

Trail Riding as an American Cultural Heritage¹

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Outdoor recreation is accepted as a “good thing” in American culture. It may be seen as a particularly good thing in our current culture where we increasingly worry about addictive behaviors of adults, adolescents and children spending inordinate proportions of their daily lives focused on electronic devices and media.

Recent literature, such as *Last Child in the Woods*³ and the keynote address at this conference, “Nature Deficit Disorder”⁴, bemoan the evidence that the newest generations of Americans are increasingly disconnected from living nature. As someone who has studied, taught and researched the science of ecology and land management for over a half-century and lived on the land, in my opinion, nature deficit disorder is not confined to children and adolescents, but also afflicts much of our adult population.

In the 1940s, land ethicist Aldo Leopold (1887-1948) wrote:

“Barring love and war, few enterprises are undertaken with such reckless abandon, or by such diverse individuals, or with so paradoxical a mixture of appetite and altruism, as that group of avocations known as outdoor recreation. It is by common consent, a

¹ A presentation at the 2011 Southeastern Equestrian Trails Conference, Auburn Univ., Auburn, AL, July 21-23, 2011.

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³ Louv, R. 2006. *Last Child in the Woods*. Algonquin Books. Chapel Hill, NC. 334 pp.

⁴ Stormer, S. 2011. Nature Deficit Disorder. Keynote address at 2011 Southeastern Equestrian Trails Conference. Auburn Univ., Auburn, AL. July 21-23, 2011.

good thing for people to get back to nature. *But wherein lies the goodness* (italics added), and what can be done to encourage its pursuit? On these questions there is confusion of counsel, and only uncritical minds are free from doubt.”⁵

More than a century has elapsed since Leopold’s deep, analytical mind critically and seriously began pondering the human reaction to nature.⁶ He found clues, but never articulated a definitive statement. Perhaps this is because no single statement can completely integrate all of the complexities of human values and the derivations of those values that encourage, diminish or prevent re-creational experiences in outdoor recreation.

And so it is that trail riding on a horse as a recreational pursuit is generally accepted as a good thing. *But wherein lies the goodness?* What values drive the pursuers of this experience? What generational values are preserved by repetition of the experience? Are the values of equestrian trail riders assets or liabilities to American culture and to 312 million Americans and their yet unborn progeny? Americans have been clear in their lawmaking over the past 60 years that they will not tolerate behaviors that diminish their cultural and natural heritage values whether those behaviors are driven by economics or the pursuit of frivolity as a recreational experience.

Most people want recreational experiences of some kind, but what constitutes recreation? By definition recreation mentally or physically refreshes one’s life. Theoretically then, the recreational experience should re-create us and make better people of us. Does the trail ride do this for the equestrian? And, if so, how?

⁵ Leopold, A. 1949 (1987). Conservation esthetic. p. 165-187 in *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There*. Special Commemorative Edition. Oxford University Press. New York, NY.

⁶ According to his biographers and other scholars, Leopold’s deepest reflections began with an incident involving killing a wolf on the Apache National Forest in Arizona in 1909. Thirty-five years after the incident he described the scenario and how it affected his consciousness of the relations between humans and nature in the seminal essay “Thinking Like a Mountain.”

Maybe we should think about possible elements of being physically and mentally refreshed in the process of being re-created? Any experienced trail rider will confess that not all of his/her trail experiences have been good, even though some of the bad ones have made interesting tales to be told more or less accurately in later years. Whoever developed the statement “My worst day on a horse was better than my best day at the office (shop or whatever)” likely never spent many days on a variety of horses. I recall some days in which the only redeeming value I can find was to make me better appreciate those days when disaster was absent. And yet, despite the painful lessons in what can happen, most of us return to the trail stage in search of something.

Possibly the first thing we seek is the sense of being with a horse. There is a mystical relationship between humans and horses. As evidenced by centuries of painting and sculpture, even for those who will never touch a horse, this animal inspires a sense of power and beauty. To those who care for and ride horses, it is a progression of sensations that begins in the imagination and then is increasingly magnified first by sight, then touch, and ultimately the sense of human-horse oneness. For thousands of years, people have marveled that this animal, a symbol of ultimate physical power for much of human history, would submit to our will. Thus far, our sciences have failed to explain this mysterious relationship and the human desire, even need in some cases, for it. We seek what we can never adequately articulate. Possibly what we seek is the indefinable fabric of passion.

