."

"Oh my God! I hope you're being careful. You have no idea of the diseases they have here. Where and what are you eating?"

"Anywhere and anything I can."

"Rules be damned," she said, obviously concerned. "I'll give you a hepatitis shot and pamphlets describing precautions you should take against malaria, typhoid, tuberculosis, cholera, and bubonic plague."

In those days tuberculosis was a familiar threat, but I'd thought typhoid, malaria, cholera, and bubonic plague existed only in history books and horror stories. Suddenly however, they were among the threats I faced in Ecuador's Andes—along with bandits and avalanches.

I'd landed in this predicament because of boredom, which had emboldened me to tackle what I'd thought would be an exciting experience. All my life I'd longed for adventure, but I'd done so without realizing it was almost always a consequence of carefully laid plans going badly wrong—something much in conflict with my orderly German nature.

By the time I was nine, my family had moved ten times to new homes in seven states. Instead of making me long for continuity, all that uprooting and replanting made me restless for change whenever things stayed the same for very long.

We were never in one place long enough for me to get past being an outsider.

Every year I was the new kid in school and my classmates teased me mercilessly, mostly about my exceptional height. In response, I'd look forward to our next move in the hope that life would be better wherever we went next.

According to my mother, horses were the only thing that claimed and held my interest back then. As a young child I begged for horse books, and later I began pleading for a horse. When our family finally settled down in Reno, Nevada, my long-standing request was granted.

I was eleven when my father bought Trixie, a mustang mare



born wild and captured on a Nevada desert when old enough to ride. She was a bit small for me and sorrel, a color now called chestnut. Her energy and aloofness distinguished her from all other candidates my dad and I considered while horse shopping.

Trixie lived up to my expectations as nothing else ever had. I spent every second of my free time with her and joined a youth group sponsored by the Washoe County Horsemen's Association. My favorite of its many activities was an annual hundred-mile ride that took us into the wilds for three glorious days.

Newly arrived in Reno and socially clumsy, I didn't fit in with the other members and soon acquired a nickname, Tom Mix Up—inspired by a famous movie cowboy.

Trying to be a good sport I laughed when my fellow riders called me that. But clearly an insult, it stung.

By the time I was a freshman at Reno High School I'd sprouted to a whopping six-feet nine inches, outgrowing Trixie. I sold and bid her farewell with the same casual ease I'd left people and towns during my childhood. But it took years to find her equal.

My next horse—a Quarter Horse mare, Miss Rosetta—was phlegmatic and calm.

Her lack of energy made me long for Trixie's enthusiasm—a quality called *brio* in Peruvian Paso horses. My interest in this new mare, never strong, expired after I tried out for the Reno High School varsity basketball team and was unexpectedly chosen.

I sold Miss Rosetta and concentrated on this new challenge. Having grown like a weed, I was still coping with height to which I wasn't accustomed, and was too awkward to be any good. But as Coach Lloyd Trout told a newspaper reporter, "When a boy is built that close to the basket, he's liable to come in handy."

In my senior year I finally came into my own. Our team made it to the State Championship game—which we lost by three points—and I was named to Northern Nevada's All Star team. Following basketball season however, I was once again bored.

After a year at Portland State College in Oregon, my tolerance for dull routines was exhausted. Hungry for adventure I left school and never looked back.

Soon after Anne Mossman and I married that summer, I received a job offer from Roy Chamberlain, the man I'd worked for in Reno during high school. He'd been transferred to a new Skaggs Payless Drug Store, and he tempted Anne and me to Salt Lake City by saying he'd make me a department supervisor.

Two months before Christmas—following the store's grand opening—I was assigned to manage the toy department. Nothing I'd ever done had been as exciting. For two months I had to move fast and learn faster. Exhilarated and obsessed, I was in the store from before it opened to after it closed, seven days a week.

"You're doing a great job," Mr. Chamberlain told me one evening. "The owner's wife told him that our toy department is the best one in town."

