



The Call of the WEST

Wide open spaces, spirited horses, unbridled weather, and three huge meals a day. This is real freedom—if you can take it. By Tracy Young

The call of the West, like a dog whistle pitched at a decibel level beyond human hearing, comes shrouded in silence. Early in the morning, the only sound is the creaking of saddle leather as you pick your way along a stream where beavers have left their handiwork—stumps that look like sharpened pencils. At the top of a ridge, a family of elk poses, noses in the air, moving off when they hear the horses blow and snort. The birds flee, screaming; then everything is quiet. In the West, where it is possible to scan the horizon and see nothing but raw space for miles and miles, where you are enveloped by nature, the emptiness feels intimate. Out here, the image of the-earth-as-mother is more than a cliché. And with your legs around a horse, such figures of speech have an even more primitive power.

As Ronald Reagan said in a moment of lucidity: "There's nothing better for the insides of a man than the outside of a horse." >

PHOTOGRAPHS BY KURT MARKUS

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*The West was full of fences and feedyards now. It was crowded with calf traders and futures brokers, college boys who didn't know a Hereford from an Angus, and ranchers who commuted from London or the South of France—and whatever the movies once promised, there was not much chance, in a showdown, for a hero on a horse—Jane Kramer, *The Last Cowboy**

If you stop to remember that the cowboy empire was founded on lawlessness, on rustled cattle and stolen land, the gentrification of the American West becomes a peculiarly American tragedy, shot through with ironic asides. Consider the story of one old Montana ranching family, staunch Republicans all, who tried growing marijuana in a desperate attempt to pay off their debts, only to get caught in a squeeze play between the Mafia and the Feds.

But the myth of the West is more powerful than the reality—and devoid of irony. It may be what got Reagan elected. Surely it is what attracts some people to dude ranches. Catering to the child in us, that savage innocent who is as tenacious as any old hand about hanging on to the past, dude ranches may be the only family spreads to survive.

The Bitterroot Ranch, however, is not your ordinary dude ranch. There is no Olympic-sized swimming pool. No all-weather tennis courts. No nine-hole golf course. No hot tub. No sauna. No video arcade with Shoot-Em-Up-Cowboys-N-Injuns. No authentic Old West Trading Post selling German-silver belt buckles with your name in lariat script. The Bitterroot Ranch, when you come right down to it, has less in common with a traditional dude ranch than it does with something more modern, say, Outward Bound. And the survival course begins the moment you land in Jackson Hole, Wyoming.

Looked upon with a certain amount of scorn by leathery locals who regard it as a theme park, Jackson Hole can nonetheless present all sorts of challenges to a visitor. It is surrounded by mountains—the Tetons to the west, the Absarokas to the north, the Gros Ventre Range to the east—so

planes do not so much land as fall from the sky. It also boasts some of the steepest ski slopes in North America. Even the town proper, laid out in a square like a Monopoly board, inspires feats of endurance: outfitting yourself, from the crown of a new Stetson to the silver tips of a pair of custom-made boots, you can literally shop 'til you drop.

From Jackson, it's usually a two-hour drive to Dubois, the closest town to the Bitterroot, so my traveling companion and I turned in early at the Antler Motel, half-drunken on a dinner of barbecued ribs. At seven the next morning, as we nosed out onto the long highway that stretches, straight as a pin, from Jackson up to Yellowstone, it was snowing lightly, an occurrence, we were told, not unusual for early September. Mountain weather. Through the car windows, scenery flashed by like film frames: rolling plains, clumps of purplish sagebrush, a cowboy in a bright-yellow slicker sharp against the graying sky. "Look at this," I crowed. "It's like the West."

"It is the West," my TC said.

And so, at long last, it was.

It is common, I'm told, for people to experience a sense of *déjà vu* when they visit the Pyramids. I had the same feeling that day in Wyoming. I was, I felt with a deep *thrum* of psychic satisfaction, home. In retrospect it makes sense that my blood would run backwards. My maternal grandparents came from "out West," as they called it, from sheep farms in Utah. And years later, even after they had raised a family and had become pillars of a tame suburban community, if not totally assimilated by it, they still retained a whiff of the exotic. When I was a child, my favorite stories were the ones my grandmother told me, of the horse she had ridden as a girl and of the Indian who followed her home one night. My prized possession was an Indian blanket that she had traded, she said, for a set of pencils. (Like many westerners, she was utterly direct, but equally prone to tall tales.)

