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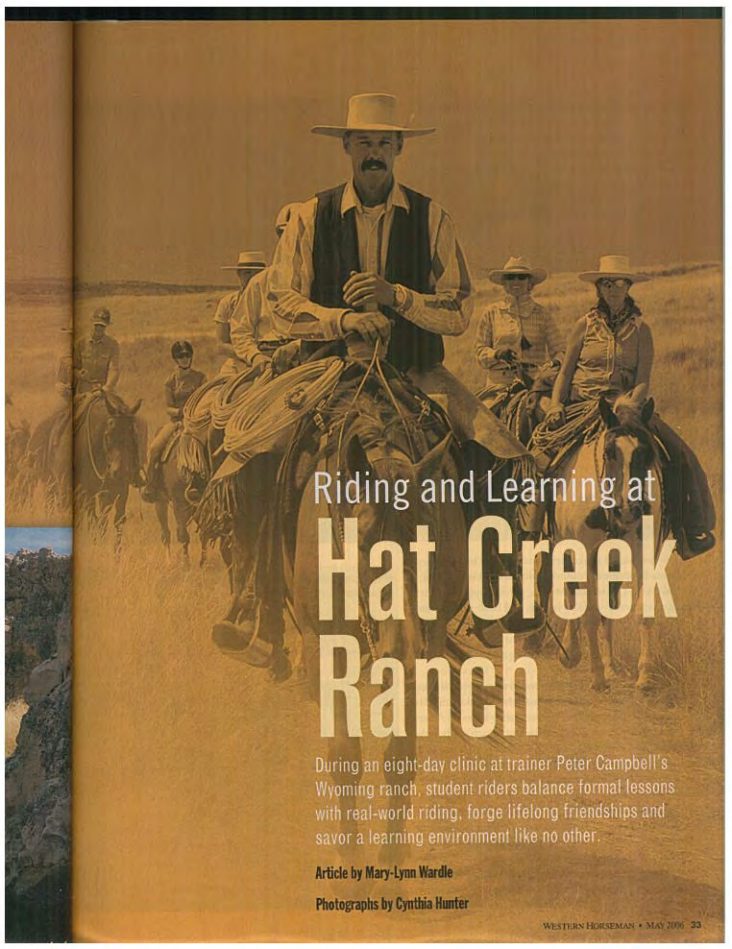
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HORSEMANSHIP



A group of riders on horseback in a field, with a man in a cowboy hat in the foreground. The scene is set in a vast, open landscape under a hazy sky. The man in the foreground is wearing a light-colored long-sleeved shirt, a dark vest, and a wide-brimmed hat. He is holding the reins of his horse. Behind him, several other riders are visible, some wearing hats and others in more casual attire. The overall tone is warm and golden, suggesting a late afternoon or early morning setting.

Riding and Learning at Hat Creek Ranch

During an eight-day clinic at trainer Peter Campbell's Wyoming ranch, student riders balance formal lessons with real-world riding, forge lifelong friendships and savor a learning environment like no other.

Article by Mary-Lynn Wardle

Photographs by Cynthia Hunter

I sat astride my Paint mare, Bittersweet, oblivious to the 100-degree heat as I gazed, awestruck, at a simple pair of wagon tracks that split the open Wyoming landscape.

The tracks had been carved into the earth, more than a century before, by the Cheyenne-Deadwood stagecoach, which ran from September 1876 to January 1891. As I took in the scene with my fellow riders, it wasn't difficult to picture an 18-passenger coach making its way across the plains of southeastern Wyoming.

There were around a dozen of us, riders from all across North America, gathered at the Eagle's Nest Stagecoach Gap with clinician Peter Campbell. Flanked by massive sandstone outcroppings, "Stage Gap" is the standout landmark on the trainer's Hat Creek Ranch, an outfit 15 miles east of Wheatland, Wyoming.

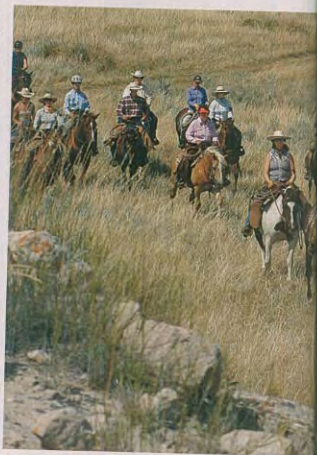
My fellow riders and I had come to Hat Creek for one of two eight-day clinics Peter and his wife, Trina, host each August. The clinics give the couple a break from their hectic on-the-road schedule, which takes them all over the United States and Canada, and offers small groups of horsemanship students the opportunity to learn from one of today's top horsemen in the quiet, relaxed environment of a remote Wyoming ranch. Students get the chance to balance formal lessons with real-world riding—gathering cattle or checking fence, for instance—in a supportive atmosphere that turns unacquainted riders into lifelong friends.