As he'd expected, I was inspired to redouble my efforts. The predictable letdown came on December 26th.

With Anne's enthusiastic approval I decided working in a foreign country might be more to my liking, and I wrote John Cooke, an ex-girlfriend's father. A geologist who'd worked outside the States for years, he gave me a letter of recommendation and the names of foreign employers who might give me a job. I sent applications for months, but nothing came of it.

Finally I took the bit between my teeth and asked Mr.

Cooke, "If I were to just show up someplace, where would I have the best chance of finding work?"

"Peru," he replied. "I have a friend there who'll be happy to help you."

Anne and I spent half our savings on my one-way ticket to Peru. If I found a job, the rest of our money would fly her and our ten-month-old daughter, Vicki, to join me.

Otherwise, it would bring me back home.

On the flight to Peru, I met a lady who offered me a job teaching English, but I was hoping for something more interesting. Peru, I soon discovered, offered many appealing adventures but no interesting jobs for which I was qualified. Running out of money, I hired on as an English teacher at the Instituto Cultural and sent for Anne and Vicki.

By the time they arrived I was supplementing my income with private English lessons and saving for one or more adventures a travel agent had recommended.

\* \* \*

Two months later Anne met Hillary Dunsterville and Lu-Bette Herrick, who'd checked into the boarding house where we were. They'd driven there from New York and were headed for South America's southernmost tip. Their Jeep station wagon Matilda, had developed mechanical problems shortly before reaching Lima, and the cost of repairs was a major setback.

The three women became friends and unbeknownst to me, discussed the possibility of having Anne, Vicki, and I join Lu-Bette and Hillary's adventure-in-progress. When Anne revealed that possibility to me, I was intrigued – but apprehensive.

"Having two strangers and a toddler move into Matilda," I told her, "will be hard for them."

"They know that," Anne assured me, "but our contribution toward expenses is as attractive to them as the prospect of adventure is to us."

Unable to contain my excitement any longer I asked, "Where are they going next and when do we leave?"

At the mechanic shop where Matilda was waiting to be repaired, I spent the next three afternoons building a collapsible wood and canvas tent on its roof rack. There Anne, Vicki, and I would sleep during what we hoped would be a memorable three-month trip to Santiago, Chile via the Andes of Peru, Bolivia, and Argentina.

Hillary and LuBette eventually found corporate sponsors, permitting them to reach their goal in Tierra del Fuego and then go north to Alaska. By then however, Anne and I had spent our savings, and we took a freighter from Santiago to the U.S. East Coast, then hitchhiked back to Oregon.

\* \* \*

Several months after that I went to work for George Jones, who managed a finance company in San Francisco.

"I'm looking for ways to invest some money," he told me one afternoon over lunch. "Did you see anything in South America we could sell in the States?"

For weeks I offered suggestions we evaluated until George rejected them. Eventually I got the impression he enjoyed our hopeful conversations as an end in themselves. But he kept asking for ideas, and we amused ourselves for hours—George searching for a lucrative investment, me dreaming of another adventure.

Then one day during lunch, I made a suggestion that changed my life.

"I don't know why I didn't think of this sooner," I began.

"Peru has a unique horse breed that could be sold for good money in the States."

Sensing potential profit George gulped a half-chewed mouthful and asked, "What makes them special?"

By the time I'd described the breed's lateral four-beat gait, smoothness, beauty, and energy, he knew as much about Peruvian Pasos as I did. Impressed, he set up a petty cash fund so I could explore this idea. Gradually a concrete plan evolved. We'd import one of these horses and see how people reacted.

Soon I was on my way to Peru carrying a heavy burden of responsibility. The horse I bought would have to be impressive, but all I knew about Peruvian horses was that they lit me on fire. In Peru fortunately, a breeder named Fernando Graña took me under his wing.