Happily lost in reverie, I hadn't noticed that the snow was falling harder, glazing the asphalt, and the road was curling back and forth on itself as we headed up the Togwotee Pass, nearly ten-thousand feet at its summit. "These brakes don't work at all," my friend said.

I looked out the back window just in time to see the car behind us spin and slam into the mountain. To our right, lost in the

fog, was the valley somewhere far, far below. "Why are you hanging onto that door handle?" my friend muttered, hands frozen to the steering wheel.

I knew we were going to die; I just didn't know when. And by the time we pulled into Dubois, we were long overdue for a miracle. The miracle was that the donut shop was open; the downside, that we still had thirty miles of bad road before we reached the ranch. Two and a half hours later, and almost too frozen with despair to notice a coyote perform a perfect extended trot across the tundra, we skidded across a wooden bridge, past a small corral, and parked in front of a low-slung and utterly unprepossessing lodge. "Boy-o-boy," I said, banging snow from my sneakers. "I bet they'll be glad to see us."

Mel and Bayard Fox, the owners of the Bitterroot Ranch, are not Wyoming natives, but their roots are as romantic and as tough as they come. Mel, a weathered, boyishly lean blond, was raised on her family's farm in Kenya; Bayard, a dead ringer for the Marlboro man except that he doesn't smoke, grew up near Philadelphia, went to Yale and, it was whispered, had worked for the CIA. This marriage between *Out of Africa* and G. Gordon Liddy's *Will* goes a long way toward explaining why they hadn't been particularly worried about the dangers we had faced—and weren't particularly impressed that we had turned up unscathed.

"He thinks we're sissies," my friend said from beneath a mountain of covers when

Some people experience déjà vu when they visit the Pyramids. I had that feeling in Wyoming

we had bedded down for the night.

"I know," I said, turning out my light. And thinking what fun it would be to take Bayard for a quick spin on the "A" train, I fell asleep.

Like all good fantasies, the myth of the West is a costume drama, so the next morning, I got up so early it was still dark, took a hot bath, and began what was to become a morning ritual. Rub Aspercreme on my legs. Tape the insides of my knees with moleskin. Dress: long johns, thermal socks, jeans, chaps, turtleneck, vest, jacket, hat, slicker—the whole cowboy kit.

Looking like one of the Young Guns, I strode off to the lodge to indulge in the kind of breakfast you can eat without feeling guilty only when you know you're in for a long haul.

When I got down to the end of the road, I saw a couple of cowboys in sweat-stained chaps and dirty dusters ride out of the mist and across the wooden bridge, their dog trailing after them. They dismounted, hitched their horses, and ambled up onto the porch, where they stood, shifting from foot to foot, trying to keep their droopy mustaches out of their coffee.

It was an ineffably romantic picture—and something of a sartorial revelation. If real cowboys, for practical reasons, make a fetish of gear, they don't dress like folks weaned on the movies. Real cowboys, it seems, don't wear Levi's, much less Girbaud jeans; they wear Wrangler's, probably because they break in faster and don't chafe at the seams. Real cowboys don't wear thousand dollar Lucchese ostrich boots like you buy at Billy Martin's on Madison Avenue; they wear Packer boots, a strange hybrid of work boot and cowboy boot that lace up the front, are cheap and comfortable, and were impossible to find in the East until Hunting World caught on. Real cowboys wear spurs—long-shanked, roweled, dripping with jingle-bobs. And real cowboy hats look like something the dog used for a whelping box. Only slightly chastened, I went inside to meet the other guests.

Given the rugged surroundings—bounded on one side by the Shoshone National Forest, on the other by the Wind River Indian Reservation, the Bitterroot comprises about one-hundred square acres, thirteen guest cabins, a main lodge, a few out buildings, and some corrals—and given the fact that Mel and Bayard are avid horsemen, the ranch tends to attract two kinds of visitors: Europeans smitten by Americana, Americans fed up with Europe. Both are serious about riding, but skill is another matter. One equestrienne, impeccably turned out in glossy dress boots and fresh nail polish, was put off by the bulky western saddle and instructions to keep her mount on a loose rein. "How the hell are you supposed to make contact with the horse?" she said, snapping her crop. Another guest, whom we instantly nicknamed "Bubbles," informed us that she had a "perfect seat." Which she did, by Rubens's standards. But her relationship to the saddle was a distant one at best. *Wang-ity-tong*, *wang-ity-tong*, off she went, listing

dangerously to port.

