

Stephens College/Perry Mansfield: a camp that is 67 years old and still going strong.



By Mike Hulse

In 1914, two young ladies, new graduates of Smith College, crossed the awesome Continental Divide to fulfill their dream of establishing the Perry-Mansfield Dance Camp. The camp has had such well known students as Lee Remick, Julie Harris, Martha Graham, and Dustin Hoffman. Perry-Mansfield has also been host to children of celebrities like those of George Segal, William Shatner, and Robert Redford, in recent years. Since its beginning, the camp has grown to over fifty buildings on 94 acres of land. Thousands of young people have been exposed to the Rocky Mountains through the Perry-Mansfield.

I thought the camp's history and activities would be an interesting story for Three Wire Winter readers.

I spoke with Chuck and Jan Harrington, the present resident managers of the camp, and Eleanor Bliss, long-time resident of Steamboat and a past camper at Perry-Mansfield. Eleanor Bliss told me about her first years with the camp.

"I went to camp first in 1924, and I was there as a camper that year. In 1925, I came back as an assistant in the riding department. Those were

the only two years that I was actually a part of the camp. After that, I came back year after year and visited Marjorie Perry, who was head of the riding department. I came as a guest, and we lived right next to the camp in Marjorie's cabin. I was not actually a camper, but I know what went on, and I have had a very close association with the camp ever since."

Eleanor talked more extensively about the horses at the camp and the horse she used to ride. "We had fifty or more horses. Charlotte (Perry) and Portia (Mansfield) and a few of the campers had their own horses. Different ranchers would bring in a bunch of horses in the spring, and they'd come and take them away in the fall. They were always good ranch and trail horses.

"The first year that I came, Portia thought that she was going to be very kind to me. She asked if I wanted to rent her horse for the summer. It turned out that Zanoza had some of the meanest tricks. The second year I rented a horse from a rancher. The horse's name was Navajo. He was dark, almost chocolate, with a bright yellow mane and tail. After that, when I came out to visit Perry-Mansfield, I rode

Marjorie's horses. Marjorie always had a lot of horses. She used to have them trucked down to Littleton, where she lived in the winter."

Eleanor explained some of the activities in which she participated while being an assistant to the riding department. "The riding department was very important. It was not the kind of riding that is emphasized now, where you get in the saddle and ride around the ring, but we went into the hills and on lots of pack trips. One of our regular all day trips was to go over what we called Fivepoints and Gnome Ridge, which is from Storm Mountain (now Mt. Werner) to Buffalo Pass. That was a beautiful trip.

"We had a couple of girls who wanted to go on pack trips using English saddles. They always came to grief. Every once in a while, we'd get into a yellow jacket's nest, or something awful, and it was always the girls with English saddles who got bucked off. In steep places they couldn't sit easily. They'd slide right off the saddle or the saddle would slip.

"We usually took four horses with double-diamond pack outfits on them. We didn't have normal sleeping bags, but we did have canvas tarps which we put on the ground and laid homemade sleeping bags on top. Marjorie made most of them. They were quilts doubled over with ten grommets to hold them together. We could also make a double bed by opening them and putting two together. I don't think we ever carried a tent. We slept under the trees. It rained so many times, but if we found a good spruce tree we were all right.

"We sometimes took three-day trips. We would usually go to Luna Lake and camp for the day. Then we would go to the Mount Zirkel Wilderness Area for a day, circle the Mt. Ethel area, then return to Luna Lake and come back the other way. We always went one way and came back the other. Sometimes we went up the Strawberry Park way, and other times we went up Soda Creek Trail, which was much shorter than the Buffalo Pass route.

"Marjorie's idea of western riding was to get out into the mountains. We lost many horses because she never believed in tying them up, except at night. If they got away from us before we tied them up, especially if it was a year when the grass was not good, they'd wander and end up back at the camp. Sometimes a three-day trip lasted five days because we had to send somebody down to get the horses and bring them back to us!

"Marjorie was an excellent outdoors person. She had been trained by her father, who was a marvelous hunter. She was accustomed to good camp etiquette. She knew what a camp should look like, what it should have, and how to never put your camp under a ledge or a stream