A month later at the harbor in San Pedro, California — near Los Angeles — George got his first look at Malagueña, the sample I'd chosen. Soon he was almost as vocal about Peruvian horses as I. Our continuing efforts led to further importations, and within two years there were over a hundred Peruvian horses in the States.

To promote the breed, George and I founded the American Association of Owners and Breeders of Peruvian Paso Horses. He served as its first president, and I as the second. At twenty-three years of age, I'd finally found something that was never — not for an instant — boring.

My favorite among our promotions was importing *Marinera*, a mare I'd chosen to compete in cross-country endurance races. We sold her to Julie Suhr — an emerging endurance rider — and I became obsessed with their progress.

In 1966 Julie rode *Marinera* in California's grueling hundred-mile-in-one-day Tevis Cup Ride, and the gallant little mare represented her breed admirably.

Remembering those hundred-mile rides of my youth, I ached to get involved in endurance racing. But though slender I weighed two hundred pounds, and very few successful endurance riders were an ounce over one twenty.

I could however, ride Peruvian Pasos from South to North America. By then, Anne and I had gone our separate ways and the longer I considered that ride, the more it appealed. Here was a way to live life to the fullest. And after my journey I'd enter my best horse in the Tevis Cup with a rider who weighed far less than I—step one of a campaign to further promote Peruvian horses.

"You have a potentially fatal case of Paso promotion fever," George said when I pitched my brainchild.

When I mentioned my idea to others, their reactions made his seem optimistic. But such a ride was achievable. As a youngster I'd several times ridden a hundred miles in three days. All I'd have to do as an adult was string together fifty such trips. Right?

\* \* \*

In the 1920s Aimé F. Tschiffely had made an epic, ten-thousand-mile, two-and-a-half-year ride from Buenos Aires to Washington, D.C. on two Argentine Criollo horses. His journey created the kind of publicity for Argentina's horses that I hoped to generate for Peru's.

"It's time to come to your senses, Albright," was George Jones's reaction.

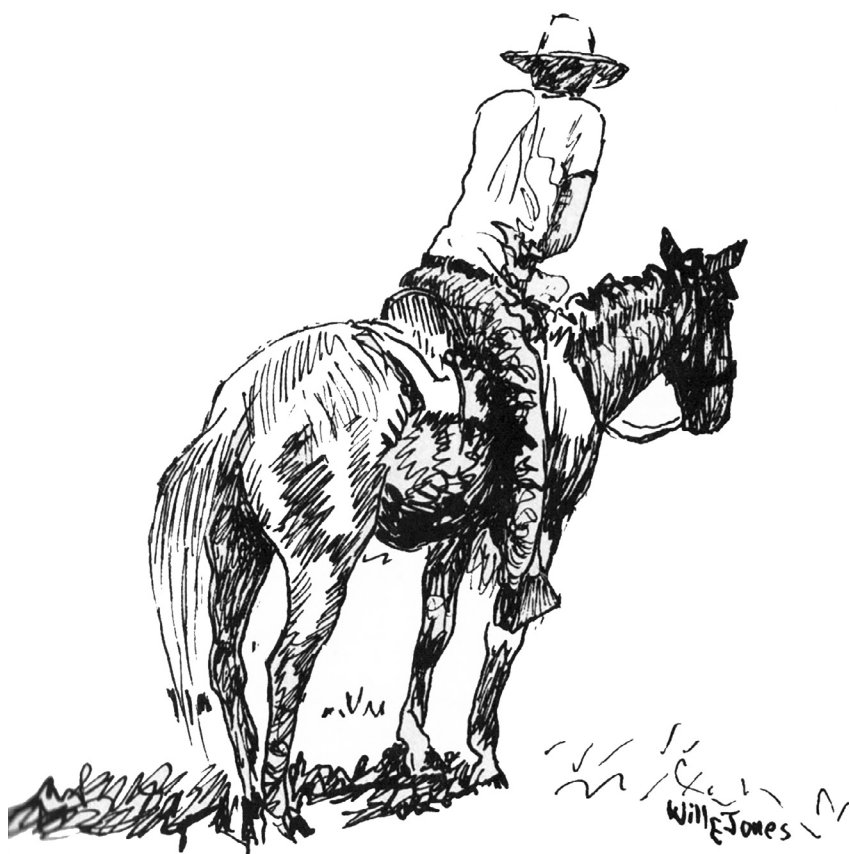
I was undaunted. Those hundred-mile rides of my youth had taught me a great deal about long distance riding. The Jeep trip with Hillary and LuBette had familiarized me with traveling and crossing borders in Latin America. I was physically and emotionally capable of such a journey. Marinera had shown that the same would be true of well-chosen Peruvian horses.

