

2017 September Trip Report

Sunday Sept 10th:

About 2 weeks before this trip started Murphy felt like it needed to make sure we were aware of how many different things could go wrong during the week. Murphy was on a roll all week, as I don't believe there was one day we even got to stop at plan B. It was always at least plan C.

A couple weeks before the trip I sent a reminder to the school district, that we would need a bus to pick people up in Sheridan on Sunday Sept 10th. I was told they did not have a bus available, which meant I had to figure out how to get all the people up to camp. Since this trip starts on top of the mountain and ends in the valley, we can't get to many vehicles on top of the mountain because we don't end where we started. Since Sheridan is not a metropolis there is nowhere to rent a 15 passenger van. We had to go to Billings to find one. This of course, just adds more hurdles for us to figure into our planning. Since it a 2 hour drive to Billings there is no option other than to rent it for the week, because there is no one to return it and then pick it back up the end of the week. So we pay for a week on a van that we only use two days. That of course breaks out to \$500 for each day of use. Such it is in running a business in rural America. We picked people up in Sheridan with the van and a couple ranch pickups, to haul the luggage and extra guests to camp. It's always amazing how quickly people get in when they view it from the thought of having to ride with the luggage in the back. We had a beautiful day for the first day of the week, with a high of about 65 on the mountain. We did the horsemanship clinic, some light riding to get a feel and look at how we had horse and riders matched up. That evening around the fire we had the white bag nominations. It is always a real struggle the first day since no one really knows anyone else. However, I did have a nomination. Curt Carlson was the only nominee as well as the winner. Seems when he checked sex on the registration, he checked female. Since we didn't know Curt, we didn't know if maybe the word sex got him all worked up and he checked his preference or maybe he just wasn't sure what sex he was. Either way, it didn't matter to us as we are non-discriminating when it comes to making fun of someone.

Monday Sept 11th:

We started the gather this morning by splitting into 4 different groups, with the idea of throwing everything we find into Lake Creek, before starting the long trek to the Dry Fork the following day. Craig and Stan headed to ride the Bear Trap drainages with a group of guests. Taylor took a group and headed to ride the head of Lake Creek and Fishhook Creek, with the idea of throwing anything they find into the bottom of Kane Creek. I sent Chris and Roy and another group of riders to ride the Rubber Boot Park country. I took a group with me and we headed to the bottom of Dayton Gulch to come back to Lake Creek with anything that we might find. Like all things, there are so many moving parts when you scatter like this, that you never know if everything will go as planned, so you really just hope to complete the day sometime before dark. My group picked up about 40 head in Lick Creek and trailed them to Lake Creek. Chris and Roy's group found a few and when they came back Chris and Roy dropped below Anvil Rock to ride the upper benches. Anvil Rock is only a ¼ mile from the horse pasture

where camp is located. Sem who had enough riding for the day, decided to head back to camp from Anvil Rock. We are not sure how he got lost with his little group of played out cowboys in a ¼ mile, but he did. I guess living in a cement/ steel jungle you just don't observe landmarks. Even though the getting lost was very temporary, he did win the white bags that evening for it. However, he was also nominated for another little mishap. When he came to the camp that morning, he was complaining about the short in his flashlight. It kept going off and on. We explained it was a strobe so that if he actually got lost, he could flag a ride down and hitch a ride on a space ship as it went over. However, he did not have his strobe with him when he got lost. Since as he said he was momentarily misplaced with his geographic location, we were glad we explained the strobe to him and encouraged him to carry it with him.

Tuesday Sept 12th.

The logistics of these trips are always my biggest problems. We had a lot of gear and groceries to transport to the next camp on Wednesday, so we decided to have Alice and Tianne take the two Gator's loaded with supplies, down to the next camp on Tuesday, so as to get at least part of the load in. They hauled a couple coolers loaded with food and when they arrived at the next camp, they couldn't get the cabin door padlock to unlock, so they left both coolers outside under the overhang and hoped that the bears wouldn't find it that night. On the way back out with the two Gators, they were about 5 miles out from the camp, when they broke a drive belt on the older Gator. All they could do was leave it, knowing it would complicate the next day's logistics, but that is tomorrow. Oh well, Murphy had had his fun for the day, so odds were, all would go well the rest of the day. We couldn't have been more wrong! Murphy was just getting warmed up.