What we all soon discovered was that it is one thing to canter figure eights around a ring, and quite another altogether to follow Bayard on a trail ride into the hills. "I hate to go with him," Mel said in one of her rare confidences. "He has two speeds—walk and all-out."

So when Bayard announced, over dinner one night, that he was leading an all-day excursion that would require expert riding ability or, lacking that, dumb determination, our solution, being qualified in neither category, was to drive part of the way. The next morning my TC and I loaded our saddles into the car trunk and watched the rest of the posse clatter off over the bridge, ponying our horses.

We arrived at the meeting place. We saddled our horses and took off across a pasture studded with sagebrush, forded a swollen stream, plunged up the far bank, and cantered until we reached the edge of the woods and a long trail that wound twelve-thousand feet up the mountain. At moments, trotting among trees that shot a hundred feet into the bright air, and dappled with sunlight that streamed through the tangle of leaves, it was like riding in an enormous cathedral. At moments, mincing along a trail so narrow that a misstep would spell disaster, it was like riding on the edge of the earth. I figured out the essential difference between driving a car and riding a horse: I had placed my complete trust in the animal

underneath me.

Which was a very good thing indeed. As we neared the uppermost ridge, the trail swooped gently, and the horses broke into a canter. At the very top, the trail broke sharply to the left. Careening around the curve, we skidded to a halt, inches from the overhang. We tied our horses and flopped down on the grass to share sandwiches, fruit, cookies, and Snickers bars. The dogs tumbled together like clothes in a dryer. Bayard fell asleep, legs splayed, battered hat over his face. Spread out below us, like a Panavision shot from a John Ford movie, was the valley that we had traversed hours before.

Soon the wind came up, making the horses fuss at their tethers, so we checked our tack and headed home, back down trails so steep at times our knees ached and we were forced to get off and lead our horses. On level ground we made time, stopping only to let the horses drink at the stream; then forging across, whipped by gusts, we cantered faster and faster, until we were galloping a crazy zigzag through the tall bushes that dotted the field. Too exhilarated to feel terrified, I was willing to slow down only when we came to a thicket of woods and a ragged herd of cows. Our horses, many of them cow ponies, gave chase, crashing through the underbrush, leaping over logs, scattering the cows which looked annoyed, and a bit bewildered by all the fuss.

By the time we ended up back at our car, unsaddled the horses, and opened >



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the door for the fat old Lab who sprawled out exhausted on the back seat, even Bayard's thirst for recklessness had been sated. "You're terrific," he said to my friend, who had come the whole way loaded down with cameras. "When those guys from Leo Burnett come out here to shoot the Marlboro ads, they don't even get out of their jeep."

There's routine in every life, which is exactly what people are always trying to escape, but the rhythm of the ranch—organized around our basic needs and those of the other animals—was about as ho-hum, and as purifying, as breathing. Every day we would wake shortly after dawn, and lie in bed listening to the horses clatter down from the high pasture. Dress. Eat a huge breakfast: griddle cakes, sausage, eggs, juice, and black coffee. Ride all morning. Eat a huge lunch: meat, vegetables, bread, salad, dessert, and more coffee. Ride all afternoon. Stagger into the lodge for mulled wine or coffee. A quick nap or a hot bath. Eat a huge dinner: more meat, more vegetables, more bread, more salad, more *dessert*, still more coffee, and maybe another dessert. By nine it would be bedtime and sleep stirred by dreams where you would pitch and roll as if you were still on horseback.

Riding seven hours a day, every day, doesn't give your muscles time to stiffen up, and by midweek even the worst of us were in some kind of physical shape. By the week's end, our psyches had become similarly aligned. It seemed the kind of life that could make you hard—in the way Georgia O'Keeffe was hard, stripped of triviality. Or hard like my grandmother, who had no patience for *pets* because she believed that animals belonged outside, but who pulled a radiator out of the wall to rescue a struggling runt the night our dog had a litter all over the living room.