All that remained was to do it. To give my best horse and its race-day rider time to work together before 1967's Tevis Cup, I'd have to be back in California in nine months – not enough time to ride five-thousand-plus miles. But what the heck, I didn't have enough money either.

George had declined to contribute to this venture and my life savings amounted to a little over two thousand dollars. Would that be enough? I couldn't prepare a budget. Not even the *Wall Street Journal* publishes the current cost of hay in Guatemala, grain in Panama, horseshoes in Costa Rica, dinner in Ecuador's highlands, and paperwork for horses to cross eleven borders.

All I knew was that I'd have to buy supplies, a plane ticket, horses, feed, hundreds of meals, and whatever else I needed along the way. My destination would be Joe and Pat Gavitt's ranchette near Los Gatos, California. They were avid Peruvian horse fans, and Pat had agreed to ride one of my horses in the Tevis Cup, a task for which she was well qualified.

After purchasing supplies, I wrote Tuco Roca Rey, secretary of Peru's national Paso horse breeders association, and informed him of my impending arrival. I hoped he and Peru's breeders would be enthusiastic about my plans because I would desperately need their advice and assistance.





## PABLITO

**"G**oodbye," the Peruvian schoolgirl beside me said, pressing her forehead against the Boeing 707 jet's window so she could see the sun as long as possible. "I won't see you again or feel your warmth for a while."

Her words were prophetic. As our plane knifed down into the cloudbank that hangs over Lima in August, I saw the sun for the last time in many days.

After a turbulent descent, Peru's arid coast came in view. We passed above a farmer and oxen plowing a field, then oil derricks with flames burning off natural gas. Briefly we paralleled a highway with burros hurrying along its shoulder and boys straddling their rumps behind clay pots, probably full of water for homes that had no plumbing.

"What brought you to Peru?" the schoolgirl asked.

When I answered, her brown eyes lit up with amazement.

"Wish I were a boy," she said wistfully, "so I could have adventures like that."

After landing I cleared immigration and picked up my duffel bags in baggage claim. But first I had to battle porters for the right to carry them. Once I'd cleared customs, more porters aggressively offered their services. I'd soon learn it was best to ignore them rather than explain I didn't have money for tips.

Outside the terminal, the sidewalk was congested with people waiting for arriving passengers. My ears were assaulted by the sound of traffic and rhythmic cries from shoeshine boys, taxi drivers, agents for hotels, and tour guides.

Taxis there were the expensive tourist kind. Around the corner I found much-less-costly *colectivos*, cars that carried up to five passengers for a standard fee. People could get on or off anywhere on their predetermined routes. Before going out of style in the States, such vehicles cost five cents and were called jitneys – American slang for a nickel in those days.

When the driver discovered I spoke his language, he asked what brought me to Peru. Glad for the opportunity to practice my Spanish, I told him. His predictable response started with amazement, then moved on to disbelief and finally enthusiasm.

"If only I were young again," he declared, "I could have such adventures."

The other passengers nodded in agreement. Since I'd left Los Angeles no one had expressed the slightest doubt about my eventual success. Latinos consider it rude to rain on people's parades. But they underestimated the difficulties I faced and if I didn't succeed, they'd see me as having failed to reach an easy goal.

