

## The Trail

# Horse

## You've Always Wanted

I tack up my horse, put my foot in the stirrup and hop into the saddle. As I settle into the seat, I can feel my mood change. I give Max the signal to walk off and my heart sings. Riding down the trail, I feel free as I let myself enjoy movements of my horse and I feel alive. I soon find myself enjoying the great outdoors, smiling as I notice how green the grass is, and my eyes fix on the beautiful trees with their leaves swinging in the breeze. What a great feeling I get while I'm riding my horse. Life is wonderful!

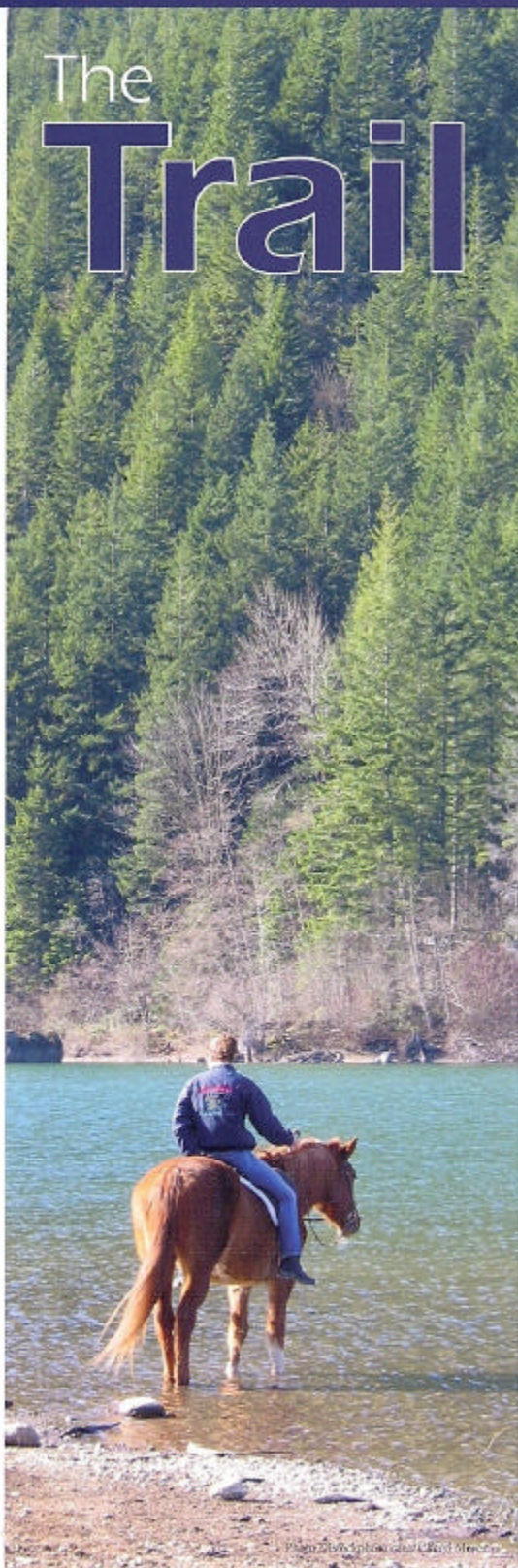
Take a moment and think about this question. How do you think your horse feels when he gets out of his stall, the arena, or perhaps the pasture, and rides down the trail with you? Do you think he enjoys it as much as you do? I know my horse does, but I see horses out on the trail that are definitely not happy – and one reason is the rider isn't happy. The human part of the equation is preoccupied with training, keeping his steed under control and a myriad of other antics that folks do with their horses. Ho Hum.

I've always wondered how a horse can be your partner if you are telling him what to do every second of his ride. How can the rider enjoy his horse if he worries about whether his horse is on the right lead or if his head is in the proper position? I've always thought a great relationship was based on the 'give and take' principles. What are you purging from your horse while you are riding him in this fashion while in the great outdoors? Are you allowing him to be a part of your experience? Are you really?

If you're wondering what my point is, I'll tell you. My idea of a great trail ride is to enjoy what I'm doing and to let my horse also enjoy it. Horses are very perceptive, as you know, so if you're uptight about your horse's behavior, what is that doing to your horse's performance? Remember, your horse may have something important to give to your relationship. That is right – he has something to add – if you allow him to.

The ancient Greek horseman, Xenophon, who many modern day equestrians give credit for being the first to use gentle or natural horse techniques, did a great disservice to the horse, in my opinion. His philosophy was simply that he did not like the way the horse looked while being ridden by the nomadic people of his day. Therefore, he believed you should use equipment, such as bits, to get the horse's head higher so he would look "prettier" as he pranced around. Well, that doesn't sound very natural to me.

