

Horse Pack and Fishing on the Aquarius Plateau

By Pat Ronneburg

Photos by Monique Beeley-Schwab

Guiding on Griffin Top in the Dixie National Forest ceased in the 1980's with the death of Marty Rich's father, Mayo Rich. Marty decided to resume the guide service in 2007. And we were lucky enough to be one of the first trips to go out! Marty later told me that Bryce Canyon Pines is the exclusive guide and outfitting service for the west side of Griffin Top. No ATV's or other motorized vehicles are allowed in the area, so all travel is on horseback or on foot. After riding the area for a couple days, I was extremely glad not to be on foot. Getting to the lakes we were going to fish in the morning was straight down and the ride to camp in the afternoon was straight back up!

The Rich family has a long history at Bryce Canyon Pines. The property began as a dance hall, complete with kitchen and gas pumps in the 1930's. Mayo and Mary Rich purchased the property in 1948 and the family has owned and operated the property continuously since that time. The first three motel rooms were built in 1954. Today, Marty and Ethel Rich and their family are in charge and there is a motel, restaurant, and RV and camping park.

For those who would like to enjoy the backcountry scenery, but don't want to be out in the woods overnight, the family also operates Red Canyon Trail Rides. The Red Canyon area can also only be accessed on horseback or on foot. The Rich family offers Red Canyon Trail Rides by the hour, half day, or all day. They also breed, train, and own all the horses; none are leased. Their knowledge of and respect for their animals was very humbling to this city slicker. Upon arrival, we checked in to the motel and met Ethel. She had one of her grandchildren in tow and a dusting of flour on her nose as she'd been in the kitchen baking one of her world famous pies. Hardly locked to the kitchen, Ethel is an avid athlete/runner. She graciously welcomed us and went over our arrangements for the next morning when we would be leaving on our adventure into the high country with our cowboy guides: Marty and Ethel's son, Rusty Rich, and their son-in-law, Gilbert Manning. She told us that the cowboys were up in camp just then putting on the finishing touches in preparation for our trip and that we'd meet them in the morning.

That night we had an excellent home cooked meal in the restaurant before turning in early to get our last night's sleep in clean and comfy beds! The next morning, we followed our guides and the horse trailer to our campsite. As we finished climbing a steep, rough passage, the Tahoe flashed me a warning message about the tires. "Oh, no!" I thought as I pulled to the right and slowed down, watching the back of the horse trailer round the bend and disappear ahead of me in a cloud of dust. Yup! By golly, I had a flat! Thank goodness for the owner's manual! We got out the spare and had loosened the lug nuts in preparation to jack the car up when Rusty came galloping down the road (just like a knight in shining armor no less!) to rescue us. He helped us--er, he actually finished changing the tire for us--and we loaded up the flat and proceeded into camp.

Our camp was in the pines, high on top of the mesa at about 10,000 feet. There was open meadow all around with cattle grazing the open range in the distance. The air was clear and crisp and cool, a welcome relief from the muggy heat on our car ride the previous day. There was a storm threatening in the west, so we hurried to set up our tent. (Bryce Canyon Pines provides very comfortable wall tents and cots but we needed to field test a new tent system on this trip.) Rusty and Gil had also set up a big tent for our common area for cooking and shelter. And we needed it that evening, because shortly after sunset, there was a huge thunderclap and the rain and hail started to pound! The first thunderclap was so loud that we all thought the horses were going to break free. Rusty and Gil both jumped and ran to get the horses settled down until after the lightning and thunder passed. We had a subdued dinner and all hoped that the rain would stop by morning. I was glad I had brought some of my winter gear. It was cool enough at that altitude that I needed it even in July!

Rusty and Gil matched us up with our horses with the understanding that we both were novice riders. And they did a good job of it, too! The next morning dawned shiny and clear. We rode out across the meadow and into the forest. And then we went down. And I do mean down, almost straight down in some places. The horses were amazing--sure-footed, well trained, and willing to tackle the most challenging terrain. We were more than a little nervous, but as we got used to our mounts, we realized that they knew we were safe, even if we might have doubted it at first.

In addition to enjoying the camp and the horses and the ride--three of my most favorite things--our objective was to fish some of the lakes in the area. The lakes were originally small natural ponds, nestled in the trees and tucked back into the hillsides. In the spring, the ponds would fill with runoff, but eventually they would dry up as the season progressed and as the local cattle drank the water. The early ranchers fortified the tails of the ponds, thus capturing more water and ensuring that there would be water all summer. Then our friends from the Division of Wildlife Resources came along and stocked some of the ponds. Some of the shallower lakes winterkill and the Division doesn't stock every year. But I'm told that there are natural breeding populations of trout now in some of the lakes. The cowboys told us that the fishing was best early morning and then again late afternoon. I can attest to the truthfulness of this statement. We fished all day long--hard--and we were finally rewarded at the end of the day when the sun was beginning to wane. Rusty and Gil wondered at us because we didn't want to get up before dawn and fish the ponds to catch

the morning risers, but Dutch oven breakfast and sunrise by the campfire with morning coffee was way too tempting! Plus, morning was one of the best times to observe wildlife. We watched the elk at the edges of the meadow, coming down for their morning drink, and there were so many birds that I lost count!

The Rich family's interpretation of Western hospitality went beyond our expectations. In addition to Rusty and Gil taking care of us day and night, Marty came to camp one night, brought his guitar, and sang some of his original Western songs for our entertainment. I still have a vision of him with his guitar on his lap, strumming, with the sparks from the campfire swirling into the night sky. He and the young men swapped stories about the area and past rodeo adventures for our enjoyment. Then on our last night in camp, Ethel brought some of the grandkids and we had steaks. It was a great BBQ complete with Ethel's Dutch oven biscuits and dessert. What a treat! As she cooked, Ethel amazed us with stories about running down the side of the mesa to meet the horse trailers at the bottom on prior family camping trips. I'm pretty much convinced that there's nothing she can't do!

Riding, camping, and fishing with great companions! Who could ask for more? Be sure to stop in at Bryce Canyon Pines and book a trip of your own!

For more information on this area

brycecanyonmotel.com
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