

BANDERA 2005

by Diane Ancel

I was asked to talk a bit about our trip to the Bandera State Natural Area in November. It was absolutely wonderful! The weather was picture perfect and we even saw a bit of fall color--which for Texas is rather unusual. The meals, oh my goodness, were truly more like fine dining--definitely haute cuisine. And the company! Whether sitting on the front porch, gathered in the kitchen, or snuggled up around the fire, we had great fun discussing the days ride, our horses, or whatever happened to come up.

Since I couldn't think of much else to say, I will tell you about my first White Knuckle Trail Ride. That morning on Friday as I was tacking up for my first trail ride (the very first one of my life!), Ed was rushing me. I told him, "You go on. When I get ready, I will ride out with someone else. Just leave me alone."

Thankfully, Judith came to my rescue and asked "Diane, would you like to go along with me? We will take it easy. When we want to come back we will, no pressure." Whew, that made me feel so much better. I immediately agreed.

Judith and Ed were already warming up when I finally made it out there. I took a deep breath and we headed off down the road. I thought to myself, "Ah, this is going to be nice." As we crossed the stream, it was bubbling, the sky was blue and I thought, "The weather is superb, not too hot, and not too cool, it's just...!?!? What the heck is that?"

Then we all heard it! Good grief, it sounded like a stampede. We were on a curve and couldn't see what was coming. Someone yelled, "Move to the side!" We all tried to get off the road and were only marginally successful. Then we saw it. It was a coal black horse, on a dead-on gallop. As the horse rounded the corner the whites of its eyes were gleaming and you could tell there was only one thing on its mind--get back to camp and it was going to steam-roll anything in its way. What was even scarier was the saddle! It had rolled under the horse's belly and the girth was on his back with stirrups flying. (Please remember the flying stirrups later on.) Judith exclaimed, "That is Noreen's horse!" Then she quickly took off back to the ranch. I told Ed, "I suppose Judith went into emergency mode and headed back to the ranch to tell the park ranger. I guess we should go look for Noreen, right?" Ed agreed, so we started yelling for Noreen as we rode on. We went up a few different trail heads. We kept calling her name. But no answer came, it was completely quiet.

As we road further down the road we happened on a park ranger in his vehicle. We told him what had happened. He got on his radio and started relaying the message to all the other rangers. He passed on to them the time she had left, her age, what condition the horse was when we saw it. He wanted a description of what she was wearing. The entire conversation was, to say the least, unsettling. I asked him, "What can we do to help?" He said, "Well, it would help if you would take a trail that is back behind you. Just go back down the road and before the stream take a left and go up 5, then take a right at 4B, then look for 4A, take a left there. I'll meet you at the old farm house." I was too embarrassed to ask to ask if it was a novice trail, not to mention what the heck did 4A, 4B mean. Good grief, I have to tell you, I was never so scared in my life. The first hill we encountered was straight up and over huge rocks! I am lying on my poor horse's neck as we struggled up. We were going straight down over narrow rocky passages. We finally broke out into a moderate clearing, and then Ed said, "There's the park ranger." "Thank God," I thought to myself. The Park Ranger yelled, "Your friend Noreen is OK, she is back at the ranch." We thanked him and he disappeared before I could ask which way was the road back to the ranch.

I turned around and asked Ed, after we passed the farm house, "Shouldn't we have got to the road by now?" He said, "Well I would have thought so, but just enjoy it, we will get there." I said, "I am leading, I don't want any surprises. Just stay behind me until I clear whatever I have to clear." (I was approaching this like a trip to the dentist.) We went up and down terrace steps and over huge rocks, I thought, "I must have truly lost my mind to be doing this!" Since I am writing this story, I did, of course, survive.

When we got back to camp I was exhilarated and am quite proud that I had rode on trails I would have never attempted had I not stumbled into doing it. You may be thinking this is all about me, but it really isn't, it is about you. I must express my thanks to the good folks at the ranch that accepted me without question and bolstered my confidence. To all the new friends I met on the Bandera trip that took time to answer my rudimentary horse questions. And finally, to Nancy and Jesse for getting Centavo under saddle and teaching me to ride and giving me self-assurance to go anywhere on my horse. Remember when I said don't forget the stirrups on the runaway horse? When Judith took off for the ranch, it was Dartagne's idea--not hers. One of the flying stirrups hit Dartagne and he spooked and went on a dead-run heading toward one of the trucks parked at the ranch! Fortunately Greg stepped in and helped Judith get her horse stopped.

In closing, we all had a great time in Bandera. Surrounded by beautiful horses and all the fine people from the ranch, it couldn't have been a better weekend. This is the life that magical moments are made of. After our last ride on Sunday morning, I took my horse over to the giant water trough. As we gathered around watering our horses, someone queried, "Who is the guy that says, may the horse be with you?" Another person said, "I don't know, but, I think we need a slogan for our trail rides. What do you guys think it should be?" With a wry smile and wink one of our compadres offered, "I think it should be something like this: **may the horse be with you when you come back!**"