Cast of Characters

The first morning, I awoke early, unable to get back to sleep. When my boots hit the dust outside the bunkhouse door, I saw that Adam, Jesse and Megan, the Campbells' ranch hands, were already feeding horses, and Peter was ambling across the yard, walking toward Dillon, his wiry buckskin horse. The sandstone towers erupting out of the earth around the Campbells' log-cabin-style house gave the ranch headquarters the feel of a movie set.

Peter grew up in Canada's ranch country, and began starting colts at age 12, when he went to work for a pack outfit. He developed his skills as a horse trainer during stints on Alberta's Wine Glass Ranch and Government Ranch—where he and two other cowboys managed a 200-horse remuda—and during time spent in California, studying vaquero horsemanship traditions. For the past 18 years, Peter's given clinics all over North America, helping riders develop what he calls "willing partnerships" with their horses. The "at-home" clinics at his ranch give him a chance to teach, and his students the chance to learn, over a longer period of time, and in more peaceful surroundings.

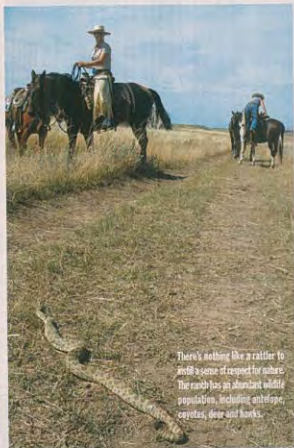
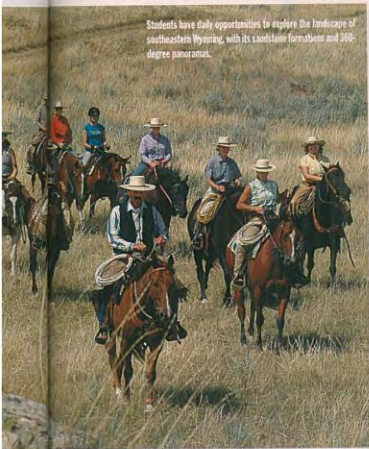
Over the course of the next week, the morning walk from the bunkhouse, down a dirt road to the corral containing my Paint, would become an opportunity to reflect on all I was



Along with ranch riding and horseback ranch work, in-depth round-pen training, with colts and saddle horses, is an important part of the clinic.



Students have daily opportunities to explore the landscape of southeastern Wyoming, with its sandstone formations and 360-degree panoramas.



There's nothing like a rattler to instill a sense of respect for nature. The ranch has an abundant wildlife population, including antelope, coyotes, deer and hawks.

learning. Morning chores – feeding hay, filling water troughs, mucking out pens – became a sort of meditation for me and the ranch's other guests.

Clifford and Doug, bachelor brothers from Manitoba, own a ranch with about 300 horses and 2,000 head of cattle. Sue hails from British Columbia; Kathy from Manitoba; Lolly from Michigan; and "Nana" from North Carolina. Lanham, from Texas, was usually last on the scene, reason enough for some good-natured kidding about him "sleeping in." And, Trina's dad, Walter, rounded out the group.

A Typical Day

Our days revolved around our colts and our saddle horses, and the rare luxury of having uninterrupted time available to learn from them, from Peter, and from fellow ranch guests.

After each morning's 7 a.m. breakfast, we spent the next few hours in the round pen with our colts, working them with ropes and flags, concentrating on their reactions, how they shifted their weight and moved their hindquarters. Once the colts were under saddle, things moved quickly for them; by their second rides, we were using them to work cattle.

By the time we were ready for a midmorning break, Walter would arrive – driving a wagon pulled by Bert and Ernie, two massive draft horses – and unload a cooler filled with iced water bottles. As we retreated to the sidelines, Adam, Jesse and Megan would take center stage in the round pen, working with their own colts.