In Miraflores I left the colectivo and hailed a cab. Minutes after that I reached the Asociación Nacional de Criadores y Propietarios del Caballo Peruano de Paso (ANCPCPP), the national Peruvian Paso breeders association.

Before George Jones and I had imported Malagueña two

years earlier, I'd written the Asociación several times. When the secretary finally replied, he'd answered none of my questions and instead offered his assistance when I got to Lima. When I'd shown up on the Asociación's doorstep, he and other members had been supremely gracious and helpful.

The ANCP CPP clubhouse had an office, bar, dining room, kitchen, and courtyard with a fountain. The breeders present that night invited me to their dinner-in-progress, and afterward Tuco Roca Rey translated my last letter aloud for them. I'd known he wouldn't answer it—but as his notes in the margins confirmed, he'd already given considerable thought to my project.

"What can we call you?" Carlos Luna de la Fuente, one of the ANCP CPP's founders, asked, perplexed by his inability to pronounce my name.

"Let's give him a Spanish name," Carlos Gonzalez, the immediate past president, chimed in.

Playfully they suggested possibilities, their laughter very different from that of my classmates as they'd chosen my many hated childhood nicknames.

"From now on you're *Pablito*, little Pablo," Luna abruptly declared.

"Perfect," Gonzalez said, then told me, "Pablito is a famous, very short comedian."

I'd feared these busy, important men wouldn't have time to help me but laughing and patting my shoulder, they gathered around to ask questions and offer advice.

When Fernando Graña came in, he instantly replaced me as the center of attention. He was the most polished, elegant, intimidating man I had ever met. I'd been in awe of him since seeing a primetime U.S. television interview during which he described Peru's social problems in perfect English. Later he'd sold me Malagueña, the first horse George Jones and I imported.

As the evening progressed, a problem I'd had other times in Peru resurfaced. I don't partake of alcohol, which is an indispensable part of Peru's social life. Again and again someone offered to buy me a drink and was insistent after I declined.

"I don't have moral objections," I explained again and again. "I simply don't like the taste or effect."

But no matter how often I repeated those words, my abstinence seemed to offend or at least make them uncomfortable.

I cringed when Fernando Graña approached, presumably to try his luck.

"This has gone far enough," he declared. "Come with me please."

I followed him to the bar.

"Pour two fingers of Coca Cola in a glass," he instructed the attendant, "then add four fingers of soda water."

Studying the result he asked me, "Does the color look familiar?"

"Most definitely," I replied, grinning.

Handing me the glass he said, "As long as you're holding this scotch, no one will bother you."

Carlos Gonzalez noticed my duffel bags in a corner and asked, "What's in those?"

"Supplies for my ride," I told him.

"Would you mind displaying them on our conference table?" he asked, leading me into the office.

When my exhibit was to his satisfaction, González opened the door and herded everyone in. Nothing there would've attracted attention in the States, but in Peru almost everything did.

"You gringos may have a highly advanced country," exclaimed an elderly man who'd obviously never seen Levi's jeans, "but these pants made of canvas must be uncomfortable."

No one could resist removing my Bowie knife from its

sheath to admire the blade and double-edged tip. My water purification tablets brought predictable comments about gringos' fussy stomachs.

"Rain will pass right through these," one man predicted pouring a splash of scotch on one of my nylon horse blankets. To his considerable surprise it beaded up and rolled off.

For reasons I couldn't understand, everyone—though accustomed to exquisitely braided leather halters and lead lines—greatly admired my simple nylon ones.

As the room emptied, I was given two suggestions.

"Your horses will need grain," Carlos Luna, a professor at La Molina College of Agriculture, told me. "You'll need feed-bags for that."

I made a mental note.

"And this cowboy hat isn't appropriate for riding our horses," Fernando Graña gently scolded. "You need a proper Peruvian sombrero."

I couldn't work up the nerve to disagree with him. A Peruvian sombrero however, was out of the question. They were stylish but expensive, and didn't stay put in wind or hold their shapes when wet.

