

CLOSE UP

# DREAM FINDERS



*Says Gene (upper right) of his and wife Jan's Wilderness Trails Ranch (this page), "If a person wants to learn about horses and the outdoors, I'll knock myself out to teach them."*

Jan and Gene Roberts sought a career with horses, through a guest ranch enterprise, and found more than they ever bargained for.



WRITTEN BY  
ANNE LANG  
PHOTOGRAPHED BY  
MARK WALPIN

JAN AND GENE ROBERTS refer to it as *The Year of the Elk*. It was 1970. The young couple was preparing for their first winter as sole owners of Wilderness Trails Ranch, a horse-oriented guest ranch near Durango, Colorado. Jan and Gene had sunk every penny they owned into the venture, so were living from guest deposit check to guest deposit check. Such a find in the mailbox often meant feed for the horses, a few groceries for themselves—and the ability to keep the utility company from shutting off the electricity.

On a cold October day, the pair set out on an elk hunt. Their goal was not a trophy, but meat to sustain them through the frigid months ahead. “I knew that if we didn’t kill an elk, we wouldn’t make it through the winter,” Jan matter-of-factly recounts. Eight months pregnant and armed with a 30-30 rifle, she scooted off down a remote trail aboard a motorbike, in search of game. Gene set off in another direction on horseback.

Dusk was settling when Gene heard gunshots crack through the mountain quiet. He leapt aboard his horse and scrambled uphill, to the spot where he’d last seen Jan’s parked scooter. “Suddenly, I came across the darndest scene you ever saw,” he remembers. “There was Jan, blood to the elbows, with a tummy that looked like a ripe watermelon, and a smile as big as the bull elk that lay at her feet!” The two prepped the carcass, then rode double back to the house. Less than a month later, son Lance was born; that elk fed the family until spring.

Reflecting today on those tough early years—as they bask in the success of their now-thriving guest ranch—Gene and Jan emphatically state that the initial struggle was worth it. But each admits that there were times when they questioned their dogged pursuit of a dream: to make horses—via a guest-ranch enterprise—the central point of their lives.



**Y**OUR GUEST-RANCH ADVENTURE BEGINS AS you drive out of Durango, down a winding two-lane blacktop road that snakes through hills peppered with aspens. Around every bend is another "I want that one" farm. The preview ends as you swing onto a gravel road, traveling 2½ miles until you see a rustic wooden sign for Wilderness Trails Ranch. One final turn onto a narrow gravel lane, and the cattle part to let you through.

**T**HE ROBERTSES MET IN 1966, on the ski slopes of Colorado's Loveland Basin. Gene, who worked as an accountant in nearby Denver, moonlighted with the Loveland ski patrol. Jan, a fellow avid skier, was employed as a nuclear-medicine technologist at a Denver hospital. That they both loved skiing was instantly evident, but a significant contributor to the couple's marriage later that year was their mutual passion for horses.

The newlyweds immediately began seeking a way to move out of Denver, and onto a ranch of their own, hoping to parlay their equine fever into a viable business. After researching several options, Jan and Gene determined that operating a guest ranch would be the most likely way to sustain a living from horses and land.

Toward the end of 1969, having scoured Colorado for available ranches, the Robertses—in partnership with another couple—acquired the 160-acre, 60-horse Wilderness Trails. The scenic ranch, established during the 1940s, was open to guests only during summer months, but its new proprietors soon discovered that the labor inherent to ownership continues unabated year-round—a fact that caused the Robertses' partners to bail out after one season. Gene and Jan bought the remaining half, which emptied their bank account, and resulted in the Year of the Elk, plus more than a few lean years beyond.

Erratic cash flow was only one challenge facing the couple. While struggling to keep the ranch viable, they had to become overnight experts in the following fields:

- Hotel/restaurant services to feed 50 guests per week;
- Management of a 33-member staff;
- Human relations, so they could successfully serve guests' wants/needs;
- Retail sales savvy, to oversee an on-site store; and
- Entertainment, to provide nightly performances and daily recreational diversions for out-of-the-saddle hours.

And then there were the day-to-day horse tasks. But, for Jan and Gene, the horse operation was a welcome respite, of-





fering a comfort zone in which they could surround themselves with the familiar odors of horse sweat and oiled leather. Still, the two soon discovered that caring for 60-plus horses required them to be a cross between wrangler, trainer, breeder, veterinarian, and farrier—whatever the situation called for on a given day. As Gene points out, when you care for that many horses, “situations” come up a lot.

