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Trail riders from all walks of life make lasting friendships in New Mexico.

Story and photos by Mark Bedor

# Chuckwagon Camaraderie



IT'S EVENING IN A REMOTE MEADOW AT A ranch in northern New Mexico. As the daylight fades, a warm light glows from a big, white canvas tent large enough for 100 men. Under the shelter, guitars ring and dozens of cowboys listen as singer-songwriter Jeff Nourse and his two-man band play his original song, "Old Friends."

"Good friends are hard to find ... I wouldn't trade any of mine," Jeff sings. "Anytime, they'll be there to the end."

That tune perfectly captures what the annual Chuckwagon Trail Ride is all about. Every June, for more than 60 years, men

have come from all over the country to escape their daily routine, saddle up and enjoy the beauty of New Mexico.

"It's just about coming out and enjoying this beautiful space and having a chance to ride our horses and be with a great bunch of guys," says Chuckwagon President Howard Gershon.

Those simple pleasures can have a profound impact, especially in today's stressed-out world.

"Something happens when people are up here," says rancher Kim Chesser, who is here to provide horses. "When you're relaxed and



Scenic vistas, gourmet food and lots of great conversation along the trail make the Chuckwagon ride worth coming back for.

feel comfortable, eating together, having fun together and riding together ... lasting friendships are made."

For the better part of a week, some 65 men spend their days on a nice relaxed trail ride, soaking in the scenery, and getting to know each other. And along the trail, it doesn't take long to discover what an interesting bunch they are. Dusty Davis flew F-15s during his 30 years in the U.S. Air Force, while raising American Quarter Horses at the same time. He has scaled back a bit but still owns five American Quarter Horses, including the stallion Perlino Lena Cksix, at his ranch near Raton, New Mexico. On the trail today, he's riding Heygoodlookin Cksix, and at the age of 86, Dusty's in better shape than most men ever are.

"What's more exciting?" I ask. "Flying a fighter jet or riding a horse?"

"Oh, they're both about the same risk!" Dusty says, laughing.

Most of the horses on this ride are Quarter Horses, and about half of the guys bring their own. Bob Tabing is here riding LJS Hay Dude. Russell Shaw is on his beautiful palomino, Alafrost, and Stan Williams rides a striking grullo, HR Gayles Starbuck.

Riding the Land of Enchantment (New Mexico's nickname) is one Kodak moment after another. We trek through wide-open mountain meadows, follow trails that wind through pine forests, and travel along the shore of quiet ponds of water.

Conversation is relaxed and easy. I meet Loren Skyhorse, a Colorado custom saddle maker who once worked as a government hunter in Alaska. "So the Fish and Wildlife Service hired me to go to the Aleutian Islands," he recalls, "to join their project to try to save a bird from extinction – the Aleutian Canadian goose."

Mike Kennedy is another Coloradan on the ride. As a kid in the 1950s, he used to commute horseback to his gas station job in Estes Park and fall asleep in the saddle on the ride home.

"In the evening, I was tired," he says. "The old horse would take me home, stop at the gate and wait for me to wake up."

I also ride for a while with retired ear, nose and throat surgeon Dr. Roy Dunlap. "I've always wanted to do this," he says. "It's really a dream come true."

The Chuckwagon once had more than 100 riders saddle up every year. It began as a "point to point" ride that moved camp

every day. Now it's a "wagon wheel" ride, with each day's trek starting from a single base camp. That's a lot less work. And the Chuckwagon is now limited to about 65 riders.

"In the early years when I came, we had about 120 riders," Howard says. "You could be in camp for five days and not necessarily see everybody. So we decided we'd like to collapse the group a little bit. That way, everybody gets to interact with everybody, there's no separation, no big cliques that form. So it's very cordial."

Kim, of New Mexico's Burnt Well Guest Ranch, provides horses for those of us who don't have our own, out of a string that includes a number of registered horses. I was fortunate to ride "Kodiak," a Colonel Freckles descendant owned by Kim's wrangler, Kenneth Thomas. That well-trained mount was especially helpful shooting photographs horseback.

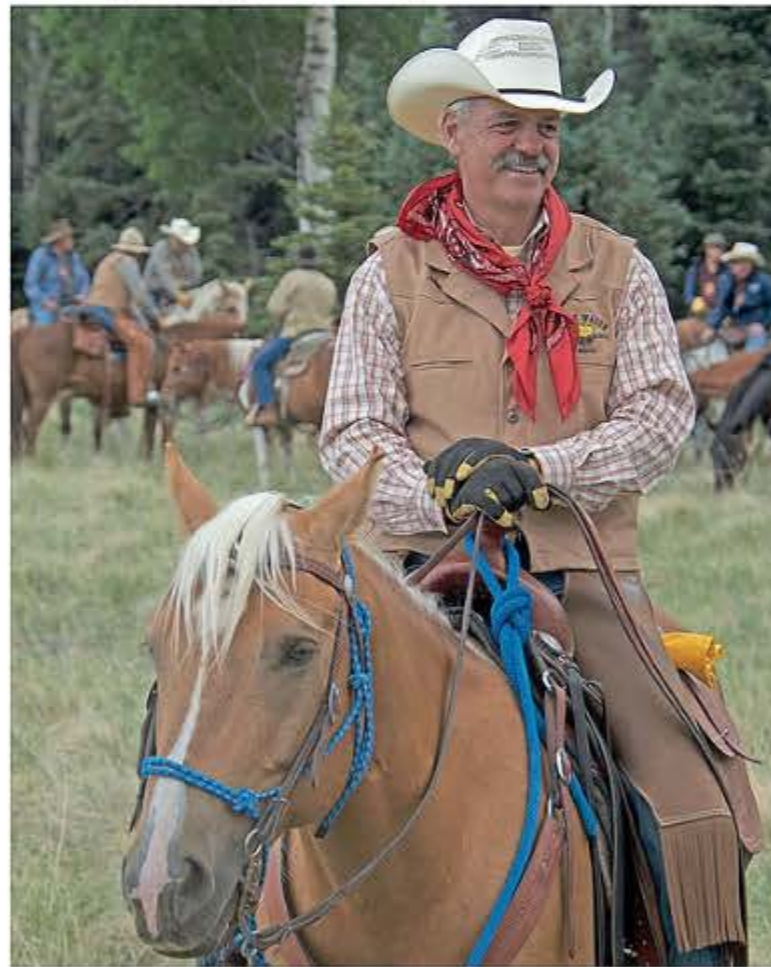
But finding horses that safely accommodate riders of any size and ability is no easy task.