How the equestrian trail recreational experience is sought varies widely among rider group types and among individuals within these subsets. May it suffice to say that the divergences vary from those who strive for athletic accomplishment to those who gather for group socializing on horseback to those who seek solitude and a chance for quiet reflection with a horse in a wildlands setting. Hopefully, all of these recreationists are re-created for the better.

Obviously, opportunities for athletic expression, socialization, and solitude exist on rural and wildland landscapes without a horse. In fact, many horseless outdoor recreationists meet these objectives, and many of them would see the presence of a horse as an encumbrance on their freedom of action. But to the horseman, the horse critically heightens the experience in an inexplicable way.

That riders value their horses and the opportunities to trail ride and value them in different ways is simply the human condition and is no different than how they value other humans and human experiences. But does trail riding recreation have value important to American culture? The American Horse Council reported in 2005 that about 3.9 million horses (about 42% of the nation's horse population) were used primarily or entirely for recreation. Some fraction of 1.9 million horse owners trail ride. But around 312 million Americans own the public lands on which the overwhelming proportion of the trail mileage open for horse use exists. So, given the small fraction of public landowners that own or ride horses, it seems only appropriate to ask if trail rider values are important to American culture.

As America has evolved into a nation focused on urban values, perhaps the most fundamental of trail rider values are becoming increasingly important. The preservation of a deep sense of where America came from and how it got here is of immeasurable value. A palpable feeling for what once was, for human strivings for survival and progress, for landscapes irretrievably lost, and a compelling desire to reenact what the makers of our history lived is critically important to valuing the foundations of this "land of opportunity." A sense of history and a consciously formed vision of the future clearly separate us from all other animal life. While current American visions of the future seem limitless, knowledge of our past seems to be rapidly diminishing as suggested by a recent survey which indicated that only 76% of Americans knew from what nation we proclaimed our independence or in what year that proclamation was made.

Our history can be viewed with elements of both pride and shame as we picture the adventuring frontiersman pushing West across the Blue Ridge then on to the Mississippi, across the plains, the Rockies, the Sierra Nevada, the Cascades and down to the Pacific shore on a horse. We can hear John O’Sullivan’s newspaper proclamation of “Manifest Destiny” that pretended no doubt of our Divine appointment to arrogantly usurp the continent. Our conscience is cluttered with the arrogance of Custer at Little Big Horn to be followed by Wounded Knee and other atrocities inflicted on the people who were here first.

Once the Spanish conquistadores introduced the modern horse to the North American continent, the Indians, East and West swiftly adopted it and changed their entire cultures. According to Cheyenne tradition, a prophet, Sweet Medicine, foretold the coming of the horse that would be brought by strangers he called “Earth Men.”

“It has a shaggy neck and a tail almost touching the ground. Its hooves are round. This animal will carry you on his back and help you in many ways. Those far hills that seem only a blue vision in the distance take many days to reach now; but with this animal you can get there in a short time, so fear him not. Remember what I have said.”⁷

The Cheyenne went on to become some of the world’s best horsemen.

The National Museum of the American Indian is currently featuring programs and exhibits collectively entitled “A Song for the Horse Nation.” It relates the many facets of the horse in native life and art to the present day.⁸ Cowboys and Indians were likely the foremost American cultures to truly live as one with the horse.

⁷ p. 28 in Ward, G. C. 1996. *The West*. Little, Brown and Co., Boston, MA

⁸ Dr. J. R. McClenahan, Shreve, OH, personal communication

In boyhood, I was taught to honor the memory of General Robert E. Lee, who is interred in the soil not many miles from my family home in Virginia, and his horse “Traveller.” As I matured into a man, I thought countless times of how much more human suffering and death they witnessed than should any human or horse.

