

WOMEN OF THE WEST

Sandy Seaton Sallee

A no-holds-barred approach to life gives this Montana cowgirl poet plenty to write, and laugh, about.

Interview and photograph by RYAN BELL

THERE ARE TWO BROKEN VERTEBRAE in Sandy Seaton Sallee's neck. The injury was caused by a team roping wreck that fractured the C2 and C3 vertebrae—an injury often called the “hangman's fracture” for its propensity to kill prisoners hung at the gallows. But it takes more than that to hold this cowgirl down.

Even with the bones wired together, she continues to work as a mule trainer, packer and backcountry cook for Black Mountain Outfitters, which she owns and operates with her husband, Scott, in Emigrant, Montana. She has also published three volumes of poetry and appeared at cowboy poetry gatherings across North America.

When the kids come out, they're so used to being entertained by their phones. The first night, when they sit around the fire, the kids think they're going to be bored silly. The moms aren't sure what chores they should be doing. And the dads are thinking they should be off to work, rolling in some money. By the second night, they're actually talking, looking into each other's eyes. They get to know each other again.

You'll see a bear, and [guests] will be trying to see it through their lens to record it, instead of recording it in their memory. They've got that phone, the lens, between

them and the actual experience. I think the difference is whether it goes into your soul or not.

I broke my neck team roping 25 years ago. I got hung up and then did a flip over the top and landed on my neck. It knocked me out. Then, apparently, I got up and roped better than I did formerly. But I don't remember it.

We went to a doctor in Billings. They confined me instantly, saying that I could've been paralyzed. A spine specialist said most people he saw with my injury were in a wheelchair. The difference was that I was physically strong enough and mentally stubborn enough to keep working.

I was in one of those big brace collars for six months. Scott and I lived in a small cabin. He used to rotate me around on a piece of plywood to wash my hair. It was a test of a young relationship.

I have always written poetry. Since I was 8 years old, I wrote our family's poem for Christmas. I love poems with a moral and an idea that'll either make you laugh, make you cry, or make you think.

My folks got divorced when I was 10. My dad ran off with a barmaid named Dolly. He mortgaged all our furniture.

My mom, who had a business degree, got a job as the vice president of marketing and sales for Yellowstone National Park. We lived in the mail carrier's cabin from the 1860s. It wasn't chinked well, so the snow blew on our beds in the winter time.

I started hiking through the mountains alone when I was 12. There weren't near the number of bears there are now. But there were still

hired me. I stayed in New Mexico for three years.

The Mexican border is a scary place for a young single woman. I slept with my 357 because I knew I was a target. I'm brave with animals and storms and natural things. But people can scare the bejesus out of me.

My sister called and said there was a guy in Yellowstone who wanted a gal to cook in his Slough Creek Camp.

I took the job, even though I'd never cooked before. I bought a Betty Crocker cookbook and carried it with me on the 20-mile ride into Slough Creek. And that's where I met Scott. He was the guide. He loved the mules, the mountains and the danger.

“I love adventure. If there's a steep hill, I want to be on the edge looking off it.”

a lot of them. My mom gave me a harmonica to play to scare them away. When I saw one, I'd wheeze on those high notes and it irritated the heck out of them.

I always wanted to work on a real ranch—those big ranches in New Mexico and Arizona, where they roped cattle and tied hard and fast.

I got as far as Deming, New Mexico, where my friend Robin and her husband ran a feedlot. This would've been in '77. Some ranchers saw that I could work, even though I was green as grass, and they

One morning, I was in the cook tent making breakfast at 4. Most wranglers brought the herd in slow. But that morning I heard the bells just a-coming fast as they could. Then I heard, *ka-whop*. I went running out of the cook tent. In the moonlight, I saw Scott in his big black hat, his slicker flying out behind him, and popping his bull whip over the top of the horses. They'd just crossed Slough Creek so there was water flying off of them everywhere. It just stamped my heart. I knew this was a guy I had to get to know. 🌟