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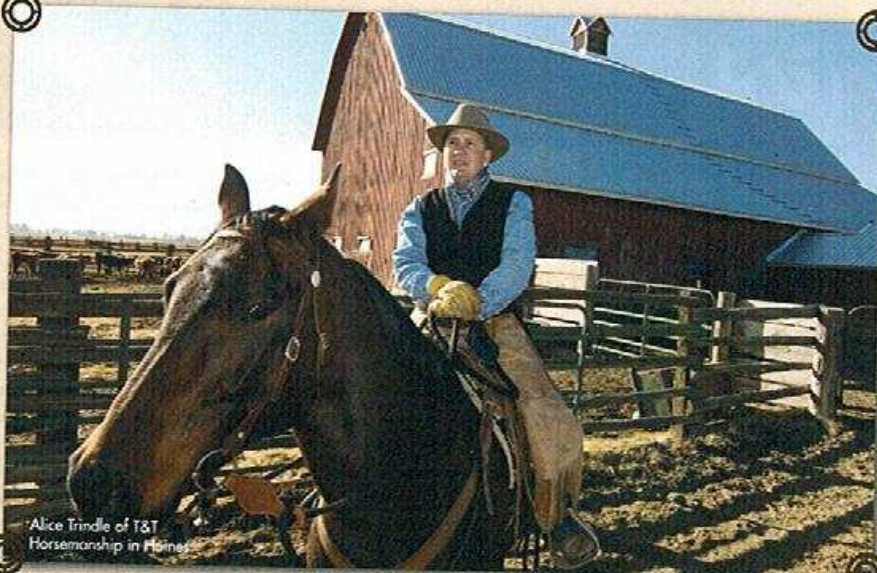
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# A GIRL AND HER HORSE

*In Eastern Oregon, the relationship between horse and rider has a long and beautiful past.*

BY MIA NICHOLSON // PHOTOGRAPHY BY LEON WERDINGER



Alice Trindle of T&T Horsemanship in Haines

In third grade, half the girls I knew were horse crazy. Never mind most of them had come no closer to a real steed than the mechanical drugstore variety. Their passion was genuine, driving them to reel about the playground in pony-tailed herds, tossing their heads and stamping the blacktop with their Mary Janes. Horsey girls collected figurines of appaloosas

and palominos. A few even spent time with real horses, and one attended something called horse camp where girls rode their own dedicated mount each day—for two entire weeks.

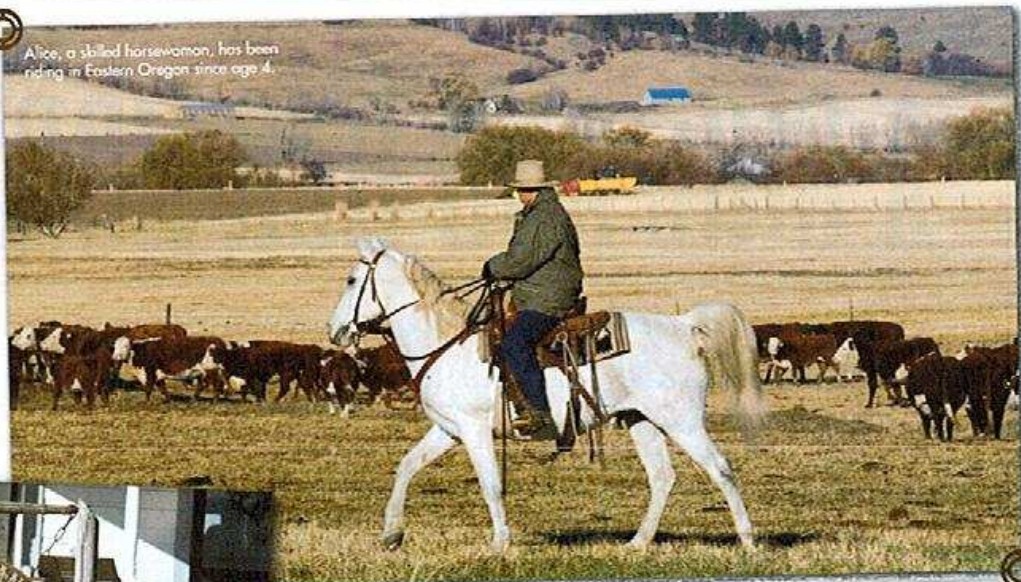
I played along with the equine craze, but my heart wasn't in it. My parents grew up on farms, and to them the idea of riding lessons was about as sensible as paying someone to let you shovel manure. We lived in town. We

traveled by car. Horses were out. The unlikelihood of actual horses in my life dimmed the fantasy considerably.