Lee bared his heart for Traveller when communicating with artist Markie Williams, a woman who wanted to paint the horse:

“If I was an artist like you, I would draw a true picture of Traveller; representing his fine proportions, muscular figure, deep chest, short back, strong haunches, flat legs, small head, broad forehead, delicate ears, quick eye, small feet, and black mane and tail. Such a picture would inspire a poet, whose genius could then depict his worth, and describe his endurance of toil, hunger, thirst, heat and cold; and the dangers and suffering through which he has passed. He could dilate upon his sagacity and affection, and his invariable response to every wish of his rider. He might even imagine his thoughts through the long night-marches and days of the battle through which he has passed. But I am no artist Markie, and can therefore only say he is a Confederate gray.”⁹

As I have traveled the rural South, I have occasionally observed herds of Santa Gertrudis cattle grazing on soils that might once have been soaked with the blood of Americans, many of whom were in the Confederate Army commanded by General Lee. In 1852, Lt. Col. Lee surveyed the headquarters for the King Ranch at Santa Gertrudis Creek, the origin of the name of the cattle breed.¹⁰ He could not have imagined at that time the horrors that were to come or the beguiling pastoral scenes that today lie as palls over those killing fields. Do the spirits of Lee and Traveller ever visit such places?

⁹ Copied from *Wikipedia*.

¹⁰ p. 90 in Pirtle, C. et al. 1975. *XIT Being a New and Original Exploration, in Art and Words, into the Life and Times of the American Cowboy*. Oxmoor House, Inc. Birmingham, AL 156 pp.

The early American naturalists and painters such as William Bartram (1729-1823) and John J. Audubon (1785-1851) explored and described the American wilderness on horseback. Meriwether Lewis (1774-1809) and William Clark (1770-1838), commissioned to carry out Thomas Jefferson's Voyage of Discovery (more commonly known as the Lewis and Clark Expedition, 1804-1806) carried out their charge by horseback as well as by watercraft and on foot. Quintessential American artists Frederick Remington (1861-1909) and Charles M. Russell (1864—1926) painted cowboys, frontiersmen, cavalymen and Indians, all on horseback. The Oregon, Chisholm and Santa Fe trails and many other less well known routes were opened for westward migration, trader commerce and cattle drives by men mounted on horseback.

Our arts preserve visions of Native American cultures, Euro-American westward migration by wagon train, of cattle drives to supply the nation with beef, and the breaking of the tall grass prairie sod to create the nation's "bread basket." At center stage in every scene whether of conquest, war or peace is the horse supporting human endeavor whether for noble or ignoble purpose.

The foundations for American natural resource conservation were visualized and formalized on horseback. George Bird Grinnell (1849-1948), considered by some to be the father of American Conservation, rode with the Pawnee on their last great buffalo hunt in 1872, then with Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer on the Black Hills expedition in 1874. In 1875 he rode as the naturalist with Col. William Ludlow to evaluate Montana Territory and Yellowstone National Park.

While editor of *Forest and Stream* magazine Grinnell founded the Audubon Society in 1886. Working with Theodore Roosevelt (1858-1919), he was a founder of the Boone and Crockett Club in 1888. Grinnell was a major force in the creation of the Forest Reserve Act of 1891 and the Yellowstone Game Protection Act of 1894. He

worked with Roosevelt and others to establish federal protection of wildlife and wildlands in National Parks, National Forests and National Wildlife Refuges.¹¹

Biographer David McCullough's book *Mornings on Horseback*¹² and Douglas Brinkley's *Wilderness Warrior*¹³ leave no doubt that Theodore Roosevelt (T.R.) was not only a horseman, his dreams were of riding into the wilderness on horseback not only in pursuit of big game, but more importantly in pursuit of the early American landscape experience. T.R.'s horse "Lightfoot" was the delight of his erudite New York life, but it was his Dakota ranch and trail horse "Manitou" that took him into some of the highest adventures of his life. As related by Douglas Brinkley, after protracted, deep mourning following the death of his much beloved young wife, Alice, T.R. concluded that he needed the healing powers of wild landscapes and "[a] saddle horse would be his best companion, his true and equal friend."¹⁴

