

# Three Days at Celebration, July 2014

---

Way up in the Mimbres Valley is the Celebration area, a piece of real estate of somebody's grazing permit in the Gila National Forest. It's not a campground, although anybody can camp there. It has no toilets or RV hookups, no corrals, no potable water. The only structure is a concrete trough, more or less full of greenish liquid that passes for water in the Gospel According to Cows.



Celebration is a spacious network of campsites connected by smooth dirt roads. Overhead is the great big Gila sky. Underfoot is a sculpted carpet of needles and lumpy cones shed by an abundant ponderosa forest. The place has shade, trees close enough together for easy highlining, level areas for trailers or tents, and sufficient rocks to allow for fire circles without making the footing difficult.

Over a dozen members of the Gila BCH chapter gathered at Celebration beginning on Tuesday, July 15, when David Allen and Donna Tillmann, Gerry Engel, the Lemons (Mickey and Rawlings), and Bob Shelly arrive to put things in order for the first annual GBCH summer horse camp. By the time I arrived on Wednesday morning, the advance team had established a base adjacent to the water trough and equipped with the chapter's trusty yellow weather-shelter tarp (supported by poles that leaned at various angles), as well as steel Dutch oven stands and a table or two to hold whatever might be required to feed us all. There was talk around camp about Tuesday's antics of Donna Tillmann's new horse, Rusty, who liberated himself from his high line and had himself a walkabout

As the day progressed, GBCH members arrived towing their horse trailers. High lines popped up between the pines, with equidae munching thoughtfully below. Chairs sprouted under the tarp. Horsemen and horsewomen saddled up and organized themselves into groups to explore the countryside.

One group, led by Louise Cash and Bob Shelley, rode up Skates Canyon, juicy with input from the then-two-week-old North American monsoon rains, for an eight-mile round trip to a waterfall that tumbles over an escarpment at the end of the trail. The trail to the falls zigs and zags around and through the creek and makes at least 74 wet crossings—some of them deep enough to create splashing worthy of your favorite western movie.

Another group under the experienced eye of Gerry Engel, made a trek up the slightly moist Rocky Canyon, whose ingress lies directly across Highway 35 from the road into the Sapillo Campground. The trail the group rode from Celebration to Rocky Canyon (there's as many ways to get there as a country boy knows to get to town) winds over the braided, sandy watercourse that parallels the highway. At one point, the trail squeezes between a barbed-wire fence and a steep bank of loose soil, where

the more courageous members of the group rode their horses and the faint-hearted ones hopped off and led their steeds through. There's a big stock tank at the mouth of Rocky Canyon. The tank was dry as the riders passed through, but luxurious and green with a thick cover of what looked like lambs' quarters and would probably make a good ingredient for a salad. The trail up the canyon didn't live up to its name; it was rocky only over the dry stream crossings and was level and sandy everywhere else. The group rode a couple of miles up the canyon, regaled by reports from Gerry of exploits in the side canyons, and then returned to camp.

Riding wasn't a requirement to participate at Celebration and several people stayed behind to nap, organize meals, explore the many trails that wind through the area, clean tack, and socialize.

Wednesday evening offered a dinner of Dutch oven delicacies—a mushroom casserole, hot biscuits, and berry cobbler. We ate with our own cutlery (wash your own dishes, please) from plates supplied by the chapter. We sat on our own chairs in a big circle under the tarp and amused ourselves with our perspectives on everything except politics and religion.

Thursday was mostly a repeat of Wednesday, except that a group rode up Lincoln Canyon instead of Rocky Canyon. A few folks stayed behind to ride around the Celebration trails and therefore subjected to the benefit of David Allen's extensive knowledge about saddles, bits, riding technique, and how not to embarrass oneself by being too smoochy with a horse.

Earlier in the day, Laurie Wlosinski organized a GPS poker game, the object of which was to locate packets of playing cards, working from GPS coordinates she supplied on a map of the area. Whoever got the best hand won the prize. A couple of participants weren't present when we started examining our hands, so we passed the time by trading cards to improve our chances.

Dixie Dexter and Fran Rawllins set up a horseshoe pit and had themselves a clanging good time laughing at themselves while everybody else sat in the tarp circle, cackling and guffawing about everything we hadn't addressed the night before. By the time the last participant (Louise Cash) arrived at dinner, everybody's hand was corrupted and Laurie accused us of cheating.

Fran and Dixie returned to the circle, accompanied by fits of their own laughter about Dixie's popping of a fluffy during one of her horseshoe tosses. Somebody admonished Dixie that her behavior wasn't dignified, to which she emphatically retorted "No one EVER accused me of being dignified!"

Fran won the poker game and carted off the prize, a stuffed black-and-white horse.

Dinner was potluck side dishes, pulled pork, beans, and all the other delicious food for which Back Country Horsemen are famous, along with judicious amounts of wine, a beer or two, and some liquid confection called a Gingerita, heartily endorsed by Cindi deCapiteau.

In the hours long after lights-out, Donna Tillmann's Rusty Houdini-ed again and galumphed around the camp, which set up a round of snorting and whinnying from the less-talented members of the herd.

The Dutch-oven chefs, Mickey and Rawlings Lemon, Gerry Engel, and Bob Shelley, set out a breakfast-to-die-for (although nobody did), made all the better by the trappings of a steaming enamel coffee pot hanging over the fire, cantilevered from a cowboy pin stuck into the coals.

One more ride was scheduled for Friday morning. This one was a trip up the Continental Divide Trail (CDT) from Sapiillo. The ride was possible because Gerry Engel hopped over to the Mimbres ranger station the day before to inquire about the trail closure sign at the CDT trailhead. He learned there that the trail was not closed and, in fact, the Friday-ride group missed the CDT because the sign was gone by the time the riders reached the trail. The two huge cairns that mark the trailhead weren't obvious enough, it seems.

The CDT was a challenging climb for Donna's new horse Rusty, who hails from southeastern Texas. Everybody knows that the only elevation change in southeastern Texas resembles that of a sheet of paper on a clean desk; Rusty certainly didn't know anything about hills. He was so befuddled at the upslope scramble that he executed several jiggy left-to-right-right-to-left sidepass maneuvers. Donna responded by taking his pony line and leading him behind her saddle horse, while Rusty's rider enjoyed a responsibility-free trip and remembered similar rides with her father when she was four years old.

The group circled back to camp, where the rest of the celebrants were packing up for home. We were covered with dirt, smiles, and appreciation for friendship, shared pointers, the bonhomie and variety of talent that exists in this bunch of people who share a love of the outdoors and the animals who make our work there possible.

We will no doubt be doing this again next year, so if you missed the event this time, make room for it in the future. You'll be glad you did.