Some days, Peter led the group to a figure-eight round corral near the ranch house, and coached us on moving our colts, catching their eyes and rolling them off the corral fence. The in-depth round-pen work had always intrigued me at traditional clinics, but there had usually been no opportunity to discuss it, given the varying skill levels among other students. The eight-day schedule and slower daily pace – and the fact that Hat Creek's clinics are geared for riders ready to move beyond the basics – put such opportunities within reach. For example, we learned the importance of a rope and hobbles to a horseman, and how to use cattle as training aids, to teach ourselves, and our colts, about the elusive concept of "feel."

Around noon, with the mercury nearing the century mark, we'd return our colts to their pens, top off their water and head back to the bunkhouse to wash up for lunch, over which



Peter takes up his post at the Hat Creek barn, a hub of daily activity for his students.

we'd compare notes about the morning's work and share observations about what we were learning.

At 2 p.m., we'd reconvene at the corrals and saddle our horses for an afternoon of ranch riding. Hat Creek had no shortage of routes, destinations or horseback jobs to attempt.

Peter might send us into what he called the Home Field, surrounding the ranch house and headquarters, to collect his Longhorn and Angus cattle. He'd instruct us to meet him

with the herd at a 200-foot round pen located up a nearby canyon. It didn't take long for the novice herd-handlers among us to learn to move cattle slowly and surely.

In every direction, there were sweeping plateaus and sandstone-accented vistas. Two parts of the ranch, Tower Field and Shipping Field, offered the best chances to encounter wildlife, or just appreciate being horseback under Wyoming skies. We never failed to spot a herd of around 40 antelope in Tower Field, sometimes with hawks and coyotes in the same "picture frame." I recall Peter showing us the track a rattlesnake had made, slithering between two yucca plants in Shipping Field.

Around five, we'd return to the ranch house, put our horses away, and get ready for supper. A question about horsemanship would trigger conversations lasting well into the night, with dressage riders sharing counter-canter tips with penners, and cutters giving collection pointers to hunters. Such conversations laid the groundwork for strong relationships among the Hat Creek guests, and friendships grew as the days passed. We might've been strangers when we arrived at the ranch, but we knew we'd leave as friends.

Slowly, the Wyoming sky would take on the red glow of evening, Stage Gap standing out against the darkening sky, and the Milky Way would emerge. The bunkhouse beckoned.



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Stage Gap

The fifth day of the clinic marked the first ride to Stagecoach Gap. With Peter in the lead, we rode north from the ranch headquarters, climbed an outcropping, and finally dropped into a valley where we encountered two faint wheel tracks. Peter explained the tracks' historical significance, and directed us to keep our horses off of them as we continued to navigate through the valley. In reverential silence, we each rode carefully past the tracks.

Before long, we cued our horses up the side of a gully, until we were again "up top," above the valley and weaving through sandstone hoodoos that looked like they belonged in a moonscape.

We rode back through Stage Gap itself, emerging from the sandstone formations as if returning to reality.

With the other riders far ahead of us, and Peter and Adam hanging back to

check a water tank, Nana and I encountered a historical marker, a simple, round stake, stuck in the ground. I stepped off my horse to the read the words engraved on the marker: "Eagle's Nest Stage Stop."

It didn't take much of an appreciation for history to begin imagining what it must've been like to stand on that spot more than a hundred years ago, watching the horizon and listening for the sound of approaching horses.

At the End

Saturday night, every Hat Creek hand and guest headed to town for the ranch rodeo, where 12 teams were competing in the usual lineup of cowboy events, from team branding to ranch roping. We'd all looked forward to venturing into Wheatland, even though it meant our experience together was nearing its end.

As those first days had passed, I'd gotten in the habit of living "in the now,"

unmindful of obligations back home and the daily schedule that awaited my return from Wyoming. The experience at Hat Creek Ranch, with its 360-degree panoramas, had somehow redefined the concept of time, at least for the duration of my stay.

I'd expected to leave Hat Creek with better horsemanship, and wasn't disappointed. What I didn't expect was to leave with close friendships with people from all over the United States and Canada. I also didn't expect to begin thinking of Wyoming as a second home.

On my final day, when the sun set on Stage Gap, I realized that so much of what mattered to me in the world was centered in this enchanted landscape, and that coming back mattered just as much.

Mary-Lynn Wardle lives in Calgary, Alberta. For more information on Peter Campbell and Hat Creek Ranch, visit www.willingpartners.com.



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