Along the way, Jan and Gene also learned about parenting: A daughter, Erika, arrived 4 years after Lance. The Robertses found themselves struggling to fit some semblance of a family life into a guest-ranch existence. Luckily, both Lance and Erika inherited their parents’ thirst for “all things horse.”

#### HEART OF THE MATTER

If the Robertses are the soul of Wilderness Trails, horses are its heart. One of Jan and Gene’s top priorities when they took over the operation was to expand the ranch’s horse population. By chance rather than by choice, the first horse they bought was a Morgan, a mare sold to them by a friend who raised that particular breed. But the couple quickly became Morgan converts.

“Morgans have fantastic personalities, they’re easy to get along with, they have a lot of stamina, they’re pretty to look at...,” Jan reels off before coming up for air, “...and generally speaking, they’ve just worked out real well in our operation.”

Gene adds, “They make very good trail horses, because they’re sensible, and they’re sound. If you want a good, solid horse that can go up and down the hills and get there in a hurry, ride a Morgan.”

During the mid ’70s, the Robertses bought several Morgan stallions, and a band of Morgan mares, and set about creating a breeding program to bolster their herd. While Erika and Lance were growing up, the whole family successfully competed in a variety of divisions at Class A Morgan shows. However, the trend in the Morgan breed toward Saddlebred-type horses eventually caused the family to diversify its breeding program. “Quite simply,” states Lance, “we began to find it difficult to locate good, working-type stallions. It’s sad.”

While the ranch herd remains about 25 percent Morgan, the breeding focus



*Clockwise, from upper left: Lance helps ready horses for guests; Gene rounds up stray cattle; daughter Erika; the Robertses; wranglers help Gene move strays; a Morgan from the Robertses’ ranch herd.*





has shifted to Quarter Horses; the family is particularly interested in adding some "cow" to their bloodlines, as they now offer guest packages that include moving cattle. Still, disposition remains key. Says Gene, "When one type of rider is on a horse this week, and an entirely different type of rider is on him the following week, that can really get to a horse's mind. So we're careful about how we breed our horses, in terms of disposition. They've got to take care of themselves, and take care of the guests, as well."

"What we like about raising our own is that we get more of what we want, from conformation to disposition," says Jan. "But we do occasionally buy horses from other sources—particularly kids' horses. A good kid's horse is hard to find." Adds Gene, "I wish we could raise all of our own, but we can't. Babies take a lot of time. More than two or three foals a year can really stress me out." He estimates that about half of their current horses are homebreds.

**G**ENE AND A VISITOR MOUNT UP, AND RIDE off to search for stray cattle. Three strays are spotted across a stream. Gene guides his horse down the steep bank, but the gelding balks at the water. Gene firmly spurs him forward; the reluctant horse finally splashes across. Later that day, the rancher picks at his lunch. He confesses that he's "kicking himself" over the water-crossing incident. "I let myself get macho with that horse, using my spurs instead of my head. I should have let him slowly build his confidence to go across."

**T**EACHING CORRECT AND COMPASSIONATE horsemanship is the cornerstone of the Robertses' riding program. "You can't just plop your butt down on a horse and ride," Gene states. "You've got to achieve and maintain your balance, in order to have an independent seat and legs, and to control your horse's body." To be sure each guest gets the attention and instruction he/she needs, the Robertses first separate riders into three groups, according to each individual's self-ranking; rank is based on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being most experienced.

Each rider is carefully evaluated, and his/her rank—and group placement—is adjusted as needed. Jan and Gene assign an appropriate horse; horse and rider will remain a team throughout the week.

Jan works with the novices; seasoned wranglers supervise intermediate riders, while Gene rides with the more advanced guests; trail riding is alternated with arena work. Guests spend 2 hours



in the saddle every morning, and 2 more each afternoon.

"It's a funny thing," Gene muses, "but this happens all the time: I'll take off with the more advanced riders on Monday morning, while Jan stays with the less experienced people in the arena, working with them to develop their hands, seat, balance, and so forth. Come Saturday, if you saw everybody riding together, I swear you'd say the folks who just started as novices on Monday look better than the ones who said they knew something about riding. It's because the beginners paid close attention, and were 'molded from a lump of clay'."

