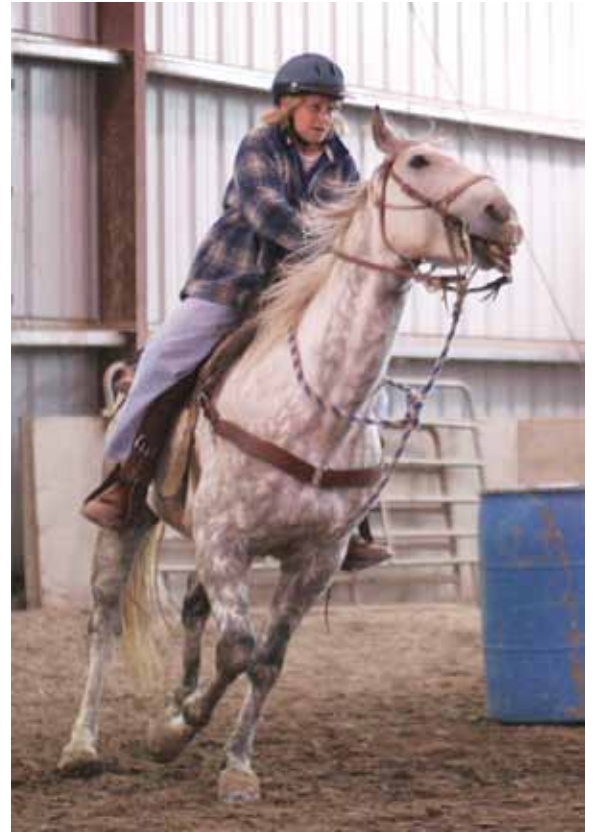


Cowgirl Up

Perfect Getaway



Carolyn Northcutt from Dallas tries trap and skeet shooting.



Barrel racing on Saturday afternoon is exciting.

Hooked On Horses



By Constance See

Photos by Jennifer Steven & provided by the Bar W Ranch

Struggling to fight back tears streaming past her glasses, Fern Schelin from Kalispell looked around the barn at a dozen women on horseback who were strangers less than a week ago. She was surprised at how hard it was to say, “Goodbye.”





Fern Schelin from Kalispell leads the trail ride along the Canadian border and Lake Koochanusa.

The ladies, who ranged in age from 12 to about 60, traveled from as far away as Florida, Pennsylvania and Missouri to participate in the June Cowgirl Up retreat at the Bar W Guest Ranch two miles north of Whitefish.

“When I first arrived I was nervous because I didn’t know what to expect,” Schelin said. “I’d never done this before, and I had to leave my horses at home. I have five. The whole atmosphere, the wranglers, the cook, the girls from all over the place have been so wonderful. We’ve become a big family. It was such a neat experience I didn’t think it would move me like this but it did. It was so awesome. I’m crying because I have to leave, but we’ve already decided to get together again for a reunion.”

Carolyn Northcutt, from Dallas, Texas wasn’t crying, she was grinning ear-to-ear, saying she “hadn’t laughed this much in the last 20 years combined.” She too mentioned the unexpected and fast bond that had developed between strangers. Northcutt attributed the powerful emotions to the power of horses.

“Horses have survived 50 million years,” said Northcutt, “They’re so tuned in. If you walk into their stall and are depressed, horses know it immediately. This sense is part of their genetic makeup. Also you can’t fool a horse. You can’t pretend things are one way, when they’re another.”

A horse lover since she saw her first black and white western many decades ago, Northcutt is very close to her own Tennessee Walker. She tried out three horses at



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the ranch until she found just the right one. Next, she questioned the staff in detail about food choices, medical care and most importantly, how they treat their horses when they're ready to go out to pasture.

"I asked what they do if they get a horse that gets too old or crippled to ride and they just said, 'We keep them.'" Northcutt said. "For horse lovers like me, that's really important."

One of her favorite aspects of the retreat came at night listening to an impromptu performance outside on the porch with wranglers unwinding at the end of the day jamming on the harmonica, guitar and piano.