We rode out of camp that day to start the herd towards the Dry Fork, with the forecast of it being a beautiful day, actually it was a little warmer than what we really wanted to be trailing a bunch of cows. It is such a long way to the Dry Fork from Lake Creek with a herd, that we decided to try something new. We would trail half way today, start the herd on down the trail, with the idea of cleaning it up the next day. All of the cattle had been up and down this trail before, so we thought it might work. We hit Lunch Break Park about noon which was perfect. We got off our horses and ate our lunches, while the cattle rested and mothered up. It was an absolutely gorgeous day. After lunch I explained to people that we were going to break the cattle up into about 8 different small herds and trail them to where the trail becomes a single file trail. If you shove 400 cows into a single file trail all at once, you still have 400 cows there the next day. That's why we took 8 small groups so they are strung out instead of bunched up. Somewhere at this point, the communication didn't make sense to someone. One of my crew members was in the lead to turn the cattle onto the single file trail, so the cattle wouldn't walk right on by it. When I arrived with the drags there was a whole bunch of people who had shoved their cattle down the trail, and then came back to wait for the drags, as that was as far as we were going with the herd today. However, I could hear a cowboy down the trail a little way still pushing, so I went down and found a couple people and asked if they knew if there was anyone else ahead of them. They said they did not know. I sent them back up the trail and then sat there and listened. I didn't hear any cowboys whooping or hollering ahead of me, so assumed I had caught the lead. Now starting 8 small groups down the trail by the time I got there with the drags, the leads might

already be ½ mile down the trail. I rode back up to the other riders and was told that several of them had run out of water, so Taylor had taken them off into the timber to a spot where we knew of a spring, to get a drink and fill their water bottles. I didn't know how many had gone with Taylor. I knew they would catch us, so I took every one else with me, and we headed back to camp. We had gone about 3 miles when I came to a spot where I had had the cooks leave a pickup and trailer that morning when they had taken the groceries to the Dry Fork. This was so that if we had someone completely worn out, we could take them back the last 4 miles in a pickup instead of having to ride every inch of it.

When you ride back from a long day in the saddle, riders have a tendency to get strung out depending on your riding skill and how fast your horse walks. It might be as much as 30 minutes before the first one and last one get in.

Since we had been split in two groups coming back we were strung out for about 30 minutes from the first person to the last person into camp. This is when Murphy went into an all out rolling on the ground belly laugh. One of our guests rides up and says "Has anyone seen my mom?" We responded we had not seen her. However, there were still riders coming, so she might be with one of them. We could do nothing but sit and wait until the last riders came in. At that point, it became obvious, Beth was not with anyone. We are about 1 ½ hours before dark at this time. Taylor was one of the last riders in so he had not unsaddled when he heard we might be short Beth. As soon as I was convinced we were short Beth, I ran to the corral, caught a horse, saddled up and crawled on. I rode over to the camp, grabbed the SAT phone, hollered orders to Taylor to take the pickup and trailer to where we had left it earlier in the day. I told everyone else to stay put. I took off riding the exact trail we had ridden on, sure that I would come upon her riding up the trail on her way to camp. I knew Beth had been with us at lunch time because I had visited with her at that point. I rode at a very fast pace never getting out of a trot or lope depending on the steepness or ruggedness of the trail. The horse I had grabbed, had been ridden all day, but he obviously could sense my urgency, as he never broke stride up or down the mountain side. That horse had probably had 20 miles already put on him that day and who knew how many more were going to be asked of him. But he was willingly going to give me everything he had. I caught up with Taylor just at dark, 4 miles down the trail. You could see outlines but that was about it. Once I caught up with Taylor I was pretty sure I had figured out what had happened. I explained my thoughts and we concluded we had no options other than keep going. Alice and Cathryn had jumped in the Gator and were waiting at the pickup when we trotted up on our horses. I told them I was sure what had happened, is that Beth didn't get the message when we shoved the cattle down the single file trail towards the Dry Fork. She would have been in the lead group and that bunch of cows knew where they were going, so just kept walking, and Beth doing the same. She just kept following along and probably went clear to the Dry Fork. Now whether she pushed cows all the way to the Dry Fork or the cows led her all the way to the Dry Fork is still undecided. By now it is completely dark, but we are still out in the open parks so we hadn't turned our flashlight's on yet. Once we got to the first timber patch, we turned on our flashlights so we wouldn't catch a branch in the face and loose and eye. We had slowed to a slow trot by now. As we rode along in the dark we could hear Bull Elk bugling to us as we rode by. The Elk were in full rut. I realized about then, that if you were riding back by yourself in the dark, and had never heard a bull elk bugle, it would scare the crap out of you. Several bulls issued a challenge to us as we rode by and many of them weren't more than 50 yards away from us in the timber. When Taylor and I rode into Lunch Break Park it about 8:15 pm and pitch black. We stopped so

