

*Some History relating to the Jasper National Park Horse Program
and the Maligne Range Horse Facility*

From the memory bank of Gord Anderson [JNP 1970- 1998]

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What I Think I Know - Pre 1970

The original staging facility for park horse use was located in the vicinity of the present day site of the Jasper Museum. A huge hip-roof barn dominated the site. The barn was constructed out of rock, concrete and wood. A collection of corrals were located adjacent the barn. The staff comprised of a barn boss, a farrier and a packer. They all worked full time for the warden service. In the winter, they were assigned various other duties.

The horse herd numbered in excess of 100 head. The primary rationale to having such a large herd would be that all materials needed to manage the backcountry were packed in by horse. The usage of helicopters was very limited until well into the 1970's. Cabins were built and maintained, trails and bridges were built and maintained, phone lines sometimes needed major attention by crews. All these activities plus backcountry districts and highway warden stations were supported by the trusty Jasper horse remuda.

When extra horses were not out on the trail, to save on feed, the horses were trailed out to the wintering range of Buffalo Prairie or to the grasslands of the Moberly homestead across from the Jasper Airfield where some horses were also wintered. Meadows are scattered back up river to butt up to the Maligne River across from the old Fish Hatchery which became the Warden Headquarters for almost 20 years. This area was to become known as the Maligne Range.

Horses were always an integral part of the Jasper Warden Service operation and their function was fully supported by the guidance of Chief Park Warden Mickey McGuire during his time in charge. Mickey devoted 34 years of his life as a park warden, all of it within Jasper National Park. He believed every

square inch of the park needed the attention and protection of his roster of wardens with the importance of the backcountry at the top of his priority list. Therefore, Jasper's horse program was top notch under Mickey's watch.

CPW McGuire possibly had this in mind for sometime, but during the sixties, he initiated the development of an improved horse facility. Jasper townsite was in need for land expansion prompting all Park Functions to move towards improved work facilities in more suitable locations. As such, during the late sixties, the recently fire demolished Maligne Range Horse facility was born. A Bailey bridge, which became known as the 6th Bridge was installed adjacent the present day Picnic Site on the lower Maligne River. A large hip-roof barn, similar in design to the one in town, was constructed by the park carpenter crew. Corrals were built and paddocks and a pasture fenced. An Atco trailer housed tack, equipment and space needed by staff. In 1970, the farrier still worked out of the old barn in town.

What I Know I Know - Post 1970

I transferred from Banff to Jasper during the summer of 1970. When sheep hunting season opened I was assigned to work the backcountry. That is when my interest in the Jasper Horse Program gained fruition. Over time, I earned the trust and friendship of the staff. I listened, learned and hopefully asked mostly intelligent questions.

To say I became interested in everything I could learn about park horse history would be an understatement. I can not state that there ever was a comprehensive record from the beginnings of the park horse usage. I think protocol developed slowly over time. I do know that some wardens kept their own horses for use in performing their duties as recent as the 1950's.

Before getting on with the things I do know about the program, I want to say I do not have access or knowledge of when events happened in specific years. I was informed that any records that were kept at the Maligne Range perished in the fire of July 2024. I can not say what other records may exist or where.

Up until sometime in the sixties, Jasper park horses were in the park year

around. Horses were wintered in the Willow Creek meadows in the north. The Willow Creek warden kept horses at his headquarters cabin and rode out to check on the condition of the free range horses as part of his duties. Hay was stored at the Hay Corrals, at the end of the fire road up the Snake Indian River Valley, between Seldom Inn and Willow Creek cabins. The Willow Creek warden hauled hay by sleigh to feed his horses. Willow Creek has a large fenced pasture so horses were probably turned out to forage and get some exercise when not in use. The warden service also wintered horses at Buffalo Prairie and the old Moberly homestead across the Athabasca River from the present day airfield.

Horse outfitting had always been a large part of the mountain culture and wealthy clients from afar were the initial proponents for the development of this culture. Many outfitting businesses had their headquarters and staging areas based in Jasper townsite. During the off-season outfitters and private individuals were allowed to turn their horses out on park grasslands to forage.

There came a time, during the fifties and sixties, when parks managers realized that several hundreds of horses infringed on wildlife habitat. This benefit was gradually withdrawn. As policy changed for the private sector, so they changed for the park horses. Jasper began hauling their horses to Elk Island National Park for wintering. I do not know for how many years. I was told they came home in the spring fat from the excellent forage available.

In 1970, at my beginnings in Jasper, the park still had between 100 and 110 horses. The Maligne Range was still in development. A very adequate shop, tack room and shoeing shed were soon to be built. I welcomed my introduction to the vast Jasper backcountry during the fall and in my duties, I worked with several of their excellent string of mountain horses.

The status of the Ya-Ha-Tinda ranch has been on shaky ground off and on over the years and I assume Jasper was pressured to take their horses there to help substantiate the need to continue that operation. My first winter in Jasper was the first winter for Jasper horses at the Ya-Ha-Tinda. That fall or winter of 1970/71, park horses were tested for swamp fever at the ranch. If memory serves me, close to 20% of the Jasper herd were condemned. In

addition to that huge loss of good horses, the survivors came home in the spring in poor condition being unfamiliar with their new range. I remember hearing that the chief was not pleased. The next winter proved much better and Jasper horses have gone to the ranch for the winter since then.

I was promoted to full warden status in 1971 and was assigned to the Rocky River Backcountry District which meant more connection to the horse operation and deeper relationship with the staff.

By the summer season of 1973 I was back working in the high-use area but still maintained a strong interest in the horse program and arranged backcountry trips whenever possible. Over the ensuing years, I returned to the backcountry, for one or two good trips per year and had good fortune to serve several years of full summer assignments.

Wintering the horses at the Ya-Ha-Tinda gave rise to logistics that provided some challenges to the barn boss and support staff. Early on, the operation was limited to a stock truck that held 6 horses which meant many trips in sometimes difficult conditions. Eventually, to expedite movement of the horses to and from the Ya-Ha-Tinda, JNP warden service contracted professional livestock haulers. In the fall of 1976, a new contractor lost his way to the ranch and had a wreck on a steep icy stretch of road. Out of 25 horses in the liner, 7 survived.

During the following winter, veteran wardens were tasked to travel around purchasing replacement horses. In the spring, 12 bought horses and two colts from the ranch filled the void left by the lost horses. As the operation out of the range closed in on its first decade routines settled in and the fluctuating of the horse herd with new ones added and the old and unsuitable culled. Use of helicopters gradually increased so the horse herd gradually decreased. The numbers varied between 50 and 60 head for many years.

The next major event affecting the Maligne Range occurred in March of 1985. A fire blamed on mice chewing electrical lines burned the beautiful big barn down. Numerous tack was consumed along with a full loft of hay. Funding was approved and a new barn, indoor training arena and hay shed were constructed very quickly considering all the channels of bureaucracy that had to

be navigated.

For the next 39 years, the Maligne Range functioned admirably. Many great things happened on those grounds. Up until recently parks staff benefited from the features available, absorbing the culture and history of the program. Another sometimes overlooked benefit was the camaraderie that grew there, that intangible element which evolved into a family atmosphere of **riding for the brand**.

Now in 2024, another blow has been dealt to the Maligne Range. Apparently, the Jasper Complex Fire has essentially destroyed the entire site with the exception of the metal granary which now has survived two fires.

Will the Maligne Range and the horse tradition rise from the ashes? You can safely bet that hundreds, if not thousands of past and present day staff and learned associates are praying that **history and tradition will live on**.

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