#### A FAMILY AFFAIR

**A**S HE EXPERTLY GUIDES HORSE AND CATTLE along a rocky trail, Gene talks a steady stream of training theory, jumping from such topics as neck reining ("most people don't understand it's a cue, so they just jerk their horses around"), to cattle control, with the enthusiasm of an insatiable student. "One of the things I've learned is, there's no 'neutral' on a horse. You're either training or de-training him—when you're in the saddle, you need to ride. Horses, like children, do well if you use 97 percent positive reinforcement, and 3 percent negative reinforcement."

**T**HAT RATIO OF POSITIVE-TO-NEGATIVE REINFORCEMENT has worked well for Gene and Jan, both with their horses and their children. Erika, 19, is a sophomore geology/biology major at Colorado College in Colorado Springs; she works summers at the ranch. Lance, 23, graduated from Boston College in 1992, with a degree in philosophy. He chose to return to Wilderness Trails, where he works year-round. Both children say they eventually want to take over the ranch from their parents, a plan that Gene, 57, and Jan, 52, fervently hope will happen.

"Neither Lance nor I can envision not having this ranch in our lives," Erika states simply. Adds Lance, "Erika and I both have strong convictions toward the horses, the land, and our origins. Horses will be the reason that we'll be here."

Lance speaks of the tremendous influence his parents have had on him and his sister, yet he admits there are elements the next Roberts generation would like to change about the ranch. "Our parents instilled in us a strong belief system, one of honesty and hard work. I don't think Erika and I have any less of a work ethic, but we'd like to be able to

*continued on page 74*

## So You Wanna Be A Guest Rancher...

Psst, you there—the one with the wistful face. Do you find yourself sitting idly at your desk, gazing out the window and daydreaming about a job in which you could eat, sleep, and breathe horses? Let's assume that you've ruled out becoming a full-time trainer, veterinarian, or farrier. You like to teach, but you wouldn't want to do it all day, because you'd want time in the saddle yourself. You don't want to run a boarding barn, because you don't want the responsibility of other people's horses—although the *people* part appeals to your gregarious nature. You reside in urbana, yet you long to escape to the wide, open spaces. If these traits describe you, chances are you've fantasized about running a guest ranch, just like Gene and Jan Roberts. After all, visiting such a place seems like the ultimate dream vacation—so wouldn't owning and managing a guest ranch be the ultimate dream job?

The answer is yes, for the most part—but as the Robertses will attest, the dream comes at a price above and beyond the hefty loan you'll need to acquire it. You need to be prepared to toil ceaselessly, and must be ready to acclimate yourself to the potential hardships of negative bank balances, harsh elements, back-breaking work, compromised family time, elusive privacy, and inadequate sleep. As Gene sums up, "Your purpose has got to be *beyond* wanting to make a lot of money, because you're going to be immersed in what is essentially a 24-hour job. You can invest your money in a lot of other things, for greater financial return—and a lot less work."

To give you an idea of what a guest rancher's day-to-day schedule is like, Gene and Jan allowed us to have a peek at their "Daytimers." Here's what we found:

#### JAN'S DAILY SCHEDULE

##### Morning:

5:30—Staff training (early season only).

6:00—Instruct kitchen/dining room staff.

6:45—Wrangler crew arrives for breakfast.

7:30 to 9:00—Breakfast. Greet guests, pour coffee, answer questions.

8:30—Instruct riders, ages 6-11.

9:00—Instruct teen riders.

9:30—Check office/kitchen; if all-day ride scheduled, make sure lunches are being prepared.

9:45—Instruct beginning adult riders.

10:30—Ride with guests; provide instruction.

##### Afternoon:

12:00—Lunch; help with food preparation, mingle with guests.

12:45—Meet with wranglers, to check suitability of horse-and-rider matches.

1:00—Office work; frequently check riding arena/Pony Express program (kids 3-5); meet with chef/food staff, re: dinner. Depending on week day: Check on overnight pack trip preparations; accompany teens on waterskiing trip; organize raft-trip group; run adult trips to the lake; help coordinate kids' rodeo.

##### Evening:

6:00—Dine with guests.

8:00—Initiate/supervise the evening program (magic show, sing-along, country-Western dance lessons, etc.).

10:30—Bedtime.

#### GENE'S DAILY SCHEDULE

##### Morning:

5:30—Staff training (early season only).