Mel had a little bit of both women in her. She loved her animals in a straightforward way, unsweetened by sentiment; she merely tolerated most people. So I was startled when, on our last night at the ranch, she suggested we might have time before we left to take a ride on the Roller Coaster. I had heard all about the Roller Coaster from a friend who'd been

at the Bitterroot a few years earlier. It was, she said, the most hair-raising ride she'd ever taken: a dead run on a trail laid out like the Cyclone at Coney Island.

"Don't worry about it," said my traveling companion as we finished packing.

"I'm not worried, exactly," I said. "I was, however, about to congratulate myself on spending a week here without breaking anything."

"You think too much," she said.

Prudence, as I had been discovering all week, has its place—but Wyoming isn't it. The next morning, after an unusually light breakfast, we saddled up. As we rode off, I consoled myself with the thought that had comforted me so many times be-

I had heard all about the Roller Coaster—a dead run on a trail like the Cyclone at Coney Island

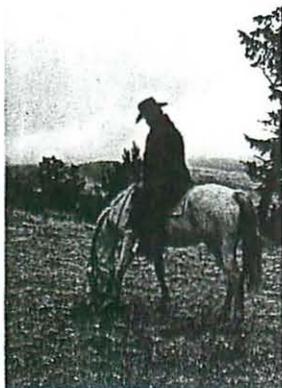
fore: I may not know what I'm doing, but my horse, Muddy, surely must.

The Roller Coaster was about a mile from the ranch, down a long winding dirt road, through a pasture where the yearlings danced over to greet us, nipping our horses on the flanks, then mincing away with great flourishes of their tails. We cantered across the pasture to loosen up. It was a great day—sunny, wetly warm like spring—and soon we arrived at the crest of a series of hills and gazed down upon a strange moonscape of porous rock which rose and fell like enormous waves.

Mel pulled up and craned around. "The faster the horses go," she said, "the more they enjoy it." I grabbed a hank of Muddy's mane in my left hand, the reins in my right, and let out a whoop, which froze in my mouth as we hurtled down the first drop, pitched at an angle so steep my stomach was left in the lurch. Before I could draw a breath, we shot straight up, whipped around a hairpin curve, plunged back down, another hairpin turn, and right back up. Mel sat grinning at the top.

"That was it?" I yelled.

"That was it," Mel said, with a hint of a smile. I had earned my spurs. Now I was anxious to try it all over again.



"Once this country gets inside you and takes hold," a buckaroo remarked while we were trailing cows on a road cutting across Independence Valley, "you may never fit in anywhere else."—Kurt Markus, *Buckaroo*

By the time our plane landed at Newark I felt like I had died. Waiting for a cab at the airport, my TC and I watched two thieves run off with another passenger's baggage. Back on the streets of Greenwich Village, still wearing my Stetson, I was jeered at by a group of teenagers in imitation Vuitton pullman-porter caps. It is always depressing to be back in New York City; this time it was even more so. What struck me was that the call of the West addressed our sense of entitlement to the land. In New York City the outdoors is the province of the dispossessed.

But the call of the West is more than real-estate's siren howl; it whispers of ambition tamed by nature; it promises so few options that the self is liberated. A few years ago when I returned from Egypt, I was convinced that to continue living as I had been was to be confined, crushed under a stack of wrong priorities. The feeling faded in a matter of weeks. This time it didn't.

In *The Solace of Open Spaces*, Gretel Ehrlich writes: "When I am in New York but feeling lonely for Wyoming, I look for the Marlboro ads in the subway." All winter I stared at those subway ads, checking the horses' tack, imagining that if I were back in Wyoming I'd be on my way to a cattle drive instead of therapy. I read cowboy handbooks at night and bored my friends with newfound lore, like how to stop a stampede. ("Very useful at rush hour," a colleague said helpfully.) By day I ordered catalogs from farm suppliers and tack shops, window-shopping pig creep feeders and stockmen's insemination kits. But it's hard to be a cowgirl in the city: when I called to inquire about a western saddle for a horse I had decided to buy, I was told that the nearest distributor was a punk boutique in SoHo.

One night, my traveling companion and I had dinner with a young woman we had met at the ranch. Looking sheepish in her lady-lawyer drag, she speared a shrimp and sighed. "I've been going back there for three years now," she said. "I figured that the more often I went, the easier it would be to give up."

"And is it?" I asked.

"Nope." She rolled her eyes. "It gets worse." ■