Gifford Pinchot (1865-1946), father of American forestry and first chief of the U. S. Forest Service, was a horseman with the reputation among his fellow Boone and Crockett Club members as a "'man's man' who could 'out ride and out shoot' anybody."¹⁵ His close association with T.R. resulted in the creation of the U. S. Forest Service in 1905 and the National Forest System in the U. S. Department of Agriculture in 1907. T.R., leaning heavily on Pinchot's advice, set aside more federal lands for natural and cultural resources conservation than has any other American president. This president and horseman created the National Wildlife Refuge System (beginning with Pelican Island, Florida, 1903) and established the first national monument to preserve cultural resources at Mesa Verde (Colorado) in 1906. During his presidency (1901-1909), he set aside 234 million acres of federal lands for natural and cultural resource conservation. This acreage was distributed over 150 National Forests (either created or enlarged), 51 bird reservations, four

¹¹ pages 184-189 and other places in Brinkley, D. 2009. *Wilderness Warrior*. Harper Perennial. New York, NY.

¹² McCullough, D. 2001. *Mornings on Horseback*. Simon-Schuster. New York, NY. 445 pp.

¹³ Brinkley, D. 2009. *Wilderness Warrior*. Harper Perennial. New York, NY. 903 pp.

¹⁴ p.167 in Brinkley, D. 2009. *Wilderness Warrior*. Harper Perennial. New York, NY.

¹⁵ p.344 in Brinkley, D. 2009. *Wilderness Warrior*. Harper Perennial. New York, NY.

game preserves,¹⁶ six National Parks and 18 National Monuments.¹⁷ According to Douglas Brinkley: “By reorienting and redirecting Washington, D.C., bureaucracy toward conservation, Roosevelt’s American wilderness can now be viewed as one of the greatest presidential initiatives between Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation and Woodrow Wilson’s decision to enter World War I.”¹⁸

While Pinchot is recognized as the father of American forestry, professional education in American forestry began at George W. Vanderbilt’s (1862-1914) Biltmore Estate near Asheville, North Carolina. Mr. Vanderbilt hired German born and educated Carl Alwin Schenck (1868-1955) to be the estate forester in 1895 and later granted him permission to create and direct the Biltmore Forest School where he conducted classes from 1898 to 1913.¹⁹ Of the 300 students, referred to as “Schenck’s Boys,” that graduated from the school, half went on to hold key positions in the newly emerging U. S. Forest Service and to become engaged in many other private and public aspects of forestry, including international consulting. To study at what became known as the Cradle of Forestry on the 120,000-acre Biltmore Estate,²⁰ each student had to supply his own saddle horse. If you prepared for your professional life in American forestry at the Cradle of Forestry, your field work was on horseback.

Aldo Leopold (1887-1948), recognized by the USDA-Forest Service as the father of wilderness, and by The Wildlife Society as the father of American wildlife management, wrote wistfully of his experiences as a young forest officer in the U. S. Forest Service working on horseback from 1909 to 1924 in Arizona and New Mexico. In his seminal essay “Thinking Like a Mountain,” in which he reflected on

¹⁶ The bird reservations and game preserves were the initial components of what would become the National Wildlife Refuge system in 1942.

¹⁷ p. 825-830 in Brinkley, D. 2009. *Wilderness Warrior*. Harper Perennial. New York, NY.

¹⁸ p. 21 in Brinkley, D. 2009. *Wilderness Warrior*. Harper Perennial. New York, NY.

¹⁹ Schenck, C. A., 1998. *Cradle of Forestry in America: The Biltmore Forest School, 1898-1913*. edited by O. Butler. Forest History Society. Durham, NC. 224 pp.

²⁰ In 1916, 80,000 acres of the Biltmore Forest was sold by Mr. Vanderbilt’s widow to the federal government to become the origin of the Pisgah National Forest, one of the first National Forests in the East and which currently encompasses over 510, 000 acres. The Cradle of Forestry is located on the Pisgah National Forest near Brevard, North Carolina.

an experience of killing a wolf in 1909 and later observing ranges over-browsed by deer herds perishing of “their own too much”, he wrote: “I have seen every edible tree defoliated to the height of a saddle horn.”²¹

In “Escudilla”²², writing about the extermination of grizzlies in Arizona, he recalled riding over “honey-colored plains” and “woody mesas.” He described the moods of the landscape and, the awareness of the mountain, Escudilla, and its grizzly by “the most hard-bitten cowboys” wherever they rode.