6:45—Meet with staff, to discuss assignments.

7:30—Breakfast with guests.

8:30—Check on horses/wranglers.

9:30—Get riders ready; doctor horses; instruct/ride with guests; check property.

##### Afternoon:

12:00—Dine with guests, or go to farm (winter

residence), to work on haying operation.

1:00—Train young horses; work with guests to locate stray cattle/move cattle back to the range; help with maintenance projects.

##### Evening:

6:00—Dine with guests.

8:00—Work with Jan to help with evening entertainment.

10:30—Bedtime.



*Jan meets and greets new arrivals at the ranch.*



## CLOSE UP

*continued from page 32*

enjoy the ranch more." Both Lance and Erika say they'd prefer to scale down the number of guests per week, although they realize that might not be financially feasible. They also talk about tailoring the riding program, to include event-specific horsemanship.

Gene and Jan are proud of their children, especially since one of their chief concerns has always been that family life can take a distant back seat to guest hos-

### In Search Of...

...the ultimate guest ranch experience? The following organizations will help you get started:

**Farm, Ranch & Country Vacations**  
7550 East McDonald Dr., Suite M-HR  
Scottsdale, AZ 85250

**Gene Kilgore's Ranch Vacations**  
P.O. Box 1919-HR  
Tahoe City, CA 96145  
(800) 472-6247

**Dude Ranchers Association**  
P.O. Box 471-HR  
La Porte, CO 80535  
(303) 223-8440

**Colorado Dude & Guest Ranch Association**  
P.O. Box 300-HR  
Tabernash, CO 80478  
(303) 887-3128

pitality and ranch operations. With a constant parade of guests to entertain all summer, Lance points out, "You lose your childhood fast. But you learn all kinds of 'people skills'."

Erika agrees. "I'm extremely grateful for having met 50 new people, every week, every summer of my life. As far as social skills go, it's made me comfortable in almost any situation."

**I**T'S SUNDAY NIGHT. THE BATCH OF NEWLY arrived guests has been fed and informed. Gene and Jan take advantage of the lull to unwind at the lodge in front of a roaring fire. Outside, a thunderstorm kicks up as they speculate about this latest batch of strangers, all of whom will seem like family in 7 short days.

"The guy from Britain, he might be a good rider—they teach good horsemanship over there," Gene begins. In the distance, a shrill whinny interrupts his musing; concern

*continued on page 76*

## CLOSE UP

*continued from page 74*

flickers across his face as the whinny sounds once more. Grabbing a flashlight, he strides out into the darkness. He trains the light's weak beam on several nearby horses.

"One's probably horsin' (in heat)," he says, satisfied that all are okay. He and Jan can go to bed. It's nearly 11:00 P.M.

**H**ORSES MAY PROVIDE WILDERNESS TRAIL'S pulse, but it's the steady stream of guests—many of whom are repeat customers—that make the ranch a viable business. Asked which side of the operation is harder to deal with—the horses, or the guests—Gene and Jan both answer with a resounding "Guests!" Then they laugh, good-naturedly. "Horses have a lot of different personalities," says Jan, "but with the people, it's harder—you get a new, unknown set of personalities every summer Sunday."

Gene concurs. "With almost every horse, you can learn to communicate with him pretty quickly, and he'll generally return in kind: If you're nice to him, he's nice back. And horses'll let you know pretty directly if they're unhappy with you. But with people, you're never sure—the face you see may not be the face that's underneath."

Still, both two-legged and four-legged charges motivate the family. "I like the horses a bunch, but we've also got some super friends now, from all over the world," says Gene. "Our guests come from a million walks of life, but I don't care what someone does for a living, where he comes from, or what color he is—as long as he's got the right attitude. If a person wants to learn about horses and the outdoors, I'll knock myself out to teach him."

Occasionally, Jan confides, guests turn up who "don't know how to relax, who expect deluxe hotel amenities, like room service, golf-cart transportation from cabin to corral, etc. They want to ride their horses the same way they drive their cars on the freeway, and when they find out we don't allow that, they might decide they don't especially like our program."

But the occasional disgruntled guest hasn't penetrated the Robertses' heartfelt passion for what they're doing. "Part of the thing we enjoy the most about the business is putting a person on a horse and having him or her experience riding through the mountains," says Jan. "There's something really romantic and inspiring about riding a horse. This truly is a dream come true." □