Two hundred miles and light years away in rural Haines, Ore., a teenager named Alice Trindle was living the dream. Raised on a cattle ranch, Trindle is the real thing, a skilled horsewoman who began riding at 4, sitting behind her brother Mike and clutching his belt. Alice rode her horse Token bareback until



Alice, a skilled horsewoman, has been riding in Eastern Oregon since age 4.



she was 10. Long before that, she and her playmates regularly rode into the foothills of the Elkhorn Range alone. For Trindle, every day was horse camp.

One thing I know about dreams deferred, they're always waiting to resurface. So when work offered me the chance to visit eastern Oregon and spend

time with Trindle—a renowned horsewoman and reputed horse whisperer, I nearly whinnied. A week later, I find myself driving into Haines and toward Alice's ranch under a blue-eyed sky. On the horizon to my left lie the curvaceous, undulating Willows; to my right, the steeper Elkhorns rise majestically. In between spreads a golden valley with nothing to hold it down but a few cirrus clouds skittering overhead. If terrain can be an optimist, this is it.

### *A Mating Partnership*

Apparently, so is Alice. Sight unseen, she breezily offered the reins.

"I'll be going riding Saturday," announced her e-mail. "You sure are welcome to come along."

Which is how I find myself standing in Alice's driveway cajoling a lanky quarter horse with thoroughbred forebears into standing still while I brush her flanks and mane. Tilly is Alice's horse, a magnificent beast with the heart of Houdini.

"Keep your eye on her—she's an escape artist,"

says Alice, handing me a brush before striding away toward the tack room. Tilly takes one side-long glance at me and begins working the knot with her teeth and lips. This horse is big. And wily. In two minutes the knot is no more and I'm holding Tilly's lead with one hand and brushing her shifting flank with the other. Meanwhile, Alice and friend Gail Lemberger do the real work of saddling up the horses. Thirty minutes and a lovely drive through aspen groves later, we're ready to ride. Alice straps on a pair of leather chaps. Squarely built and on the short side, Trindle sports no-nonsense, cropped brown hair under her fedora, a flat-brimmed woven Spanish hat.

"Grab the horn with your left hand and spring straight up first, then put your leg over the saddle," offers Alice, then turns away allowing me to negotiate Gabby by myself. On the phone, I almost mistook Trindle's straightforward manner as brusque. In person, she conveys warmth, good humor and

a quiet competence that instills confidence.

It's a spectacular morning, crisp and bright blue. Trindle and her friends gently guide me and Gabby, offering occasional advice. When Gabby wanders into the ditch despite my efforts to correct her, Trindle deftly corrects me.

"Hold the reins wider and lower," says Trindle. I do, and Gabby is miraculously mine.

We ride up a gentle slope between juniper and ponderosa pines up and over a little hill. Before us lies a long, open valley straight out of "Bonanza": wide, untrammled and studded with sagebrush. The sight has the preposterous effect of making me





feel like I could take off at a gallop. In the distance, a herd of antelope rocket in and out of sight; above, a hawk circles the cloudless sky. So this is what those lucky girls did at horse camp, I think, feeling a surge of horse mania. Maybe females really do have some innate affinity for horses.

According to Trindle, we do. "There is some universal connection between horses and girls. I think that's why so many of our clients are women."

Not that men can't connect beautifully with horses, says Trindle. Indeed, her mentor was Tom Dorrance, the legendary horseman whose innate connection with horses inspired Robert Redford's film "The Horse Whisperer." It's just that the nurturing and communication skills of women transfer seamlessly into relationships with horses. Traits both inborn and learned give women "subtler powers of persuasion"—an essential ingredient in Trindle's recipe for what she calls a "willing partnership" between horse and rider.

"If you ask the horse to do what you want them to do instead of forcing them, they're a lot more accepting," says Trindle. "You want to make the horse think that your idea is his idea."

"Women have been doing that forever."

### *A Bold Bunch*

Women have been riding horses almost as long, and nowhere more so than eastern Oregon. Long before the arrival of westerners, Native Americans of the region were expert riders who enjoyed an almost symbiotic relationship with the animals. Each September at the Pendleton Round-Up, young women on horseback from the Federated Tribes of the Umatilla bear testament to this history in hand-beaded attire for themselves and their horses. The finery is a combination of new items and heirlooms handed down from mothers, grandmothers and aunts.

