

16SHORT.DOC

Settlement of the Jasper area in Canada corresponds to the Shortgrass Country in time, but not in nature. Trappers started joining the Indians in the 1850s. Ranchers came along in small numbers. The fur trade petered out, and ranching met the usual fate of too-distant markets and too much of everything else, except money. Like all of the Rockies, meaningful development came after the railroads pushed through to join the outposts to the rest of the country.

The outfitter I chose keeps a rustic lodge and a few simple cabins back in the wilderness, accessible only by foot or horseback. Leading packhorses, the ride takes five hours. The trail leads over long stretches of moraine and unsteady rocks. Glacial-fed streams rush across slick bottoms, cutting steep banks for horses to clamber to the top. Rain erodes the trail, exposing roots to trip the unwary. Horses not only have to negotiate the difficult terrain, but in many cases have to stay under a novice rider astraddle their back.

The trip started at 9:30 a.m. at the Wabasso trailhead, South of Jasper. The owner stables a big string of horses at the exclusive Jasper Park Lodge to rent on an hourly basis. The ones for the trail ride are strong and well conditioned for mountain climbing. Saddles are cinched extra tight and tied in a triangle wrap, unlike the buckled rig of a Southwestern saddle. Reins are knotted together to keep from

stopping the ride every 20 steps to hand them back to the riders. A lead rope from a Johnson halter loops around the saddlehorn to be used at intermissions, which might be disrupted by the odor from a grizzly or the startling sight of a hiker plodding along wearing bright clothes.

The wrangler, a woman, helps every rider mount. Horses are mounted from a cold stand, meaning they aren't untracked like horses in the flatland. I suppose if one humps up or falls back with the saddle, he's reassigned to other duties, such as packing a big pannier of grub into the camp and carrying back a heavier load of stuff to base.

She (the wrangler) makes the leader of a one-man band look like he was handcuffed and hobbled. On this morning, she packed three horses with the supplies, plus our gear, and saddled five horses to be ridden, all in less than an hour. Up at the camp, she arose at daylight to awaken the cook and gather the horses from a big unfenced meadow. She leads as many as 15 riders back into the wilderness during the summer. Wrestles logs out of the trails. Sets up propane bottles and bales of hay dropped from helicopters at the lodge. Off-season, she guides bear hunters and takes care of skinning and packing out the kill.

All the tack I'd brought along was a pair of chaps and a light pair of spurs the Boss wore to school polo ponies. Spurs are politically incorrect today; nevertheless, slick boot heels are hard to adjust to after a lifetime of wearing spurs. Most of the mountain horses I had ridden before were

long jaded from the excesses of the Southern secretaries out of Mexico. I figured if hearing occurred under Canadian justice, before being sentenced for inhumanity to four-legged animals, the small size of the rowels might sway the court.

Fifty-one years ago, a bay horse named "Long John" cured me forever of wearing sharp-roweled Chihuahua spurs. The same session, I learned to be quiet around the pen when the boss matched horses to riders. So at the trailhead, I stood apart from the other three riders in a light rain, and thought of all those mornings at the old ranch of 40 or 50 head of horses milling in the corral before daylight. I snapped to attention when the wrangler said, "'Flair' is your horse's name. He's the one the Marlboro cowboy modeled 10 years ago here in Jasper."

I felt better immediately. Visualized a billboard of "Flair" and myself, showing our reflection in a big water hole. Instead of wearing old-fashioned batwing chaps and a Laredo straw hat, I'd have on a pair of short leggings and a nice white Stetson ceased to a point like a bronc rider's hat. Tried to recall how to hold a cigarette and let a horse drop his head to drink. Had a second thought of how much fun this ride was going to be with such colorful storytellers.

Also, in an instant calculation, knew my horse was old enough to be gentle.

The ride took longer than five hours. The rain grew heavier and the horses slipped in the mud. Now and then the

weather broke enough to see massive snow-capped peaks. We stopped for lunch by a small lake, spotted with beaver tree falls. Cook used to bring us dinner in the pasture. The last one's name was Vesta. She was the best kitchen hand our outfit ever hired.