

Glacier Park Sperry Chalet Ride
Appaloosas in Glacier Park
By Cliff and Cheryl Palmer

Glacier National Park is one of the great treasures of the world. Its glaciers, Alp like mountain peaks, lakes, lush forests, and wild life make it a wonder to behold. Most people don't know that in the early days of the Park it was experienced by horse back and horse pulled carriages. Many of the trails in the Park are still open to horse travel. However today most people visit the Park via the automobile and very few people actually get out and hike or ride the many beautiful trails.

The Great Northern Railroad built several Chalets and Lodges to encourage visitors to ride their trains to the Park. One of these was the Sperry Chalet which is nestled near 8000 feet on a mountain side. Opened in 1914 and currently an historic landmark, the rustic stone buildings at the Chalet have survived their rugged environment relatively unchanged through the years. There are no roads into the Chalet and supplies are brought in twice a week by pack mules. The pamphlet describing the Sperry Chalet ride says, "This is a great ride to a beautiful chalet built of rock in a high alpine setting."

We had been planning to make the Sperry Chalet ride in Glacier Park for a couple of years as we live only 50 minutes from the park. This year we finally made the ride. It was on Sept. 6, 2008 that we arose at 6 a.m. to feed our horses and found an unexpected foal out of one of my mares. We scurried about checking the mare and foal to make sure everything was ok and then got ready to load the three horses we were taking on the ride. We left our place at 7:30 and arrived at West Glacier at 8:30 where we met up with our two friends who were going on the ride with us (our trainer and horseshoer and his sister).

By the time we arrived at McDonald Lodge, our trailhead point, got the horses saddled and ready to go, it was 9:30. It was a beautiful cool fall day with the temperature in the 60's and lots of sunshine. The first segment of the ride was through a beautiful pristine forest of old cedar and hemlock... The steepness of the trail increased sharply as we moved in and out of the forest and the 6.7 mile trek up to the Chalet gained 3500 feet. We met a lot of hikers along the way going to the Chalet but some already looked spent and most never made it to the top. That's the advantage of riding horses in the Park!

This ride really separates the chafe from the wheat and tells you a lot about your horses. Athletic ability, good trail horse sense, endurance, and sure footedness all come into play. The Foundation Appaloosa is really a versatile jack of all trades type horse with its sturdy legs and feet and more lean muscled body build. We had ridden our horses on 7-8 mile jaunts to condition them for this ride but really nothing could have prepared them for the grueling ascent and rocky terrain and unrelenting steepness. The ride continued uphill with acute switch backs and loose shale and high step up boulder and rocks. It was a challenge for our horse's endurance as well as their ability to pick their way up the

mountain. This ride is not for the faint hearted or green horse as there are sheer drop offs as we climbed higher.



Figure 1 Neemepon Rainfeather leads the group through a streambed as she is a gifted gaited shuffler with her fast moving walk.

It started raining the last third of our ascent and the sun was shrouded behind cloud cover as the temperatures dipped. It was an ethereal sight as we could see the Chalet way above us through a fog cover and clouds. It felt like we were in the Himalayas as the shale and rockiness of the narrow trail enveloped us. Relief was in sight we thought as we approached the Chalet but it was a mirage as the trail continued to wind upward steeper than ever and the last mile took us a long time to navigate. As we neared the top of the mountain we spied a herd of mountain goats on steep ledges above us feeding on vegetation above the timberline. We worried about our horse's legs and feet as they had to strain and pick their way up this last part of the ride to the Chalet. Finally we made it to the top and tied our horses to the hitching post. Our ride to the summit took us a little over three and a half hours. The weather at the top was more severe with cooler temperatures and increased rain and slush. It had snowed lightly up here the night before.



Figure 2 Horses tied up on the tie-line at Sperry Chalet in Glacier Park

We made quite a splash as people commented on our colorful horses and came out of the lodge to take pictures. Homemade pies, soups, and sandwiches awaited. It was still

raining and somewhat cold so it was a relief to go inside where the wood stove was providing welcomed warmth. We ordered hot cocoa, soup and their infamous Berry pie.

After lunch we explored the Chalet where the rooms are rustic with no electricity, no running water, no heat, and outside pit toilets. Just the basics. For the luxury of staying in one of the rooms you pay \$170 a night. My husband said you might as well sleep outside! Most of the people here at the Chalet were seasoned and fit hikers who enjoyed the challenge of moving about in the wilderness. Many were of retirement age whose hobby is hiking and outdoor activities.



Figure 3 Cheryl standing in front of the Dining Hall at Sperry Chalet

We began our trip down the mountain a little after 2:00. Our descent was even more harrowing than our ascent. It was continuing to rain and the shale like rocks were slippery and the horses were already weary legged from our climb. However after we descended the first two miles and the rockiness of the trail receded the rain stopped and the sun reappeared and the horses moved along at a more rapid pace. On the way down we passed a number of hikers struggling up the trail but we didn't see any of the hikers we passed on the way up. Most of them must have turned back.

This trail ride was really challenging and brought out the mettle of our Foundation Appaloosas. Rainfeather, our 4 year old green broke gaited shuffler, proved to be the 'star' of the ride. She became the lead horse both going up and coming down, very self

reliant, sure footed, and self confident and showed tremendous endurance seemingly fresh at the end of the ride. We felt a great accomplishment and sense of satisfaction in our horses and ourselves in completing this ride. It was an experience we'll never forget and provides one of those lifetime memories when you inventory what you've done in your life.



Figure 4 We made it! Cliff and Cheryl Palmer with their Foundation Appaloosas at Sperry Chalet