

Montana's Powder River Wagon Train

Lin Sutherland

Onion Creek Ranch

Buck and Blondie lunged up the steep slopes of Belle Creek Ridge, a place where hundreds of thousands of cattle crossed in the famous Texas to Montana cattle drives of the 1890's. The two blond Belgian work horses strained against the leather traces to pull the heavy chuck wagon up the steep incline. Their chests steamed against the hot sun, blue skies and white clouds of Montana in August.

Suddenly two wranglers burst forth from the crowd of 60 riders, loosening their lariats as they galloped down the hill to meet the wagons.

"Rope it up, boys!" yelled wagon drover Betty Schoonover as she stood in the seat of the wagon, thick driving reins held tightly in her hands. At 39, Betty is the youngest and only female member of the wagon train drovers, and she is serious about what she does. She is the partner of wagon master Larry Amendes, who having succeeded in getting to the top of the ridge, now stood on his wagon looking down at the difficult ascent below.

The two cowboys, Scott Sanburn, 45, and Bram Shaffer, 21, dismounted quickly and tied their lariats to the joint of the tongue and the wagon's body, then mounting quickly rode up the hill till the rope tautened and looked back at Betty for the signal.

"PULL, BUCK! PULL, BLONDIE!" she yelled forcefully and slapped the reins onto their muscled hindquarters, which flexed and bulged as the strong matched team hit the traces and began to move the wagon up to the top of the ridge. Scott and Bram pushed their horses up too, the ropes helping pull the wagon.

As the big draft horses gained momentum, Larry Amendes moved his wagon out of the way and watched as they crested the rise. All the riders standing on the hill burst into spontaneous applause at the monumental coordinated effort and skill demonstrated by wagon driver, wranglers and horses.

That's the Powder River Wagon Train of the land of the Big Sky. It's a six-day experience that recreates an authentic wagon train and cattle drive across the rolling grassy hills and pine topped ridges of southeastern Montana. With a herd of Longhorns, a remuda of fine horses and several wagons leading the way, guests travel what Montanans call "Custer Country", an area rich in history

where many of our pioneer forefathers crossed, Native Americans lived and died and where the skirmishes leading up to the Battle of the Little Big Horn took place. It is a land of sagebrush and prairie grass and tawny buffalo grass knee high covering the vast landscape.

People come from all over: families were there for the 1998 Wagon Train from Florida, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, Texas, Switzerland, Germany and Britain. When asked why he came, retired German businessman Alex Kern said one word—"SPACE."

Montana has less than a million people in the whole state—Germany, at half the size, has 80 million. Is it any wonder that on the first day of the trip, Mr. Kern stood on the top of a hill gazing in wonder at the unending expanse of land before him.

Freedom. Freedom is what we seek, and it's what we get. As all guests are allowed, I was able to roam freely on horseback, galloping up hills to get a view, loping down long corridors of grass, plunging up to the top of a butte --it was exhilarating. Unlike many "dude ranches" who make guests walk head to tail, Powder River, while taking all precautions to match horses with riders and their levels, gives riders the freedom to ride as they wish. It was refreshing for a rider who had some experience and would die of boredom doing the horses in line thing.

The first morning of the drive was foggy, misty and atmospheric. A little rain had blown through, cooling things down, and all around the yellow slickers began to emerge. There was the usual air of electricity as horses were saddled and mounted, cattle gathered and the start of the drive impended. Much whinnying and calling of herd buddies separated ensued. Much shouting and gathering of saddle bags and water bottles strapped on. And suddenly Trail Boss Tracy Fruit galloped to the front of the group, raised his hand in a signal and called "Let's go!"

The whole group surged forward, forming smaller groups of visiting guests, horses danced, cattle bawled, one wrangler's gelding exploded with energy and a short rodeo ensued. My big paint, the personal roping horse of Horse Wrangler Mike Williams, strained to gallop and I let him work off some of his morning moxie in a rush up the hill.

We rode the beautiful plains and hills, rich with the high nutrient grass the cattle herds from Texas craved and fattened up on in the 1880's. We had lunch at a reservoir high in the ponderosa pines, and the teenagers from North Carolina swung out on the rope swings and dropped into its chilly waters. We struggled to the top of W Butte, the highest butte around, from which we could see the Powder River to one side, the border of Wyoming to the south. We saw horned toads under rocks, flushed white tail and mule deer and pronghorn antelopes. Rabbits and hawks and the occasional marmot graced our paths.

But the best part was waking up at 3 a.m. under a starry brilliantly-clear sky and being struck dumb by a vibrant display of Northern Lights. Streaks and wisps of gray and white undulated across the horizon, like a slow dance with the bowl of black sky above it. Their shapes metamorphosed in slow motion, like ghost dancers. While humans slept, Nature performed another miracle. It left me gasping and unable to return to sleep.

They have a saying in Montana about how they "neighbor" people. I'd never heard that used as a verb. Sure, they're my neighbors, but do they neighbor me? Well, in Montana, they do. The entire town of Broadus works together year round to do all the hard things ranchers do: gather cattle, brand, inoculate, doctor, drive, move to different pastures, birth, and so on and so on. It's no different when it comes to the wagon train. The whole community gets together to make sure it happens on a grand scale, with a final "pitchfork fondue" and street dance on the last day of the drive. Wranglers and guests dance and the band plays most every night of the drive, but it heated up on the last night, and we two-stepped and polkaed away the night.

There were even tears in Betty Schoonover's eyes when she came to say good-bye. And mine. How could I ever forget that Montana spaciousness and freedom, the

strength of those surging horses as the chuck wagon clattered up the hill with the help of a few good cowboys, the view of the trailing Longhorns and the sound of the drovers calling.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Call 1-800-492-8835 or 800-982-0710 for more information. Powder River Wagon Train, P O Box 676, Broadus, MT 59317.

AND DON'T MISS...

While you're up there, don't miss these close-by, great side trips:

Little Big Horn Battlefield and Museum (Custer's Last Stand)

Range Riders Museum, Miles City (a wonderful extensive collection of cowboys, cattlemen, horsemen of the area: wagons, guns, knives, saddles, historical photos, Native American artifacts, bits and spur collection) 406 875 2233

Pompey's Pillar National Historic Landmark (where W.C. Clark of Lewis and Clark carved his name) 406 232-2890

Western Heritage Center, Billings Montana (a free museum with excellent exhibits) 406-256-6809

Cheyenne Trailriders, Northern Cheyenne Reservation, Lame Deer. Cheyenne tribal members Zane and Sandy Spang host visitors for a cultural experience, including riding the reservation, ethnobotany on plants and their uses by Cheyenne, storytelling, clown dancers, gourd dancers and camping. 406-784-6150

SUGGESTED READING

Faded Hoof Prints—Bygone Dreams, Stories from Montana's Greatest Livestock Frontier, Powder River Country, by Maude L. Beach (WPA), from the Powder River Historical Society, Box 575, Broadus, MT 59317

Bob Fudge, Texas Trail Driver, Montana-Wyoming Cowboy 1862-1933, by Jim Russell, order from Walter Clark, Forsyth, MT.

They Pointed them North, by Teddy Blue Abbot with Helen Huntington Smith

A Warrior Who Fought Custer by P. Marquis

About the Author

Lin Sutherland teaches horsemanship and riding at Onion Creek Ranch in Austin, Texas. She rides and writes where the west wind takes her.