that I could call the valley on my SAT phone. I called my oldest son Brendon, who is our emergency contact person in the valley during the trips. He is also an attorney so shuts his phone off before too late, so that he doesn't get calls from people during the night to come bail them out of jail. I called him and explained the situation and told him not to shut his phone off. I told him when I call next, it will either be we have found her or to call the Search and Rescue and have them on standby. The trail we rode down was so dry and thick with dust, you could not make out any tracks on it other than to know, that a lot of animals had gone over it that day. When you flashed your flashlight off into the timber you could still see the dust hanging in the air. In the timber, it was pitch black. We kept shining our lights on the trail hoping to find a partial hoof print of a horse or some other sign. We reached a point where we knew that any horse sign had to be Beth's, as none of us had gone that far down the trail that day. We were about 3 miles from the Dry Fork camp when Taylor picked up what appeared to be horse manure with his head lamp. He stepped off and grabbed a handful and could tell it was horse. This was a very strong positive, because we knew it had to be from Beth's horse. For the first time we were positive Beth was ahead of us somewhere. Beth was mounted on a very good reliable horse so that put us somewhat at ease. We rode off Screamer Hill, crossed the Dry Fork River and into the horse pasture. Once we hit the horse pasture, we immediately smelled wood smoke. It was either a bow hunter or it had to be Beth. We rode up to the cabin and about 100 yards from the camp we could see a bonfire burning, and Beth sitting there by the fire. At about that same time a lone horse from camp whinnied. We were equally glad to see one another. I grabbed the SAT phone and called Brendon and had him send a text message to the Lake Creek Camp that all was good. Beth had been found! I also had Brendon text them to come get us at daylight the next morning with the Gator. To turn around and ride back out of there that night, would mean we wouldn't ride into the Lake Creek camp until around 2:30am and would have to do the whole ride in the pitch black.

When Beth arrived at camp she sat for about an hour expecting another group of cattle and riders to show up behind her. More cattle showed up but no riders, they had all gotten the memo. Beth unsaddled Tiger Lilly and sat and waited. A little before dark she jumped on Tiger Lilly bareback, rode down to the creek crossing of the Dry Fork. Sitting there looking up Screamer Hill, she decided she didn't want to ride back in the dark, not 100% sure she wouldn't miss the trail somewhere. Tiger Lilly was pulling at the bit and trying to convince Beth to give her her head, and she would take her back. However, Beth made the correct decision and rode back to camp to just wait it out. I'm sure her anxiety level was pretty high, but I will say she stayed very calm and stayed put. The most important thing one can do in those situations is stay put. We all had anxiety as we were looking for Beth, but the most anxiety had to be with her son who can do nothing but sit at camp and wait. Branden is an Air Force pilot but am sure he wasn't expecting to have to go through a night like this.

Exactly what had happened is exactly what I had guessed. Beth fell in behind the lead group and since cattle were still following her she assumed riders were behind them and continued all the way to the Dry Fork. The Dry Fork is 14 miles from the Lake Creek camp so Beth was a long ways from camp.

