

Persimmon Hill

A PUBLICATION OF THE NATIONAL COWBOY & WESTERN HERITAGE MUSEUM

SPRING 2014



Women of the West



Eighty percent of the Sallees' business is comprised of repeat guests, some who become lifelong friends. One such guest is Deane Shaver, pictured here with Sandy and mules loaded with camp supplies. He started hunting with Sandy's husband, Scott, 30 years ago, before they even met.

Living and Working in Paradise

By Jeri L. Dobrowski

As a backcountry hunting guide, Sandy Seaton Sallee (suh LEE) traverses the mountains of southwestern Montana. She walks. She rides. She tracks big game. People pay to follow her through the wilderness.

Sandy and her husband, Scott Sallee, a licensed Montana outfitter, chose Emigrant, Montana, within the Paradise Valley, as the base of operation for their Black Mountain Outfitters. Flanked by two mountain ranges and watered by the Yellowstone River exiting nearby Yellowstone National Park, the scenery is breathtaking. Movie scouts selected the area for filming of "A River Runs Through It" and "The Horse Whisperer."

Under Scott's license, the couple's business — Black Mountain Outfitters — is permitted to operate in the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness Area and in Yellowstone National Park. Their two wilderness camps, Slough Creek Camp at an elevation of 6,200 feet, and Buffalo Fork of Slough Creek at 7,600 feet, are among only seven operating in the area. They also lease hunting rights on a 50,000-acre private ranch that offers a modern lodge.

A Montana native, Sandy hails from a family that moved frequently during her childhood. At 10, her mother — a single parent, landed a position as vice president of marketing for Yellowstone, the world's first national park. She moved with her mother, older brother and older sister into a drafty, two-story log cabin in Mammoth Hot Springs, Wyoming, administrative headquarters for the park.

"We lived there for years in Jim Bridger's original mountain cabin," Sandy said.

"There'd be snow on the bed winter mornings."

With their mother often away on business, Sandy's brother watched over his sisters. Several families helped keep an eye on the siblings, chauffeuring them between Mammoth — famous for its cascading travertine terraces, and nearby Gardiner — entrance to Yellowstone Park through the Roosevelt Archway.

"It was a great place to grow up," Sandy



A mule named Teacher leads the pack string on the 13 miles in Slough Creek summer camp. Sandy said the mule is reliable, will pack anything, isn't afraid of anything, and has a "lovely little trot."



Most bear sightings are during the fall, so this was a special treat to see a grizzly sow and her cub during the summer.

recalled. "My sister and I often walked five miles to school, rode bikes, rode horses, tracked animals and hiked around the park. We saw wolverines, beavers, deer, elk and grizzlies. I carried a harmonica for protection from bears. If I saw one, I'd blow the high notes. That would scare them off."

Four decades later, Sandy has a couple

of new tricks for dealing with bears. One is an M-80 cracker shell fired from a 12-gauge shotgun. The cartridge explodes with a loud bang at the end of travel, like a huge firecracker. The Fish and Game encourages the use of the shells to discourage bears from hanging around camps and it is effective.

Also effective are Airedale Terriers.

Sandy's research on guard dogs led her to the breed, which she said are, "Amazing dogs. Good with people but fearless. It doesn't bother me to be alone in the mountains when I have them with me."

Relating how *Buster* — their first Airedale — earned his stripes, Sandy told how he bolted from the tent one night, rushing to the aid of another dog threatened by a grizzly. *Buster* sprinted toward the bruin grabbing it by the hindquarters. He spun it around,

then proceeded to bite the bear's tail. Shining flashlights onto the moose, she and Scott watched as the two tore off into the forest, the dog still biting the bear. About a half hour later, *Buster* returned to camp, happily wagging his tail.

Scott and Sandy met in 1983 when they worked at the Slough Creek Camp, just north of Yellowstone National Park. Sandy said, "After college, I wanted to work on a ranch, but all I could find in Montana was cooking jobs. That wasn't what I wanted. I went to New Mexico and worked in a feedlot south of Deming. While there, I helped gather wild cattle off foreclosed ranches. It was exciting and an honor to ride with those cowboys who tied hard-and-fast, but I wanted to come back to Montana.

"My sister, who also married an outfitter, told me there was a fella looking for a cook. I didn't know how to cook, but I bought myself a *Betty Crocker Cookbook* and headed home. The first morning there, Scott came running 30 head of horses in the dark using a bullwhip. We've been together ever since."

Scott, who grew up in nearby Livingston, Montana, had been guiding for six years when he and Sandy met. She continued to cook while honing her tracking and hunting skills. The first animal she killed was a buck deer, after which she admits to having feelings of pride, remorse and victory. After uttering a simple prayer of reverence, thanking the animal for providing sustenance, she gutted it. When she finished, she returned to the lodge where she went back to baking cookies and pies.

In 1987, while the pair was working on the Forbes Ranch north of Gardiner, a guide quit leaving the camp shorthanded. Reasoning it was easier to find a cook than a guide, Scott promoted Sandy to the position. She guided full-time until 1994, when



When Butte, Montana, hosted the 2009 National Folk Festival, organizers invited Sandy to present a packing demonstration, explaining the techniques used in loading cargo onto mules. They also asked her to share some of her poetry written about packing and the backcountry.



Sallee pauses with her beloved dogs at the end of the third wilderness hunt in late 2013. Guests shot the elk displayed behind her.

the fledgling business they launched in 1991 started to grow. At that point she stepped back into the role of cook, adding responsibilities as secretary and bookkeeper. Sandy still guides mountain lion hunters, fishermen and wilderness horseback rides.

