

Wyoming Week

A VACATION ON HORSEBACK

The faded sign read "Pinedale Subdivision," but there wasn't a house in sight, only miles of empty grassland. We sat at what seemed like the loneliest spot in Wyoming, the intersection of two gravel roads leading off into the blue distance, and wondered which way to turn. Eventually deciding that telephone wires might link us to some outpost of civilization, we followed a line of frail poles heading northwest toward a looming mountain range. Half an hour later, we crested a long rise and were relieved to look down on a collection of barns and cabins surrounding a massive log building, windows reflecting the mid-June sun. A sprawling corral held horses and mules of every size and color. This was the D-Bar Ranch, our base for a weeklong vacation, and it looked as though it would live up to everything it had promised: "Experience the beauty of the mountains from horseback."

I chose this ranch from a list of outfitters offering western horse-packing trips for the family vacation I had always dreamed about. I wanted to ride through the wilderness, camping at night and enjoying the scenery by day, far from the noise of cell phones and computers back home in

Kentucky. The D-Bar Ranch was a working cattle operation, and visitors could sign up for a variety of experiences: riding with the ranch hands to move cattle to fresh pasture, rounding up and branding calves, or checking the miles of fence that surrounded the vast acreage. We opted for another choice, a five-day ride into the Wyoming Mountain Range. Lying between the Grand Teton Range to the west and the Wind River Mountains to the east, the Wyomings encompass a huge chunk of the three-million-acre Bridger-Teton National Forest. The region we planned to traverse would be virtually identical to what the first explorers saw more than a century ago. For the most part, we would not be on established trails.

We had invited several friends to accompany us on the trip, and at dinnertime my family joined the others in the main house to get acquainted with our hosts. Ranch owner Jack Davidson was the trail boss and would lead the ride. His wife Martie would be in charge of the kitchen chores. Their son, daughter, and various nieces and nephews would ride with us to lead the pack string, help with the cooking, and care for the horses.



Over dinner, Jack filled us in on everything we needed to know before setting off early the next morning. We would begin with a half-hour truck ride to the trailhead. Each guest was allowed one duffel bag of gear, to include a heavy sleeping bag. Everyone was advised to wear several layers of clothing—sunrise was anticipated to be a bit chilly—and to have rain gear tied behind the saddle as we headed into the mountains.

Then came the question I had been anticipating: “Do any of you people know how to ride?” With years of horse experience behind me, I kept my mouth shut and my eyes on my plate. I had heard all the stories about overconfident braggarts being assigned to half-wild broncs, and I had no desire to provide amusement for a bunch of rail-sitting spectators. After a brief silence, I heard one of my friends offer, “Catherine has done a lot of riding.” Looking up into the piercing gaze of my host, I stammered that I had a little riding experience, but quickly added that I knew next to nothing about Western saddles, Quarter Horses, or trail riding in general.

“That’s right!” Jack growled. “Some of you may think you can ride, but you don’t know my horses, my

mountains, my methods. You’ll be under my guidance this week, and you’ll do things my way.” Hey, no argument, I thought, and many thanks for the warm welcome! I found out later that this was just Jack’s way of asserting his leadership and assuring the safety of guests and horses alike. His frequent gruff orders were always designed to ward off problems and keep everyone out of danger.

After dinner we all went out to the corral where the ranch hands were tacking up a long line of mounts. Parking us greenhorns along the fence, Jack grabbed a loose horse by the mane, vaulted on, and, unencumbered by saddle or bridle, showed us how his gelding responded instantly to leg and voice cues. Impressive, I thought, but not too practical—several of the riders in our group had never been on a horse, and might have gotten more benefit from some basics on starting, steering, and stopping.

At Jack’s order, each rider was then paired with his or her horse for the week. My nine-year-old daughter Julie (veteran of several years of riding lessons) was the first to be boosted high into the saddle of a huge palomino gelding named Puff. “He makes a funny noise when he breathes,” we were told. Husband Charlie (grew up on a pony, but hadn’t ridden for years) was



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assigned to Ditch, whose claim to fame was having fallen into a gully as a young foal. Son Steve, who at age 12 was more interested in horsepower than in horses, drew a ride on Bay, an attractive brown creature with a white face.

My mount was a liver chestnut named Jezebel. "Since you know how to ride, we'll put you on this mare," I was told. "Just watch her!" Jezebel...wasn't that the name of the evil queen who was responsible for the deaths of many of her subjects way back in Biblical times? My worst fears were threatening to surface. "What does she do?" I asked in a quavering voice. "Just watch her," was the laconic reply.

In short order, everyone else was mounted, stirrups were adjusted, and we were told to ride around in the corral and get acquainted with our transportation for the next five days. It was at this point that I really started to believe all the good things I had heard about Quarter Horses. My background with scatter-brained Thoroughbreds led me to worry about possible problems when a flock of mostly green riders was turned loose in a corral that suddenly seemed awfully small. I was relieved to see that, without exception, the horses were alert and responsive, but willing to cooperate quietly with their riders' hesitant signals.

