

staff members look after the horses and cater to parties of about 12 people. Meals are sturdy western offerings of bacon, eggs and pancakes for breakfast, steak and potatoes for supper, and thick sandwiches for lunch on the trail.

Dewy conducts himself much like Augustus McCrae from "Lonesome Dove," and his speech is peppered with picturesque western metaphors. He is clearly a favourite with his customers and many of the people we met on the ride were back for their third or fourth trip.

During the night the temperature dipped down below zero, but the children and the dog slept like rocks. Day 2 gave us the option of a fishing trip to a glacial lake, a nature walk in the vicinity of the camp, or just a day in camp, playing cards and reading. Heath, Maddie, her cousin Katy and the baby opted for the latter, and Hart and I signed up for the fishing trip.

It was time for me to choose a horse. I told Dewy I was looking for something quiet, something with no spirit at all, a sick one if it was available. He introduced me to Dixie, a tall mule with long velvet brown ears and a nose like a wildebeest's. I could tell at a glance that Dixie was the mount for me. She was asleep.

"She's pretty much bombproof," said Dewy. "Mules are different from horses because they look where they're putting their feet."

Good enough for me. We mounted and rode off single file in the direction of the mountain lake, with Hart, who is a talker, already locked in theological discussion with his guide, Sonja. Dixie had an interesting gait, a bit like riding a piano stool over interlocking brick, but she travelled in a straight line without any advice from me. My attention turned to the scenery.

Ron the farmer pointed out yellow potentilla bushes blossoming on the valley floor. Marie the group leader stopped us so that we could watch a group of elk grazing in a high meadow. As we climbed into the south range, the trees thinned out and gave us a dramatic view back down the valley.

At the base of a falls that spilled out of the granite side of Mount Arethusa, we tied up our animals in a cluster of spruce that formed the edge of the tree



Dewy with six-year-old Maddie on Bullet on the trail.

line and ate our lunch. Hart, who had been demanding to see a Rocky Mountain since he got on the plane in Toronto, led the climb up a 45-degree slope to a blue-green glacial lake. It was stocked with cutthroat trout, and I was anxious to try my fly rod, but by the time we got there it was early afternoon, leaving only 20 minutes to fish before we had to return for supper. Trout swirled disdainfully around each fly I offered and there were no takers. After I snapped a few pictures of Hart fishing at 2,438 metres, we started back down. Since Hart hadn't stopped talking all day, on the way home I rode behind him

to field his questions and give both his guide and his horse a break. Half an hour from camp, he ran out of words for the first time in his life. Marie watched him closely to see that he didn't drift off in the saddle.

The next morning Dewy prepared to pack our family back out to the road, this time without the wagon. To my surprise, the baby settled comfortably in my lap, straddling the pommel. Diapers hung in one saddlebag and a bottle in the other. After 91 metres of the "Dixie shuffle" he fell asleep. Andy the dog trotted along behind the horses and swam the icy waters of the Sheep River 14 times.

And that was that. A calm, orderly and very pleasant three days in the mountains. The horses, the children and my nose had all behaved beautifully. The baby only cried once, and that was during a rough river crossing in the wagon when I tried to get a picture of the horses and bonked him on the head with the camera.

Out at the trailhead, it was startling to hear the sound of a car after three days of silence. The children were misty-eyed when they said goodbye to their horses. My parting with Dixie might have been emotional and embarrassing for both of us, but fortunately, she had fallen asleep once again. ■

*Dan Needles is a writer from Collingwood, Ont., and the author of the Wingfield Farm stage plays.*

## If you go:

There are many ways to enjoy a family horseback vacation, from roughing it in the mountains to staying at a working ranch.

Here are four Alberta outfitters who cater to families:

**Anchor D Guiding and Outfitting Ltd.**  
P.O. Box 656, Black Diamond, Alta. T0L 0H0 (403) 933-2867.

**Bates Bar J Ranch**  
P.O. Box 700, Cochrane, Alta. T0L 0W0 (403) 637-2199.

- A foothills ranch experience with a children's weekly summer camp. Adults welcome except in July and August.

**Boundary Ranch**  
P.O. Box 44, Kananaskis, Alta. T0L 2H0 (403) 591-7171.

- Backcountry trips in the mountains for groups and families. Ages six and up for day trips and eight and up for overnights.

**South Ram Outfitters**  
P.O. Box 162, Caroline, Alta. T0M 0M0 (403) 722-2539.

- A wilderness adventure for all ages on the Ram River and its tributaries.

For a list of horseback holidays in Alberta, contact the Alberta Outfitters Association, P.O. Box 277, Caroline, Alta. T0M 0M0; 1-800 742-5548.

# Rocky Mountain Adventure

*What happens when a committed walker learns that his wife has saddled the family with a holiday on horseback?* By Dan Needles



**LEFT:** Dan Needles and one-year-old Matthew hit the trail on Dixie, the "bombproof" mule. **ABOVE:** Heading to 2,400 metres.