"This place has been great," Northcutt said. "The whole staff and the food are phenomenal. They're amazingly accommodating, and did I mention the great food? I always wanted to see Montana and there's no better way to see it than from atop a horse. I'll be back."

Cindy MacLachlan brought her 12-year-old stepdaughter Samantha Caron to the retreat for a mother/daughter getaway. Both are also from Texas. A new horse owner, MacLachlan bought her first one less than two months ago, yet she's already discovered their magic.

"I think it's different for women than men," MacLachlan said. "There's something underlying about a horse that you bond to as a female. I think we absorb their strength and feel stronger. You can just look at a horse and it's therapeutic. There are no words necessary. Just



Bar W Ranch manager Ted tends the barbecue.

An advertisement for "Interior Outfitting by Draperies Plus". The top half features a group of six women dressed in Western-themed outfits, including cowboy hats, scarves, and jackets, posing in front of a large, ornate, light-colored curtain. The text "Interior Outfitting by Draperies Plus" is written in a stylized, outlined font at the top. Below it, the slogan "We've Got You Covered!" is written in a large, white, serif font. To the right, the services offered are listed: "Interior Design Service", "Fabric Design Specialty", and "Shutters & Blinds". At the bottom right, the address "324 Main Street, Kalispell MT" and phone number "406-756-1909" are provided. A small "Est. 1987" logo is also present. At the bottom left, a black banner contains the text "Our Design Team" followed by the names "Quick-Draw Kat, Buckram Belle, Dead-Eye Dee, Calico Carol, 'The Judge' Judy, Wrangler Wendy".

being with one, especially if you are insecure or afraid, can build your confidence. Horses empower women.”

Not quite a teenager, Caron was the youngest attendee at the retreat. Of all the events – a horsemanship clinic, skeet shooting, two-step dance lessons at the Blue Moon, barrel racing, square dancing, and team penning, her favorite memory was a ride with her stepmother. Electing not to join the group for one afternoon, a staff member offered to guide them on a personalized journey up Spencer Mountain.

“It was beautiful up there, with all the colorful flowers, and we had fun,” Caron said. “My mom passed away, so I can’t spend time with her. My dad has always been there for me, but I thought it would be fun when my step mom suggested a mother/daughter week here. My step mom already suggested they organize a mother/daughter week next year. I know my friends would like it, they all love horses. We’ve talked about coming back in five years for a reunion, but I think we’re going to make it a yearly trip.”

While women of all ages enjoy horses, according to Northcutt, a new trend is sweeping the nation as middle-aged women following up on a long-held dream are buying their first horse. She said about 80 percent of horse owners in America are now women.

Julene Hartman of Kalispell attends the retreat at the suggestion of her friend Schelin. Hartman said the last time she rode a horse was 20 years ago while growing up on a farm in Iowa. Over the years she’s dreamed of attending cowgirl getaways like this but when she met Schelin it all came together and they decided to do it now. Her favorite part of the week was a drive up to Lake Koocanusa for a horseback ride along its sandy beaches.

“I’ve been there before with dirt bikes or ATVS, but this time it was a lot quieter and fewer people,” Hartman said. “It was great on

horseback. I’ve already looked into the ranch’s half-day and hourly rates for the future. I’ve wanted to get back on a horse for so long. I’m 50 and my retirement dream is to get on a horse at age 51 and ride, ride, ride.”

The Bar W Guest Ranch is located two miles north of Whitefish along U.S. Highway 93. It is surrounded by 2,900 acres of state land providing endless opportunities for hiking and riding. The ranch consists of a 6,200-square-foot lodge, cabin suites, indoor and outdoor horseback-riding arenas, stables, a barn, an entertainment area and a lakeside gazebo. Their horses and horsemanship clinics are the main draw for tourists from around the world. For more information about the Bar W Guest Ranch and their Cowgirl Up retreats, call 863-9099 or check out their Web site at www.thebarw.com.

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