One of the things that gave Beth a very small sense of comfort was that she recognized the coolers that Alice and Tianne had brought in that day. She at least knew she had the correct camp. We got into the coolers, got out the next night's meal, started a burner and heated up some stew. We had extra sleeping bags in the cabin, so the 3 of us each took one and went to catch as many zzz's as possible.

Wednesday Sept 13th:

Just after the crack of daylight I heard the motor of the Gator, as Alice was coming in to pick us up. We threw our 3 saddles in the back of the Gator, piled in and out we went, with the idea we would be back at the Lake Creek camp in time for breakfast. Well Murphy wasn't through with us yet. We were headed up the logging road and about 5 miles from the Lake Creek camp when we had a blowout on the Gator. There was a loud boom and it was all over. There we sat, sort of in shock as we couldn't believe what had just happened. Taylor started walking back down the road to a Bow Hunter's camp. The thought just went through my mind, some Bow Hunter didn't know just yet, be he was about to be kidnapped. After about 20 minutes, Taylor and some bow hunter came around the corner in a pickup, we all piled in and he gave us a ride back to the Lake Creek Cow Camp. This was one of those scenarios that we have never had happen. Today was a planned camp move so the crew had gone ahead and started tearing down camp and packing it up with the idea we were still moving camp. They of course were correct, as there was lots of apprehension since the top 3 in charge were all gone. However, Cathryn did a great job. The cooks had left plates of food for us when they packed up the kitchen that morning and even though it was cold, it was great!! Once camp was packed up we found Beth another horse and she took off on the day's ride which was to ride all the way back to the Dry Fork camp today, where she had spent the last night. Since she had ridden it the day before, we made her the trail boss for the day.

Because of Murphy, we got out of the Lake Creek camp about 3 hours later than what we would have planned on, but since they had taken 2 loads of groceries in the day before, we were able to make adjustments and get everything in on one Gator and trailer. When the cowboys rode into camp at 5:30 pm we had camp all set up and dinner just about ready. Man, do I have a fantastic crew!! On the way to the head of the Dry Fork, I caught a weather report and found out they were calling for snow on Friday.

That evening I got on the SAT phone and made a call to the valley to have someone bring us another belt so we could get both Gators going.

That night for the White Bags, Beth of course was nominated but no one would vote for her. Curt was nominated for saddling the wrong horse this morning, but the winner was Michael Graves who didn't check his cinch before he came down Screamer Hill. Without it being cinched up properly it slid clear forward acting like a dump truck and standing on the saddle horn. Of course we all know what happens to the contents of a dump truck when it is in the dump position!

Thursday Sept 14th:

We awoke to a foggy over cast day, as the clouds rolled in and out all day. One minute you would think it was going to clear and the next minute you would think it was going to pour. I went up country to meet Wendell who had run to town and bought a drive belt for the Gator and met us at the head of the Dry Fork. We spent about 2 hours getting the new belt on. It was harder than I anticipated, but we got it on. Shops that do that type of stuff have all the specific tools needed to do a job like that. But I used rancher ingenuity which in laymen's terms means a bigger hammer and bigger pry bar. We had a few showers roll in as we were lying there on the ground putting the belt back on. We put our slicker on and kept right on working, hoping to stay dry. There was no option, the Gator had to be fixed

because we had way too much stuff to bring out of camp the next day with one Gator, when it is about a 2 ½ hour drive round trip. After the belt was put on and a short test drive was concluded we left the repaired Gator at the Head of the Dry Fork, as I had another crew member coming in the next morning, so we left the Gator for him. He had plans to be in shortly after day break.

The cowboys had split a couple different directions looking for the 150 yearlings that were supposed to be in the Double Springs Pasture, as the plan was to gather the yearlings we would trail to the valley the next day. They picked up about half of them, as the fog also rolled in and out on them. With fog rolling in and out, it is very easy to miss a large number of cattle because you just can't see. We weren't overly concerned because we had the cattle surrounded by water, we had the Pacific on one side and the Atlantic on the other. Oh well there is always tomorrow.

Sem won the white bags as he had taken his saddle bags off earlier when he won the white bags and hadn't put them back on, so didn't have any saddle bags at all.