"I probably buy four horses to every one that I keep," Kim says. "I buy horses all the time, but most of them don't work out."

Retired "bomb-proof" ranch horses often enjoy a second career as dude horses. But they're increasingly hard to find.

Despite the challenge, Kim still gets it done, and he brought about 30 mounts to the Chuckwagon.

Mornings are busy as Kim, son Tye and Kenneth saddle



Russell Shaw, on board Alafrost, is just one of the riders who brought their own horse to the Chuckwagon Trail Ride. Alafrost, bred by 30-year breeder Hunt Ranch of Dupree, South Dakota, is by Alamitos Sun Frost, out of TKM Dolly Frost by Bucko Jack.



Stan Williams lets HR Gayles Starbuck take a nice, long drink. The 11-year-old Appendix gelding goes back to American Quarter Horse hall of famers Colonel Freckles and Jackie Bee, as well as the legendary stallion Tee Cross, bred by Robert "Bob" Norris, himself a hall of famer and AQHA past president, on his Tee Cross Ranches in Colorado.

horses, adjust stirrups and get riders mounted. But before any guest gets on, Kim and the crew take every animal for a quick test ride.

"No matter if they're the gentlest kid's horse we have, we get on every one we saddle and ride them around a little bit," Kim says. "And it doesn't happen very often, but if anything goes wrong, we want it to go wrong with us."

Still, anytime you swing into the saddle, anything can happen – like the day we popped over a ridge to discover a shockingly big herd of elk, including dozens of very young calves. We came across elk herds during two of our rides. And I spotted a small group of those majestic animals during a morning walk near camp. Wildlife, sunrises in beautiful country and camping out in the cool, clean air of the high country were worth the price of admission.

Horseback adventures are, of course, not risk-free. That's why EMT Fernando Medina and nurse Leslie Smith go along for the ride. With a satellite phone, a defibrillator and other gear in their saddle bags, the pair were ready for anything. But happily, they didn't have much to do.

"No business is the best business," Fernando says.

"These cowboys are tough," Leslie adds. "They don't get hurt too much."

The Chuckwagon designates several of its own riders to

help along the trail as wranglers. Easy to spot in their red vests, they're quick to assist anyone who needs a hand. Wrangler Shawn Murphy brought up the rear. "Just to make sure everybody stays together," he says, "and make sure we don't leave anybody."

While this is a camping trip, we're not exactly roughing it. The Chuckwagon camp features some nice amenities no 1800s chuckwagon ever had, like hot showers. The ride provides a state-of-the-art mobile bathroom with plenty of hot water. And how many cowboys have steak and lobster after a day in the saddle?

"Incredible!" Russell says. "Sleeping on the ground and eating lobster!"

That feast includes a glass of wine or a favorite cocktail. "These are thirsty cowboys," Brian Faulkner says as he handles bartending duties.

Mornings start with hot pancakes, made-to-order omelets and other goodies. The cook crew even met us one day with a hot lunch along the trail.

"Lobster, chicken cordon bleu, salmon on the trail ... It's one of the few places where you go camping for five days and actually gain weight," Howard says.

But beyond the food, the riding and the scenery, something deeper brings these guys back together year after year. "It becomes like a fraternity," Howard says. "I've been here for 12 years. Many of the guys have been here for 20 years. And we have guys that come up every year who don't ride any more, but they just want to see their buddies. It's like an annual reunion."

For many, it's like an extended family. But families can have sorrow, as well as good times. There were prayers for a member in the hospital, and memories of another whose saddle is now empty.

Edwin Alderson made such an impact on those who knew him that the Chuckwagon Ride's top award is now named in his honor.

"He really did inspire a lot of us," Howard says. "He set the standard for the group in a lot of ways, as a horseman and a human being."

Member Scott Eckleson was clearly moved when he received the first award named in Edwin's honor, for all Scott has done for the group.

"I just love this ride," he said as he stood before the group to accept his honor. "And I can't thank you enough."

Everybody here loves this ride.

"It's the guys, it's the horses, it's the cowboy way," Stan says as he sits in the saddle. "It's this beautiful scenery. It's all of that stuff that just works for me."

The Chuckwagon Ride is invitation only. But the group would love to invite some new members. "We really encourage new members," Howard says. "We're not really in the trail-riding business. We're in the hospitality business. We want people to come and have a good time. So we bend over backwards to be welcoming and accommodating for new riders, to make sure they're having a good time and that they're safe. Safety is a really big issue for us."

As that song goes, good friends are hard to find. But there's no shortage of them on the Chuckwagon Ride. And they'd love to have a few more. ■

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