In “On Top”²³, he wrote:

“When I first lived in Arizona, the White Mountain was a horseman’s world. [Today] I hear young people, not yet born when I first rode out ‘on top,’ exclaim about it as a wonderful place. To this, with unspoken mental reservation, I agree.”

When writing about the virtues of hunting in his essay “Goose Music,”²⁴ Leopold offered as a special value: “...hunting generally involves the handling of dogs and horses, and the lack of this experience is one of the most serious defects in our gasoline-driven civilization.” What would he think of our current condition in an electronics-driven civilization?

And finally in 1922, when Leopold, wrote for Forest Service administrative consideration the justification for the size of the Gila Wilderness in New Mexico, the nation’s first Wilderness area, he specified that it needed to be large enough to

²¹ Leopold, A. 1949 (1987). Thinking like a mountain. p. 130 in *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There*. Special Commemorative Edition. Oxford University Press. New York, NY.

²² Leopold, A. 1949 (1987).Escudilla. p. 133-137 in *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There*. Special Commemorative Edition. Oxford University Press. New York, NY.

²³ Leopold, A. 1949 (1987).On top. p. 122-128 in *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There*. Special Commemorative Edition. Oxford University Press. New York, NY.

²⁴ Leopold, A. 1993. Goose music. p. 166-173. in *Round River*. Edited by L. B. Leopold. Oxford University Press. New York, NY.

accommodate a “two-week pack trip.” He was referring to a trip for hunters mounted on horseback traveling with pack stock.

That the horse and its use for travel and transport across wild landscapes was at center stage as America was sculpted from the wilderness is manifest in our art and written history, as well as our historical fiction literature. That the trail horse was a critical element in the lives of some of the most important individuals who created natural resource conservation in America is less well known. However, at this point we have abundant *prima facie* evidence that recreational horse trails and their use on horseback is a historical cultural heritage. The recreation of trail riding, when appropriately conducted with mindfulness of the natural heritage setting and the human history that helped shape that setting, spiritually re-creates the rider with a sense of human-horse adventure and provides a sense of reenactment of what historically once was on the American landscape.

The trail rider and horse entity is a reminder that our national history and the origins for natural resource conservation in our nation were created by visionary horsemen who personally experienced these resources on wild landscapes. Furthermore, most of our vast public lands, for which Americans have many legitimate values, were first protected and managed by mounted men. Thus the recreational horse trail and rider are a heritage characterizing not only human history on the American landscape, but also that of some of our most important public agencies charged with protection of the publicly owned portions of that landscape, the USDA-Forest Service and the National Park Service in particular.

The future is a relentless aggressor bringing with it changes in values as society “progresses” and civilization “advances.” Things such as improvements in human health and well-being all appear to have been for the good. Similarly, advancements in our picture and understanding of a spectacular universe have been exciting and good. But diminishment in our knowledge, understanding and appreciation of our history and connections to the “natural” world has been disappointing at best and

alarming at worst. A sense of history is unique to the human species. It gives us perspective when evaluating purported “progress.” Some historical values are so delicate that they can be easily lost as societal values change, the experience of living is devoid of personal reminders of history, and visions for a very different future dominate the collective mind.

And thus it is with the cultural heritage of trail riding on horseback. It will be preserved only to the extent that trail riders themselves focus on the experience as a cultural heritage in a natural heritage setting. To the extent that the land management agencies and the American citizenry increasingly view trail riding as a merely frivolous activity entailing natural resource damage by a very small fraction of the owners of the public lands, the opportunity to experience (reenact) this heritage will be increasingly imperiled.

“Whether you will or not
You are a King, Tristram, for you are one
Of the time-tested few that leave the world,
When they are gone, not the same place it was.
Mark what you leave.”²⁵

²⁵ From Robinson. E. A. 1927. *Tristram*. MacMillan Company. cited in Leopold, A. 1949 (1987). *The land ethic*. p. 223 in *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There*. Special Commemorative Edition. Oxford University Press. New York, NY.