I had heard the weather the day we came in to the Dry Fork and since Alice and I didn't have a tent, I built one out of tarps.. With a couple poles, a little rope and a few tent stakes, I made a shelter to give Alice and I some protection in the event of inclement weather during the night. I don't care how tough you think you are, when your spouse gets soaked and cold, the honeymoon is over! About 8:30 pm it started to pour. All I needed was for our shelter to be successful for one night, or at least the majority of the night. We both actually slept pretty dry.

Friday Sept 15th:

However, as we peeked out from under our dry spot the next morning, it looked very very wet! It was obvious we wouldn't be packing any of the tents out as they were all soaked. The rain was still coming straight down. The trick is to get everything packed up, keeping it dry, and keeping yourself dry. If you are wet before you get on your horse, you will have a very wet, long cold miserable day. Well, that just about included everyone, as I don't think anyone was dry by the time we left camp. I am sure everyone had a very wet long cold day, some more so than others. By now I am sure Murphy's sides had to be aching from all the laughing!!

As the guests came out of their tents that morning with their luggage in hand and walked, slid and cursed all the way off the hill to the cabin, I can only imagine what they were thinking. At the moment, I am sure one of those 98% of the cattle drives that are artificial, looked pretty good! This is the moment where only the shadow knows the truth. On the outside we tell and act like this is no big deal or that we don't have any concerns. However, the shadow is standing back saying you poor poor people, you have no idea what your day is really going to be like. We tarped their luggage to keep it dry, served breakfast and hoped for a break in the rain before loading the Gator's and trailers with luggage.

The first 50 yards out of camp are very steep. I knew there was no way, I was going to pull a loaded trailer up the slick hill. Brian showed up with the other Gator at about that time and was soaked and covered in mud. However, he still had a big grin to go with the red bushy mud filled beard of his. He said he had slipped on and off the road all the way in. If it's tough coming down hill, you can only imagine what it will be like going uphill, with a load. It was tough. I decided the best attack plan was for me to hook to an empty trailer and see if I could pull it up the steep hill to the first bench, where we would shuttle stuff to it with the other Gator and then see if we could pull the gear out of there from there. I poured the coal to the empty Gator and with all 4 tires spinning I made it up the hill just about a

1/3 of the way, before completely spinning out. About 6 guests and crew came slogging up the hill with their heads down and their feet slipping and sliding with every step. Once they reached the Gator and trailer they all leaned into it and started pushing. With all of them pushing, and rooster tails shooting 10 feet in the air, we made it another 6 feet before spinning out. Taylor went running down the hill to get a horse. We hooked a horse and rope to the front of the Gator and with everyone pushing gave it hell again. We made it about another 10 feet before spinning out. People are covered with mud, gasping for air in the exertion, with the rain still coming down. Brian went back and got another horse and another couple people. We now had 8 people pushing, and 2 horses pulling. With the slick mud it was hard for people and horses to get much traction, but we gave it hell again. With rooster tails shooting 15 feet in the air, the Gator slowly started climbing. Inch by inch it chewed and clawed it's way forward and up. We finally topped out on the bench and came to a rest. Everyone is mud covered, soaked and exhilarated all at the same time. Some just stood there and looked back down at the camp, others started the slow slick walk back down the hill to the camp. We decided at that point, that not only were the tents staying, but I asked my crew to leave their bedrolls, as well as any non-perishable food items, just so we had less stuff to haul out. Jake took the other Gator, loaded it with gear, tarped it and up the hill he came. Without pulling a trailer he was able to make it to the top by clawing, chewing, bouncing off rocks and sage brush to the top. He made about 4 round trips and we had the trailer and Gator loaded. Alice got in the other Gator, several of my cooks crawled in one or the other, and off we went up the slick muddy road with people's gear. I also had several crew members riding horses out. We had everything with us and everything else was left at camp. That included the crew bedrolls as well as a couple coolers of food that would not go bad, as well as all the garbage. That stuff was all locked in the cabin and was just going to have to wait until it dried out next week.

