

My

A L A S K A

TRAIL RIDE

By Howard Powers,
"Octogenerian" Horseman

"Enjoy a guided horseback ride through the Alaska Wilderness on mountain trails. Our knowledgeable wranglers guide you on seasoned trail horses to view majestic Mt. McKinley and the surrounding peaks and glaciers of the Alaska Range. Ride into the wilderness and experience the serenity of the forest."

- D&S ALASKA TRAIL RIDE OUTFITTERS -

On a 17-day cruise/tour to Alaska, we "enjoyed" 16 days of intermittent rain. Fortunately, we were able to participate in most of the side tours, including an extra adventure -- "An Alaska Trail Ride."

Never mind that we were wet and cold most of the time, because this was a trip to remember! So what if it wasn't under ideal conditions?

There were four different trail ride destinations to choose from. Each ride, in addition to being in various locales, also boasted varying scenery. Time frames were also listed. We chose the last option, not only because it was of the right length and duration, but also because we were promised the remote possibility of viewing Mt. McKinley from horseback, which should have been a fabulous sight.

Our bus driver delivered us to the town of Talkeetna, which seems to be quite native in comparison to Juneau and Anchorage. There were no sidewalks beside the rock streets, and the stores and businesses were mostly wooden structures and not at all elaborate.

There was a steady drizzle falling as we drove into town and it did not abate.

Sharon Robertson, also a member of our tour group, had made a reservation to take this ride at Talkeetna, but we did not contact the office until the evening prior to arriving in town. We were promised a ride, so as soon as we got off the bus, we went to the tour headquarters to get directions to the trail ride office. We were given a map and started walking in the direction indicated.

After what seemed like a mile in the drizzle, we still had not found the spot, but one more inquiry and we found ourselves at the rain-drenched headquarters.

With my daughter Becky and her husband Karryl, our soggy trio joined Sharon, who had somehow managed to beat us to the area. She was already mounted and in a slicker when we arrived.

After speaking with "Wrangler Phil,"



The author and "Pete"



The "office"

we were each fitted with slickers and a horse. As a good trail guide, Phil gave us a demonstration of proper seat, rein handling, and the fundamentals of riding up and down hills.

Sharon was without a cap, so I gave her mine, which left me with a hooded sweatshirt that soaked up rain; a cold shower that then dribbled down my neck and shoulders. Since I had no face protection, rain covered my glasses. They were no longer of use to me, so I stuffed



Becky & her mount

them in my pocket and let the rain fall.

Wrangler Phil took off on the sodden trail with each of us following in single file behind him. Trail horses soon learn that the easiest place to walk is in the tracks of the horse immediately in front, and since these were "seasoned" horses, that was precisely what they intended to do.

My horse was named "Pete" and he was a big, solid paint with years of dealing with novice riders. The first thing he let me know, as he thrust his nose out several times, was



"Don't pull on my reins!" According to Phil, most of his riders are, as he described them, "Screaming women or wannabe Cowboys." So it was easy to understand Pete's desire that I not yank on his reins.

The clouds were low and solid, so the chances of seeing Mt. McKinley or any other peak higher than an ant hill were out of the question. Unfortunately, Phil also told us that we would not be seeing any wildlife in this area.

He led us across a sandy area, which was strewn with driftwood and trash and in times of high water would have been covered. Onward we went, to some smaller tree-covered areas, and across shallow water. The horses plodded along in single file in that well-worn path for the entire duration of the trip. All of the horses, except for Phil's horse, were fitted with nose bags to keep them from grazing or grabbing tree leaves.

Under other circumstances, I might have been somewhat bored with this ride, but the trainer in me was inspired. I found myself working with Pete, lightly flexing his reins until he finally decided I was not going to yank. He relaxed and dropped his nose in response to my signal. Sighting Mt. McKinley or not, I was having a good time!

Pete was a good horse — solid, stout and quiet, and he would have made a great horse in any other place. He just had it figured out that the best thing for him to do was to stay in the track behind the horse in front of him and plod along.

Phil took us for an hour and a half ride, ending on the back streets of town so we could see things we otherwise would not have known were there. When we got back to the barn, we all dismounted and told Phil

thanks for a good ride. I shook hands with him and told him that I was 84 years old and had ridden and trained horses for 70 years. To say he was shocked was an understatement! He asked me to repeat that information again, to make certain he had heard correctly.

We visited awhile and he told about the problems he experiences with novice riders and how he appreciated taking us, even though the drizzle never let up and it was very chilly. We thanked him for taking us under those conditions and parted company.

On the way back to the tour headquarters, we stopped at a pizza place to warm up and get some refreshments. Afterwards, as we were heading back to our bus, we spotted our "Wrangler Phil" on the other side of the street, and he had a bottle in his hand. Maybe it was the weather that was factor in his need, or the shock of having an octogenarian on his ride, but either way he seemed to need a drink! We all had a good laugh about that.

Any ride on a horse is a good ride. Even under the most adverse conditions in the remote town of Talkeetna, Alaska, we believed it was so.

I promised Phil that I was going to write about the ride and would send him a copy of the magazine when it was published. I told him it would be a nice article and not to worry.

I think he will be pleased.



Sharon was mounted and waiting at the stable when we arrived.