From the beginning, their ambition has been to share the wonders of the area through top-notch personal service and world-class hospitality. They offer summer horseback day rides with fishing; deluxe backcountry wilderness camping trips; early bugle season rifle elk hunts; archery for elk and deer; general season elk, mule deer, whitetail and antelope; and mountain goat, mountain lion and black bear hunts. Three years ago, they took over operation of the Slough Creek Camp where they met.

The Sallees accommodate guests from the end of May through the Sunday after Thanksgiving. The season kicks off with horseback day rides, switching to back country pack trips July 10. Wilderness hunting excursions commence September 15. That's not to say they have the rest of the year off. With 70 mules and horses in their string, a large part of it is spent working with the animals.

Keen on a mule's soundness, sensibility,

reliability, gentleness and longevity, Scott and Sandy use them for packing and riding. Guests mostly ride horses. January through June, the couple spends their days buying, training and selling mules and gaited horses.

"We buy 25 new mules per year," Sandy said, "incorporating the young ones into the business and selling the same number of experienced ones. There's a strong demand for well-broke mules. To make a good mule, you've got to handle them with kindness and give 'em work."

The first seasonal employees report for work in May, tackling maintenance of tack and camping equipment. That includes washing the large canvas tents and saddle pads and oiling the handmade saddles.

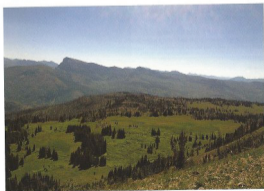
Finding help, Sandy relates, is the hardest part of the business. "We've been fortunate to hire the same two guides for 15 years. But it's usually a 'Hail Mary' trying to find a couple helpers to wrangle the horses and pitch in with what needs done. It's difficult to find people who are honest, who want to work hard and who aren't afraid of

grizzlies."

Grizzlies are the guests' biggest fear too, Sandy said: "As I tell them, bears aren't out to purposefully hurt us. They're not planning to steal our wallets or take our cars. They happen to think our food smells good. Still, the guests usually go to the restroom by twos when it's dark.

"Our guests are often overwhelmed by the open space and stunned to realize cars aren't allowed here. Some are fearful at first, but our shepherding helps. We are their lifelines, their 911. That's why we become such good friends.

"We have hunters who have been here more than a dozen times," Sandy noted, adding, "One guest has been hunting with Scott for 30 years. About 80 percent of our bookings are repeats. They aren't concerned about rack scores. Our elk harvest is predominantly mature five- and six-point bulls. We sell the experience, and they come for a wonderful time. A trip out here is their big event of the year. Family pack vacations are more likely a once-in-a-lifetime trip."



This scene, from atop a 9,800-foot mountain, is Sandy's "absolute favorite view in the world." It is accessible from both of the wilderness camps she and her husband operate.

Black Mountain Outfitters offers deluxe backcountry accommodations at their family-friendly Buffalo Fork camp: carpeted tents, comfortable cots, a sauna and a shower. It takes 60 mule-loads to transport the gear. Pristine streams are home to rainbow trout. Farther into the wilderness, the Slough Creek Camp is more rustic, but still well appointed. It requires 30 mule-loads of gear. There, anglers fish for cutthroat trout. A 9,800-foot mountainside between the two offers spectacular views of the Teton Mountains near Jackson Hole, Wyoming.

Of sharing her expansive backyard with families, Sandy said: "Back home, the kids are going crazy on their electronic devices, mom's days are spent running the kids around and dad is working so hard he doesn't know them. They get here; there's no cell service. Pretty soon the kids are catching frogs in the creek. They sit around a campfire. They see stars for the first time in their lives. They get acquainted."

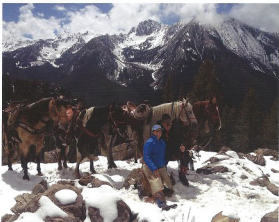
Considering she never aspired to be a cook, Sandy cooks for the wilderness summer camp season, archery elk and deer hunting on the ranch, early horseback elk rifle season in the

wilderness and big game general rifle season for elk, deer and antelope. She may be in the backcountry for a month at a time. Every piece of her equipment, including cook stoves, is packed in on mules. She tells guests in advance what to expect and delivers on the promise to "cook like your grandma used to." That includes a hearty breakfast, sack lunches, hot soup served midday, supper and "tons of cookies."

"People are so appreciative of the meals," Sandy said. "It's very rewarding. I have had standing ovations! I think part of the appeal is that everything is made from scratch."

Tending camp in bear country has its challenges. Besides preparing meals, organizing camp, refueling lanterns, re-supplying wood, hauling water, scrubbing dishes, washing clothes and caring for the horses, Sandy retrieves groceries and horse feed from a bear platform. She drops the ladder down from the pole structure hung high in the trees, with a pulley system, climbing up for the day's groceries, which she places in a gunny sack. Climbing back down with the bulging sack, she once again raises the ladder. Her efforts do not go unnoticed. The smell of chicken fried steak and the sight of a freshly baked peach pie are tantalizing.

During the off season, Scott and Sandy Saltee buy, sell, and train mules and gaited horses. They're pictured here working with four horses they would soon sell.



Buster, an Airedale Terrier, earned the title "camp bear dog extraordinaire" with his bravery defending the camp from inquisitive grizzlies.

Reflecting on her days in the backcountry during the guest season, Sandy said, "The wilderness is my favorite place to be. After the guests ride out following breakfast and I've organized camp, the day is mine. I can write and be with the dogs. I feel God so strongly there and often give thanks for being able to live and work in the wilderness." ■

Jeri L. Dobrowski is a freelance writer and photographer living in Wibaux County, Montana.