A few minutes later the gate swung open and we were told, "Just take them out a little ways and then come back." Again, the horses knew what to do, circling out at a slow jog and throwing in a few canter strides when asked. "Why does it get so bouncy when they change gears?" someone asked. Despite my fears, Jezebel calmly answered every cue as I gingerly signaled for different gaits, speeds, turns, and halts. Soon it was time to say good night to our steeds and retire to our cabins to pack.

Very early the next day we ate breakfast, laid our duffel bags in a row, and watched while the staff loaded gear, eighteen riding horses, and seven pack horses and mules for the twenty-mile drive into the foothills. As we mounted up at the trailhead, clouds were gathering and a cool wind was rising. Finally the long string of horses began to wind its way up through increasingly steep groves of evergreens. Leveling out on a high ridge, we could see lightning striking the peaks all around us as an icy rain began to fall. Our horses gained many more points in my estimation, remaining quiet as raincoats flapped, thunder crashed, and we crowded into the dubious protection of a few scrawny trees.

"We can head for shelter if you want to," the trail boss called, "but if we turn around, we won't be able to make today's mileage, and that will cut the week short by a couple of days." Cold, wet, and uneasy about the lightning, I thought about bailing out. Then I looked at Jezebel and the other horses, standing in the drizzle with steaming coats, ears alert and eyes bright. "We came here to ride," was the consensus. "Let's go on." Soon the sun broke through the clouds and the air temperature jumped about thirty degrees. For the rest of the week we enjoyed perfect weather.

Our five-day trek involved a forty-mile circuit through the mountains, and each section of the route included varying terrain and breathtaking scenery. One morning we rode for hours through a valley of stirrup-high wildflowers. That afternoon we crested a ridge just in time to see a trio of elk racing away across a green basin several miles wide.

At midmorning, noon, and midafternoon every day we dismounted for pit stops ("men to the left, ladies to the right") and to let our horses rest and graze. We were told to drop our reins on the ground, which was completely against my training, but these horses had learned to graze along with their heads to the side so as not to jerk themselves in the mouth. The packhorses were rigged with packsaddles, frames of wood and leather that held our duffel bags as well as large panniers filled with tents, food, and cooking equipment. The pack animals were also turned loose when we stopped but were usually hobbled. Again, I was impressed with the Quarter Horse mentality. These animals had not

worn hobbles since the previous summer, and the wranglers warned there might be some antics as they felt the restraint. I did notice some wide eyes as each horse realized its front feet were loosely tied together, but instead of exploding or flipping over as many a Thoroughbred would have done, these horses tensed for a moment, seemed to evaluate the situation, and then went back to grazing. My appreciation was growing!

Our ride was the first of the season, and our guide had expressed concerns about whether the previous winter's snow cover would have melted away from some areas that we planned to cross. Sure enough, as we approached a traverse around the head of a rocky valley, we could see the edge of a snowdrift lying across the trail. "I'll cross first," said Jack. "Don't follow until I signal." Our route featured a cliff to the left, a steep drop to the right, and ice in the middle. I would have gladly turned back, but Jack's horse carefully picked its way along the slushy trail and, one by one, our mounts did the same. These horses were truly amazing!

As each afternoon drew to a close, Jack chose a campsite. A fire was quickly kindled and a huge metal coffeepot was soon sitting in the coals as Martie, the chief cook, grilled steaks or chops. The staff unloaded the pack string, removed saddles and bridles from the riding horses, and turned the animals loose to roll and graze. Several horses were always tied or hobbled as a precaution, but rarely did

any of the herd wander very far. Later in the evening one of the wranglers poured a long line of cubed feed on the ground, and each horse got to enjoy its meal before munching grass for a few more hours. With a herd of horses grazing in the foreground and sunset-tipped mountains as a backdrop, it was easy to let my mind wander back to the days of the mountain men, when a good mount was not a luxury, but a necessity of life.

Shouts of "Moose in camp!" awakened us on the last morning. Sure enough, a peek out of the tent revealed a large creature wandering along in the half-light of dawn. We spent eight hours in the saddle that day, following a series of creeks and waterfalls down from the high country. Our party stopped for lunch in Roosevelt Meadows, where Teddy Roosevelt had camped and hunted nearly a hundred years ago, and paused in the afternoon for a quick dip in a mountain pool lined with huge boulders. Wow, that water had to have come straight from a snowfield!

The terrain leveled out at last. Looking through the final screen of trees, we caught a glimpse of the trucks where they had been parked five days before. It was hard to climb down from Jezebel's back for the last time. She had been a pleasure to ride, displaying faultless manners and a perfect temperament, and she had made me a believer in the Quarter Horse mind. I'm already planning a return trip, and I hope Jezebel, or maybe one of her daughters, will be ready to go again. ☺☺



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