

The Ya Ha Tinda Ranch by Rod Wallace

A unique and ecologically significant horse ranch, located in the Alberta foothills of the Rocky Mountains, celebrates 100 years of Federal Government ownership in July 2017.

The Ya Ha Tinda ranch, often referred to as the "Government Ranch" by nearby local residents, has been, and continues to be, a unique horse ranch of local, regional, and national significance. One hundred years of Federal government horse management has served the needs of the Park Warden Service in most of our National Parks, and National Historic Sites in Western Canada. The ranch and its operations throughout the previous century, has exhibited a regional influence of hundreds of "working cowboys", in the development of a unique type of ranch horse.

Rather than trained for show, jumping, rodeo events, or cutting/reining competition, where horses who are primarily trained within indoor areas, these ranch horses are trained as true working horses. They are not race horses, pulling a chuck wagon, or harnessed to race or perform in a competitive environment. They are indeed meant to be an all round, sturdy, work horses, capable under often trying conditions, often with inexperienced riders. This makes the trained Ya Ha Tinda horse both unique and special.

The people living, and working at this remote ranch are also a unique and special type of horse person. Families and "cowboys" living and working year round in a remote ranch location, make for a special type of horse person. The centennial book will tell stories of long standing traditions of working with all types of horses, while living in isolated and sometimes harsh conditions, and getting along with your nearby peers. Many innovative and different types of horse training were attempted over the decades. Various "stud" horses were tried and used during many decades of breeding horses at the ranch. Some bloodlines were successful, some not. At one time, Federal government horses, owned and trained by the R. C. M. P. were shipped from both Regina, and Fort Walsh to the Ya Ha Tinda, to assist with the breeding program at the ranch.

The people of the ranch are a huge part of the ranch story. Not everyone always got along, but each person shared his knowledge and experience with horses, in an attempt to better train and work with a variety of horses. Families worked and "played" together, and most made visiting Park Wardens feel welcome and comfortable. Wardens interested in horses and horse travel treated the ranch as a kind of "Home Place" where visitors from many different parks, shared their experiences, while gathered around the dinner table.

Horses raised at the ranch are meant to be of a sturdy conformation, have a stout chest, with decent sized feet, and generally a stocky build. These ranch horses must have a kind disposition, and be able to work with a wide variety of riders, many possessing limited horsemanship skills. These horses are trained to be used in the Rocky Mountains, and must be able to safely cross streams, navigate raging rivers in flood, cross lengthy log bridges, and navigate unstable portions of bog or muskeg. The horses work at high elevations, over rough terrain, and in adverse conditions of stormy weather, and occasionally deep snow. Unlike most recreational and competition horses, horses

raised on the ranch are familiar with a wide variety of wildlife, and learn to become accustomed to them without fear. These "government" horses truly are rare working horses, able to travel long distances, climb steep, rocky terrain, and carry a load while sometimes swimming mountain rivers. They safely carry Park Wardens to many remote locations in the back country.

Park horses are trained to navigate brush and forested areas, often traversing steep and rugged Alpine areas, which allow the Park Warden to effectively patrol park boundaries, and help prevent wildlife poaching in remote areas both inside and adjacent the Park. The park horse is trained and used as a working horse, to be ridden and packed for several weeks of travel, up to six months of the year. Horses must accept hobbles and freely graze in alpine areas adjacent remote cabins. Some even skid firewood for backcountry cabins, and skid log building materials used for bridge or corduroy sections of trail. They are used by park trail crews to carry equipment and supplies in and out of the backcountry. Park horses primarily winter at the Ya Ha Tinda in recent years, where ranch staff constantly assess their off season condition, and care for their well being. Some horses are ridden and further trained when conditions permit.

A horse both, trained and developed for the working backcountry warden horse, have been, and continues to be the goal of ranch managers. Numerous "local cowboys" and horse managers have overseen horse breeding, training, and year round care of thousands of horses over the decades. Various "stud" horses were used in an attempt to breed and train the perfect warden horse, capable of general warden use often in remote locations. Many horses were purchased over the last fifty years, re trained and used by Park Wardens. Most recently young weaned horses have been purchased to train from scratch, rather than "re train" young horses, many of whom may exhibit poor or dangerous habits.

Truly a regional story of working cowboys who have managed to develop a general, working horse, used and cared for by mostly novice horseback riders. Indeed the warden horse taught most of these young Park Wardens how to travel safely in remote locations, and perform the duties of backcountry management in our National Parks. Several weeks of backcountry horse travel with dependable, well-trained horses, allowed young wardens to not only to travel safely, and patrol extensively, but also learn a great deal about themselves, while travelling in remote locations.

The ranch operations have been a unique, and very special development of horse management. Teaching and training young horses, often takes several years of careful and thoughtful care to be safely saddled, ridden, packed and used while travelling in remote locations with mostly "green" riders. Ranch operations and efforts to develop these special working horses is no easy task.

The "cowboy" story of ranch and horse management has also meant a unique mosaic of human involvement with horse development. Each person working and living at the ranch over the decades has made a contribution to the fabric and development of the warden horse. A rich and colorful collection of ranch stories will be revealed in the publication of this book. The management program at the Ya Ha Tinda has truly been a serious and developmental process, worthy of local, regional and national significance.

Another aspect of the ranch history is the presence of numerous “researchers” over many decades. The ranch once being a part of Banff National Park, and a unique ecological area, has meant a variety of graduate students have undertaken various projects on ranch lands. Studies involving archaeology, wildlife management, vegetation and land management have not only provided useful information, but have lead to an in depth knowledge of ranch terrain, its cultural history, and environmental influences. Folks living and working at the ranch share their knowledge and observations with researchers, who in turn augment the ranch personnel knowledge and information. It’s a win-win situation.

Public involvement in Ya Ha Tinda ranch lands has also been a vital part of ranch history. Originally a well used area of ecological significance, Aboriginal peoples have used this prairie oasis for several centuries. Brewster outfitting were shown the area over one hundred years ago, and utilized its favourable grazing conditions for their outfitter business in the Rocky Mountains. The Federal government also saw an opportunity to use the ranch area for breeding, training, and wintering of government horses one hundred years ago. The ranch has regional significance for horse enthusiasts throughout western Canada. Horsemen have been drawn to the ranch to work, train and use horses for many years. The ranch location appealed to horse enthusiasts who valued its remote location and wilderness setting. Wild horses were driven and gathered by decades of horseman throughout the region. There has been, and continues to be, interaction with regional horse ranches, and outfitter businesses.

Hunting and hunting access adjacent the ranch, has also meant use of the area by Aboriginals and wildlife hunters from throughout the province. The ranches regional importance cannot be understated, and is reflected in use by recreational horse riders. Friends of the East Slopes is a major user of ranch lands, who, through a Memorandum of Understanding with Parks Canada, are permitted free horse camping at the Bighorn campground below Bighorn falls. This group of horse enthusiasts have voluntarily managed the campground, upgraded horse holding facilities, and managed both horse manure and outhouse facilities to minimize ecological damage at the camping area. The Ya Ha Tinda ranch remains the only area in Alberta where equestrian users can freely use a natural area on lands owned by the Federal government. Provincial management of adjacent Provincial (Forestry Reserve and recreational lands) is meant to complement public horse use on the adjacent lands.

This uniquely managed, sensitive ecological area, is indeed special, and will hopefully continue to be cooperatively managed and enjoyed by both the Parks and the general public recreational user for many decades to come.

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for Park Warden Alumni Society Board of Directors, January 2017.

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