I couldn't believe where I was or who I was with. The Asociación's members belonged to a social class I could never have approached without our mutual enthusiasm for their country's National Horse.

"Would you like Carlos González and me to help you find horses?" Fernando Graña asked around midnight after most members had left.

"Yes, please," I replied.

"We'll meet you here for breakfast at eight o'clock tomorrow morning."

Locking doors after we were alone, Tuco Roca Rey asked, "Where are you staying?"

"I don't know," I replied. "Can you recommend someplace inexpensive?"

"You'll be on the trail for nine months," he said, "and should start conditioning your body. If you want you can sleep on our meeting room floor, buy food at the market, cook it in our kitchen, and do your laundry in our bathroom."

I thanked Tuco for his tactful suggestion.

Alone after he left, I unrolled my sleeping bag and dedicated myself to conditioning my body on a tile floor that was probably more comfortable than most places I'd sleep in months to come.

\* \* \*

"How many horses do you want and where do you plan to buy them?" Fernando Graña asked after breakfast the next morning.

"Two mares," I replied. "I thought I'd start looking at the Hacienda Casa Grande."

The world's largest plantation, located north of Lima, had the most horses and lowest prices of all Peru's breeders.

"Mares in your price range are little more than incubators," Don Fernando said. "Few get trained and those that do are seldom ridden and therefore not accustomed to hard work."

"Geldings," Carlos Gonzalez chimed in, "have a well-deserved reputation for endurance, which is the reason we refer to castrated males as *caballos de trabajo*, work horses – instead of *capónes*."

"Though Casa Grande's horses are strong and have excellent endurance," Fernando continued, "they grow up on a flat desert at sea level in soft sand, and aren't accustomed to cold, rain, altitude, horseshoes, steep climbs, or uneven terrain. I'd recommend horses from Cajamarca, which is in the Andes at seven thousand feet."

With his usual hyperbole Carlos González added, "Horses

raised there have gigantic lungs, huge hearts, legs of iron, and hooves of steel."

If they hadn't been who were, I would've wondered what they had to gain by changing my plan.

"At Juan Miguel Rossel's farm," Graña continued, "there's a gelding named Huascarán you should consider. He's gray, seven years old, tall, sturdy, and absolutely beautiful. I'd be proud to own him, and that's the highest recommendation I have."

"I doubt I can afford such a horse," I said.

"At the moment Juan Miguel is at his Lima house. I'll find out how much he wants."

The quintessential man of action, Graña had the waiter bring a telephone to our table and called. After a quick conversation he hung up and told me, "He quoted an excellent package price for Huascarán and his half-brother Lucero, a black with extraordinary energy—subject to your approval of course."

I'd never bought a horse without seeing and riding it. But translated from Peruvian *soles* to U.S. dollars, the price was irresistible and included transportation from Cajamarca to Jorge Baca's farm near Chiclayo, an excellent place to start my ride.

"If you're in a hurry," Graña offered, "I'll call back and have Juan Miguel ship the horses. Plenty of people around Chiclayo would love to own those two geldings. If you don't like either or both, I'll arrange a trade."

I trusted him completely. He'd shown considerable integrity when I purchased Malagueña, an eye-catching gray mare I liked because her contrasting black mane, tail, and points were attention-getters.

"Before you make up your mind," he'd cautioned after

quoting a price, "I have a confession. I believe horses should be shown naturally so their qualities will be genetic and hopefully passed on to their offspring. I never would've done this for a show but for a recent parade, I had Malagueña's mane and tail dyed. When they grow out, there'll be a few gray hairs."

Bringing me back to the present Fernando asked, "Do you need more time to decide?"

"No," I replied. "I'll do as you recommend."

Fernando picked up the phone and closed the deal, then he, Carlos, and Tuco hurried to their cars leaving me alone and emotionally drained. I'd been in Peru less than sixteen hours and already had horses. I could hardly wait to see them.