The history of white horsewomen is far shorter but no less colorful. Until recently, Pendleton Woolen Mills sold a red-and-black blanket that featured a female rider on a bucking bronc surrounded by cattle brands. When a salesclerk told me that the brands were from Northwest ranches owned by women, I had to have one. Turns out the textile designer who fashioned the "Cowgirls" pattern is gone, and no one at Pendleton can confirm the origin of the design with certainty. Still, it's intriguing enough to whet my appetite for more about Oregon girls and horses. In short order, I'm staring at an image of cowgirl Bonnie Carroll being thrown headfirst from her bronc Silver in the 1929 Pendleton Round-Up bucking competition. The gripping photo is made more so by the knowledge that Silver later dragged Carroll to her death in front of horrified fans.

Carroll's catastrophe precipitated the abolition of cowgirl bucking competitions, but not before women had proven themselves in a range of rodeo events for nearly two decades. In 1914, one Bertha Blanchett came within 12 points of winning the all-around title. Meanwhile, women competed ruthlessly in bulldogging, pony and relay races. If Round-Up history is any indicator, Oregon horsewomen of the early 20th century were a bold bunch.

### *A Dance Between Partners*

Bold—but not necessarily enlightened. "Rodeo is about control and dominance. It's not about the relationship with the horse; it's about the ribbon or the prize," says Trindle. Trindle teaches students in her T&T Horsemanship clinics to listen to and learn from the horse. True horsemanship is a dance between partners. Lead with understanding, and your horse will become accepting and even eager to follow. It's a philosophy in keeping with the late Dorrance's.

"He was more horse than he was human, and his ability to understand them was a gift directly from the creator," says Trindle, who was among the honored few chosen to ride in a 2001 benefit for Dorrance the year before his death.

What about the old advice to "show the horse who's boss"?

Trindle shakes her head. "Horses are extremely tolerant. They put up with an awful lot," she explains. The strong-arm approach may get you where you need to go, but never with the kind of harmony that makes horsemanship a joyful, even spiritual experience. It's all about communication—as any woman knows.

Watching Trindle on Tilly is all the proof I need. So in tune are horse and rider that Tilly seems to take direction telepathically, with no apparent tug on the reins or squeeze of the flanks. The same holds whether Trindle is teaching clients in her indoor arena, herding cattle or executing the Spanish equestrian art known as Doma Vaquera, an intricate "dance" between horse, rider and a 13-foot pole performed to guitar accompaniment. Even on video, the connection between human and horse feels mystical.

It's enough to make a girl want to give up the city life and saddle up. After two days soaking up the horse life and sleeping in the snug bunkhouse Trindle and her partner Susan Triplett built recently for clinic students, I'm itching to hang around horses and learn to ride, pronto. Until then, I'm happy if Trindle just thinks I'm teachable.

"Alice, do you think there's hope for me?"

Trindle grins. "I think you've been seriously bitten." ♣

## Calling all Cowgirls

Back in the saddle or first time astride, there's a place to ride in Oregon. Here's a sampling.

### **BAR M GUEST RANCH, ADAMS**

Located 30 miles east of Pendleton in the foothills of the Blue Mountains, Bar M offers 3,000 acres to explore on horseback and a natural hot springs pool by the banks of the Umatilla River. A traditional, old-school dude ranch, complete with home-style meals.  
888.824.3381  
[www.BarMRanch.com](http://www.BarMRanch.com)

### **T&T HORSEMANSHIP, HAINES**

Ideal for serious riders seeking a deeper understanding and spiritual relationship with horses, T&T offers a variety of intimate workshops from dressage to cow herding, plus a popular women-only retreat. Borrow a horse or bring your own. Ask about bunkhouse lodging.  
541.856.3356  
[www.TNTHorsemanship.com](http://www.TNTHorsemanship.com)

### **BIG K GUEST RANCH, ELKTON**

The Big K offers a pastoral solution for families torn between horses and fish. Situated on the Umpqua River, the ranch caters to fish and game enthusiasts while offering excellent riding facilities and miles of trails, plus river rafting, clay shooting and even wine tours.  
800.390.2445  
[www.big-k.com](http://www.big-k.com)

### **ROCK SPRINGS GUEST RANCH, BEND**

A traditional dude ranch experience, with plenty of riding opportunities, fine dining and special programs including an "All About Horses" week and a horse photography workshop.  
800.225.3833  
[www.RockSprings.com](http://www.RockSprings.com)

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Eastern Oregon  
Visitors Association  
800.332.1843  
[www.eova.com](http://www.eova.com)

For more information, turn to "Planning Your Trip," page 78.