The nomads were the proverbial natural horsemen of all times. These equestrians literally lived on their horses; the horses were a part



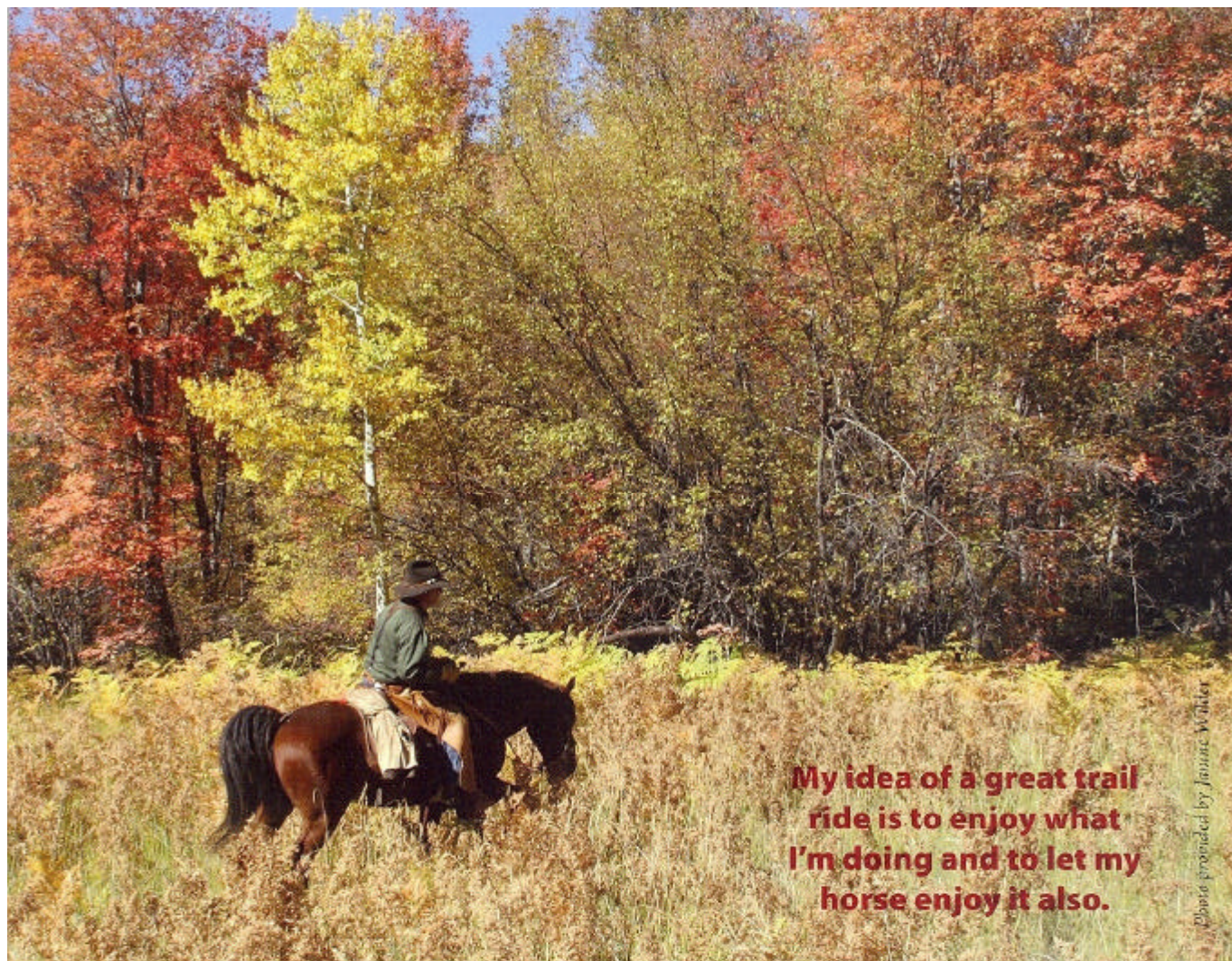


Photo provided by Janine Wicker

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Janine is an author, an international freelance equestrian writer and photographer, lecturer/clinician, Trail Horse Behaviorist, Expert in trail riding, trail camping, and traveling with horses, and a Long Rider - founding member of The Long Rider's Guild.

Janine is the author and photographer of Western Horseman's book *"TRAIL RIDING A Comprehensive Guide to Enjoying Your Horse Outdoors"*

Janine is also the founder of her new project *"Beyond Natural Horsemanship"*

of the horsemen. They had such an unpretentious connection with their equestrian partner that it led to their legacy of the Centaur. This half-man half-horse figure from history is my idea of a close-knit relationship, figuratively speaking of course.

The crux of this history lesson is to illustrate what I believe to be the next phase of growth in the equestrian community – the era of the modern day Centaur. Today's trail rider and his trail horse can mature into a liaison that every rider wants, but few have been able to achieve. You cannot train this connection between man and animal into your equine, and it will not just magically appear because you want it to. You and your steed develop this process over time.

However, you cannot develop it in the arena or the round pen. Yes, I know the horseman can do some wonderful things with his horse in a confined area, but they usually cannot transfer them to the wilds of the trail. Believe me, there is something captivating about being a centaur in our natural environment. When you are "one" with your horse, the two of you are safer, happier, and show true promise.

Is there a fork in the trail for you? My advice is to take it. Which way? The way of changing your relationship with your trail horse for the better, the way of enjoying your ride on the trail and developing a safer and more dependable mount. Life isn't getting any longer and there are too many trails to ride. So, what are you waiting for?

Wishing you safe and happy trails – Janine