

A Special Donkey – Choia’s Story

by Janet Mallow

Choia was born in the desert at China Lake Naval Station in the spring of 1983. Five months later she was rounded up by the National Organization of Wild American Horses (NOWAH) and brought to Colorado. She was the first of hundreds of burros and mustangs that NOWAH saved from being shot because they were "in the way", she was also special in other ways as well.



Trying to fit a prosthesis

We had already adopted a jenny from NOWAH, and been given a 35 year old unadoptable jack, and within twelve months they presented us with a baby. This was not planned, but Jake was in such poor condition on his arrival the vet would not geld him for fear he would die. Dr. Zaidliez, who founded NOWAH, later asked us if we would take Choia, because she was also unadoptable due to a severe case of selenium poisoning. He had removed 80% of the coffin bone in her left front hoof to stop further deterioration of the bones. As a result she limped and her hoof grew rapidly because she could not put her full weight on it. In spite of this she was happy, had a shiny coat, a good appetite and a very gentle nature. She came to us in December 1985 and the following August gave birth to a jack. No one knew she was pregnant! We called him Choia's Surprise, but he soon became Dickens.



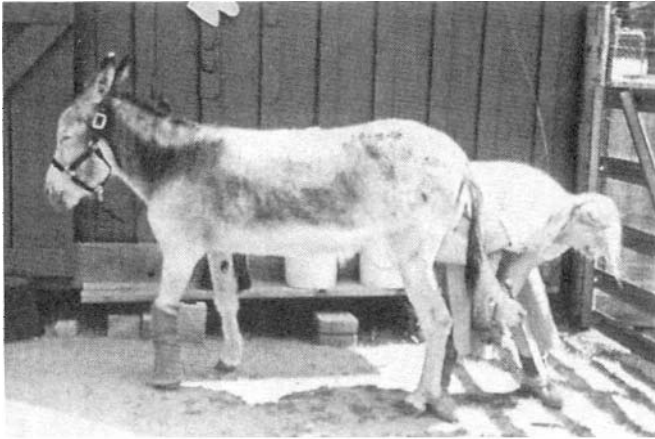
Her badly curled hoof

X-rays revealed that the bones were shattered and we heard the dreaded suggestion 'that *Choia* be put to sleep. We were truly devastated after all her patience and courage. Arrangements were made to bury her on our land, but before it happened we got a letter from Sunni Moland McNary in Washington (who we had met through The Brayer several years earlier) asking if we had thought of amputation. It was like a miracle. Our vets had not done the procedure but were willing to try and they called a vet in California who performs the

surgery on expensive race horses, to ask his advice. In August they amputated at the fetlock; and Dr. Hill made a false foot from a sponge and a block of wood. *Choia* got up and off she went again. With daily soaking and care the stump healed and grey fur grew over it. She was however, very lopsided! What to do next? A prosthesis, one of our vets has a friend who wears a prosthesis and he put us in touch with the man who made his. Frank agreed to try to make one for *Choia* without charge. He took measurements and made a mold of *Choia's* stump, and a few weeks later he fitted her with an amazing work of art. She hit the newspapers and the TV news and we worried about her ego swelling! We need not have worried, she remained the wonderfully patient and gentle soul she had always been and still is.

As the years went on her limp became more pronounced and the vet (not Dr. Z) decided she was developing arthritis and suggested a nerve block to stop the pain. The third one worked, and *Choia* was friskier than we had ever seen her. Sadly it did not last, and a month later her hoof came off.. she walked out of it as we do a shoe. It was 1991 by then. Because the vets believed a new hoof would grow, we spent the summer doctoring her and we were very pleased to watch a new hoof start during the next month. Another month passed and then the pastern turned over and abscessed Dr. Hill and Dr. Stephen never gave up, and the next step was a brace to strengthen the leg and tendons. Our farrier at that time, spent all day

designing and building one which resembled Tiny Tim's in a Christmas Carol, but his efforts were frustrated by the fact he could not attach it successfully.



Choya gets around pretty well on the prosthesis!

It is now 1998, seven years later and the time in between has not been a bed of roses for her or for us. For the first few years she went through periods of swelling and then "springing a leak" in her stump, which the vet explained as lymph fluid building up because her circulation is incomplete without a hoof. Sometimes we had to lance it to give her relief, and each time we took her out of the prosthesis and put her in a rubber soaking boot after wrapping the stump in an ace bandage. Gradually the time in between the swellings got longer and longer, and now we find it happens every two to three months. When it does, she shrinks back to normal faster. In 1993 Frank made a new, larger prosthesis, as *Choya's* upper leg had become bigger, although the bottom is smaller.

We still soak her stump daily and put on a new sock so it feels comfortable just as a human amputee does. It makes it difficult to leave home overnight, but we do have a wonderful friend who is also a vet tech. and she stays at the house and takes over as *Choya's* nurse.

When the weather is nice and there is no snow on the ground, *Choya* goes out to play with the other three donkeys. She also gets special privileges they do not (when they aren't looking!) There is the usual pecking order in the group, and they push each other around, but she pushes right back and is not intimidated. Our farrier is able to trim *Choya's* three hooves much more easily now because she can stand on her prosthesis and support herself

We feel so privileged to have had the experience with her and know we have benefited greatly from her gentleness and disposition. She has taught us much, and without her, cooperation we would not have come so far. In the evening we put her in her stall and tell her to get ready to have her foot soaked and she stands in the same spot and waits for us to come with the bucket of antiseptic water. We do not have to halter her or tie her up. She never moves away or upsets the bucket. I only wish she could talk to us in our language and tell us just how she feels, and if she agrees with what we have done to her and for her. She is now **fifteen** and we wonder how many more years we have to love and enjoy her.