I started off in the lead with the loaded trailer pushing, pulling and shoving me all over the road. It was a real balancing act, because too much speed and I couldn't make the corners, and not enough speed I couldn't pull the hills. Mud is flying from spinning and splashing and as I am sitting in the Gator I am covered completely in mud from the waist down. I made it to the first very short steep hill which was about 10 yards long and spun the load out. I attempted to back up and ended up with the trailer jack knifed off over the side of the road. At this point, I couldn't go either direction. At least the decision was easy. I unhooked the trailer and left it there, loaded. Things were looking up though as we had covered ½ mile with 6 ½ miles to go! As Alice and I headed up country slipping and sliding everywhere with the two Gator's, it just had the makings of a very long day. See one of the things pushing us, was the fact that my crew had to drive the vehicles off the mountain and get them to the Rocky Bottom so that when the wet cowboys and cattle show up, they are not stranded. We were at Plan F for the day by then. I guessed it would take me at least 3 round trips to get the rest of the gear off the trailer that I had to unhook from. So much for the easy romantic life of a cowboy! We spun our way all the way to the top where the vehicles were. By the time we covered the 6 ½ miles to the top, the ground had turned white with snow. I unloaded the two Gator's, put the luggage in the trailers and tarped it. As I thought about it I wasn't sure if we were keeping the snow out so things wouldn't get more wet or keeping the moisture in so things couldn't dry. The first wave of people then took off with some of the vehicles to head back to Lake Creek to get the rest of the vehicles and head off the mountain. We had to hustle to get the extra vehicles to the Rocky Bottom in time for the cowboys. The riders who were behind the Gator's showed up and loaded their horses and then Craig Mead

volunteered to go back with me to get the rest of the gear. What a God-send he was. He had to be as miserable and cold as I, but back down the Dry Fork we went for the rest of the gear. As we shuttled the rest of the gear to the top of the Dry Fork, the rest of the crew had gone back to Lake Creek to load all the luggage into another trailer to get it off the mountain so that everyone would have all of the luggage they brought with them when they arrived at the Holiday Inn that evening.

Upon arrival at Lake Creek with 6 inches of snow on the ground, they noticed that the weight of the snow had collapsed the mess tent. The aluminum frame just wasn't strong enough to support the wet, heavy snow. The luggage was loaded and off the mountain people went. We had to get to the valley in time to get the extra vehicles to where the cowboys would be saying goodbye to their horses.

Well by the time the cowboys rode out of camp, most of them were already wet and they had about a 6 hour ride ahead of them to get to the valley. Taylor made a quick decision that since people were wet and cold already, they were going to punt gathering cattle and just ride straight to the valley. I'm sure there weren't a lot of jocularities going on, as they rode home. With about an hour to go in the ride, one guest finally spoke up and said she was freezing and her legs were numb. She was from a much warmer climate and wasn't used to so much punishment. One of the cowboys said that maybe we should trot to help get some circulation going. She responded, no I can't, I am numb. He suggested that maybe she should get off and walk. She responded no you don't understand, I am numb I can't feel my legs! Hypothermia was definitely a concern at this point. Taylor sent one of the crew members to take off at a lope to get to the bottom where the vehicles were and bring a vehicle back. The rider hadn't gone very far when he met Stan driving up to the trail head. This saved her from 45 minutes of additional riding. They put Jane in the pickup, stuck a couple hand warmers under her armpits to start bringing her body temperature up. Jane was very close to having full blown hypothermia. It had been a very miserable long wet cold day for everyone. I hate to say it, but that reality is what has made us so popular. It was really great to see Jane all warmed up and smiling at the banquet that evening. Jane actually had some very positive things to say about the week.

People got to the Holiday Inn around 5:00pm and headed straight for the hot showers. Chris Brown got nominated for and won the white bags for the evening for falling off his horse that day. I suspect the weather conditions might have had something to do with it. Tal Levi won the drawing for the White Bags which had been signed by everyone to take home and hang on his wall. Greg Teakle from Australia won the Cowboy Trivia game and won the Double Rafter Buckle. It was a fantastic week with lots of reality checks during the week and how so many people, from so many different places, pulled together and showed some real sand to make the week successful. Thanks so much and God Bless all of you!

Trail Boss