**T**he first thing to understand is that horses make me sneeze. If I touch them I have to wash immediately. Even a photograph of a horse has been known to make my eyes water. I find the Western saddle slightly more comfortable than sitting in a shovel, but not much. In short, I prefer to walk.

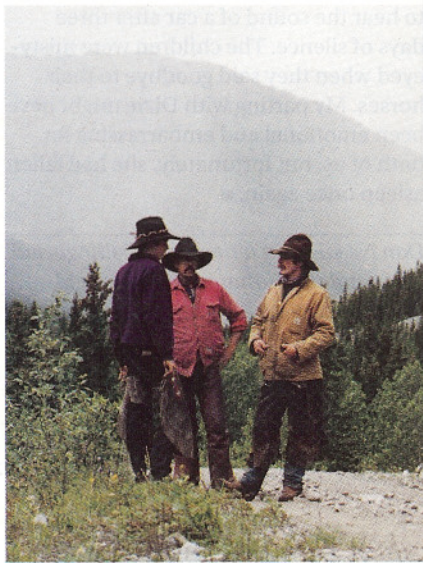
So imagine my surprise when my wife, Heath, arranged to take the whole family, including our one-year-old, Matthew, and the dog, horseback riding in the Rockies. I thought she was out of her mind. Apart from the risks to my nose, a horse looks like a three-cheese pizza to a grizzly bear, and she was proposing to take us into Grizzly Country.

Her brother, Dewy Matthews, and his wife, Jan,

run Anchor D Guiding and Outfitting from a ranch on the edge of the Sheep River Wildlife Reserve in Kananaskis Country, about 45 minutes southwest of Calgary. Dewy and Jan have been leading trail rides back through Kananaskis for 16 years and have been asking us to come for a visit for the last 11. They have 90 horses at the ranch, including three big teams of Percherons and Belgians for freighting wagonloads of supplies over the rough mountain roads. Dewy shoes all of the horses himself, but there's still enough work left over to employ several wranglers and cooks throughout the summer.

Most of the outfitters in the area have an age limit of over 14 for the overnight rides, and I asked Dewy why he and Jan did not.

"We ask the parents to use some judgment," explained Dewy. I was all set to use mine, but Dewy dismissed my fears. "Look, my kids have been doing this since they were in diapers,"



he assured me. "I've even got a baby seat on one of the wagons."

We decided on a three-day excursion to his base camp and back. Dewy trailered the horses from the ranch to the start of the Junction Trail, 16 kilometres up the highway. The trail leaves the paved road and meanders for 19 kilometres back into the upper reaches of the Sheep River Valley. He put my daughter Maddie, who is six, on a horse named Bullet, and my son Hart, who is five, on a dappled nag named Rony. Two of the guides led them on

halter ropes behind their horses. My wife, who is an experienced rider, got Jiggs, a flashy-looking gelding with fire in his eyes and plenty of air behind them. I rode in on the wagon with the baby and the dog, hoping there would be a billiard room at the base camp. It turned out to be a bone-jarring trip over a road that had been pretty much destroyed by



City folks can discover the romance of the range at Dewy Matthews' ranch at the edge of the Sheep River Wildlife Reserve, southwest of Calgary.

massive flooding of the Sheep River. Holding the wagon back on the descents was as much work for the horses as pulling the half-ton load up the hills, but Lonnie and Burt, the Belgian team, seemed to consider this an ordinary day's work. My dog, Andy, a little Jack Russell terrier, looked over the first cliff to the Sheep River 30 metres below and promptly peed on my knee. The baby fell asleep within a few minutes and didn't wake up again until our lunch stop at the base of Mount Gibraltar.

Motorized vehicles have been prohibited in the Sheep River Valley since 1977, and Anchor D is one of only two outfitters that make trips into this area. From the time we left the highway, we were alone in countryside that was surprisingly remote and very beautiful. The valley was heavily logged at the beginning of the century, then it was mined for coal and grazed by cattle. For the past 20 years it has been Crown land, and the trees have been allowed to grow

back, encouraging the return of elk, moose, mule deer and the grizzly bears, which give the expedition a tinge of excitement.

Dewy pointed to a spot where he saw a sow grizzly on the trail just the week before. He actually chased it while riding on Jiggs, who apparently has no fear of bears.

"I don't want her getting used to us," said Dewy of the bear, and it occurred to me that the rifle stuck through his saddlebags might have more than an ornamental purpose. Dewy insists that he has never had to shoot a grizzly in all his years in the mountains and he doesn't ever want to. Nevertheless, I made a mental note to stay off Jiggs.

**B**ase camp turned out to be a rustic assembly of white canvas tents on a rising slope with a commanding view of the north side of the valley and the Sheep Range. The tents had cots, and the main mess tent had two wood stoves for those making the adjustment from the heat and humidity of Ontario to the cool climate of the mountains. But this was definitely not a "lodge to lodge" ride.

Dewy's regular customers are proud of the Spartan camping conditions. Four