

September 22, 2002

Trip Report

Six inches of wet snow hit the high country five days before our September trip. A few warm days had most of it melted by our arrival but the storm scattered cattle all over the permit so we had a great challenge gathering the herd. Dana had made the decision earlier to leave the herd in the lower portion of the Little Horn canyon and this turned out to be a very fortunate decision, as we spent most of the week just trying to find cattle. A complete trip to the ranch would have been impossible as horses, cattle and cowboys were all played out. Here is how it went:

Sunday

Sunday evening brought us the greatest white saddle-bag award we have ever had. This little happening stretched over five days and involved four different people. It was incredible and went like this: a certain guest, a stockbroker from New York, let's call him, um, Ken, was very excited to join our group and called about once a week for the past couple months and asked the usual questions. Four days prior to the trip Ken called with a few last minute inquiries and then said, "my wife really wants to go on this trip but I don't want her to so if I call you right back and ask, 'are women allowed on this trip?' I want you to say NO. She will be on the other line but she won't know that you know she is listening-----after all, you know how these New York women are!"

I stuttered and stammered and replied, "Ken, I watched Bill Clinton lie for eight years but I really don't think I can do that."

"Sure you can," he shot back, "after all, you know how these New York women are."

"No, I really don't," I thought to myself as I hung up the phone and turned to my office staff for suggestions as to what I should do if he called back.

Ten minutes later the phone rings, my blood pressure pegs, and there is Ken on the phone.

"Say, did you remember the slicker you were going to bring for me?" Ken asked.

I paused and thought, "am I supposed to tell the truth or lie about this as well?"

Phew, end of conversation and no tough questions about New York women, or any women for that matter. Bullet dodged.

Four days later, guests are trekking across the country towards Sheridan in anticipation of Sunday's drive. Saturday, the phone rings at the ranch and my mother has a brief but pleasant conversation with Mrs. Ken concerning her husband's whereabouts.

Mother explained that the guests don't arrive until the following day and then Mrs. Ken asks, "why aren't women allowed on these trips?"

Mother, unaware of my conversation four days earlier replies, "why of course women are allowed on these trips. In fact, half of the crew are women and half of the guests on this trip are women."

Silence can be deafening and the silence at the New York end of the line was. (After all, you know how these New York women can be.)

Three-o'clock Sunday afternoon, Ken arrives on top of the mountain and I couldn't help but picture him as "dead man walking." Of course, the vote that night around the fire was unanimous and I'm sure Ken could have carried the bags for six consecutive days as he was nominated each night. The general opinion of the women that were on the trip was that this was far beyond a flower offense and it would be best if he showed up at home with jewelry. As of this writing I am unsure as to Ken's exact marital status, but I am sure with deep counseling things will begin to look brighter for him. Once he gets through the initial adjustment period of only seeing his three boys every other weekend I'm sure the sleepless nights and bedwetting episodes will subside. I've often said these cattle drives are a life altering experience. Ken's was.

Monday

We rode two different directions on the first gather. Chris took eight cowboys down past (and I mean WAY PAST) Rubber Boot park. Dana and I took the remainder to the bottom of Lake Creek. My group returned to camp with little hoopla but Chris's group seemed to have drawn the larger circle and were slow to return. Many struggled into camp in small groups of two or three. I overheard several people make the comment that they felt they were lost and had given thought to just sitting down, building a fire, and just waiting out being rescued. That night around the fire I explained that we weren't too good at search-and-rescue so just waiting for us to find you is not such a good idea. (Actually, we are better at body-recovery but if that appears to be too difficult we generally just divide up your stuff back at camp and deny that we ever knew you.) Everyone seemed to make to camp unassisted from that point on.

Tuesday

Tuesday night around the fire was very similar to Monday night in that we were visited by cook Gloria's evil twin sister, "Ginger." You know how some people get real obnoxious and mouthy when they have been drinking? You know the kind; they grab hold of your belt and won't let go until you have a drink with them. Well, that's Ginger. I watched in disbelief as she announced that everyone who lives outside of Montana and Wyoming are losers. However, it was kind of interesting how she sprinkled the put-downs between the chorus lines of the Montana state song she was singing. I wondered

if she could be a graduate of that not-so-famous Dale Carnegie customer-relations course, “Insulting Your Clientele For Fun And Profit.” I will say she did have the Connetians speechless. (For those of you wondering what a Connetian is, it is a now common cowboy slang term for small groups of people from Connecticut.)

Wednesday

Wednesday was our second, but successful, attempt at gathering the extra pack animals and horses from the Sardine Lake country. To save grass in the valley, we ran all the extra horses in the small 25,000 acre Sardine Lake pasture all summer long. Whenever Dana needed fresh horses he would drive out, shake an oat bucket, and the horses would come running. This worked very well until the very day we actually needed the entire herd and then they were no where to be found. Dana, Chris and eight guests rode the entire north end of the permit before Dana finally found the ponies clear down in the Little Horn Parks just above Robinson Crossing. Fortunately the gate was closed or the entire remuda would have left the area and would have been waiting for us at Rocky Bottom. As they were hunting horses, I was back in camp working out contingency plans. Regardless of how I looked at it, most options involved tennis shoes, people packing two days worth of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and rotating turns sleeping in four or five sleeping bags. Actually, after Ginger’s performance on Monday and Tuesday I was curious as to just how much people would take before the mutiny occurred. I guess I will never know.

Thursday

Thursday did find us packing down to Rock Cabin Park. Dana took most of the guests on a final circle through the high country and then proceeded to lead everyone off the Kerns-Joselyn trail above Rock Cabin Park. Guest Kathy demonstrated her equestrian skills by steering Cinch through the sticky spots by voice command only. Such nervous chatter earned her the white bags for the day but she didn’t care---she was just so damn glad to be alive.

Friday

Friday morning we tore down camp and packed out the Little Horn Canyon to our vehicles waiting at the Dipping Vat. As usual, the canyon was spectacular with the fall colors and the crystal clear waters. I have been through that canyon hundreds of times and its sheer beauty always causes me to reflect upon all the good fortune the Lord has bestowed on me---I have a good woman at home and God made me a Wyoming cowboy.

Friday Evening

Historically our September banquet send-offs can get a little out of hand. This one was no different---I ended up with Allen’s underwear. (Technically, they were Allen’s as he was given this red, lace thong autographed by all the cowgirls on the trip.) I am not sure

how this western tradition began and I am certain I have never seen such an event in any John Wayne western, but for some reason, after our drives, the pranksters in the group find great hilarity in sneaking women's undergarments into the luggage of formerly happily married men. (Attempts to sneak men's boxers into women's luggage does not seem to elicit similar jocularity.) Anyway, after parading around the Mint Bar with his red thong hanging from his shirt pocket, Al dropped his prize into my briefcase. This accident was discovered as I was digging through my briefcase trying to find my wallet so I could produce my driver's license for the nice highway patrolman. Both the officer and I were equally surprised when I flipped out the red panties.

I stammered an explanation, "These aren't mine, they're Al's."

That seemed to make things worse.