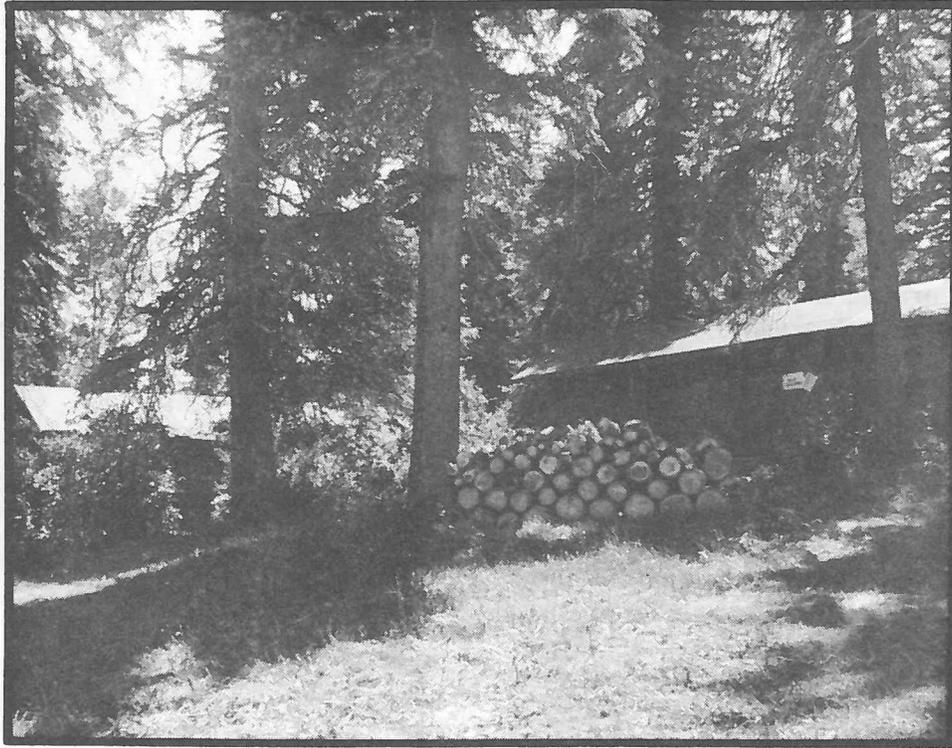
because we never knew when we were going to have a cloudburst or if the stream was going to swell."

I asked Eleanor to tell me about meals on the camping trips. "We had quite elaborate meals. The first night was always the best night because we usually had steaks. Then we'd hope to get some trout for the second morning. We always had sandwiches for lunch. We carried loaves of bread with peanut butter and jelly or anything else that was easy to carry. We needed a fire to make coffee or tea. Maybe we'd have dessert. To keep eggs from breaking we packed them in oatmeal, so we could have bacon and eggs. The girls would help pack and lift things into our regular canvas saddle outfits. The saddle bags held the food, and all of the sleeping gear was strapped on top."

Eleanor spoke about the summer sessions at the camp and how she arrived for these sessions. "There was really only one session which lasted two months, usually July and August. I really came to dance, but after I saw how great the riding was, I favored the riding program. I had ridden all my life, and I loved to ride. That didn't please Charlotte and Portia very much because they wanted me to dance."

I asked Eleanor to tell me how the people from the town of Steamboat treated the people from the camp. "They didn't understand us at the camp, at least most of them didn't. The first couple of years there were a few Steamboat gals who came out. One of them was Alma Baer. She was one of the earliest Steamboat girls who came out. There were others, but I don't remember their names. Many didn't understand what we were doing, and the flimsy dancing costumes were entirely foreign to Steamboat. But through the years they finally came to understand and support us. I would say in the forties and the fifties, with the dance productions and theatre productions, the school was well supported by the town."

Eleanor also told me a funny story about a girl at camp who wasn't quite all there. She was from a fine family back East, and because they needed campers, they let her come year after year. They could never quite tell what she was going to do next. One of the things that Marjorie always taught us was if we ever got lost in the mountains, we were to find a stream, follow it down, and it would bring us out. This time we went on a picnic, using automobiles, on Rabbit Ears Pass. We were having our picnic and everything was fine, but when we were ready to go, we were missing one gal. We hunted around, and in the end we couldn't find her. We came down and got the ranger to help us hunt for her. As we started down Rabbit Ears Pass, there was Lizzy walking down the road. Marjorie asked



"They are usually amazed...that many of the buildings as they remember them are still being used.

her, "Where were you? Why weren't you with the rest of them?" She said, "Well, you told us if we ever found a stream just to follow it down, and we'd come out all right. Well, that's what I did!" Very amusing things happened.

Chuck Harrington told me about his past connections with the Stephens College/Perry Mansfield Camp. "I joined Stephens College in 1960 as a landscape architect, and lived and worked in Columbia, Missouri, until we came to Steamboat. One of the first jobs that I had was to make a map of the Perry-Mansfield camp from an aerial photo. The transfer of ownership from Charlotte and Portia to the college was forthcoming, so I had contacts with the camp as far as physical layout. So we've really been familiar with the camp since about 1960. Stephens assumed ownership and the operation in 1965.

"We first came to Steamboat in 1967, and did some work on the camp. In 1968, we came back again. I assumed the directorship of the camp in 1977. We've been here running the camp since that year."

I asked the Harringtons what some of the changes in the curriculum have been since they've taken over the directorship of the camp. "Actually not that many, but I think we've seen more of an emphasis on our riding program in the last two years. The outdoors program has been renovated with some short backpack trips, overnight campouts at surrounding mountainous areas, and we raft the Colorado once a week through the camping session. Being a performing arts camp, our students, particularly

the college students, get tied up. They are required to attend class to receive college credit. It's difficult to schedule extended camp-outs, backpack trips, and horsepack trips. In our riding programs, there's instruction in the ring and on trail. Most of our trail rides are up Copper Ridge, some are breakfast and dinner rides as opposed to extended horsepack trips into the wilderness area."

Chuck went on to tell me about their livestock at the camp. "Our riding program will use about eighteen horses this year. Other than that, we usually pick up six or seven bum lambs and let the younger children raise them throughout the summer. They take over their feeding and care requirements. Occasionally, we'll come up with a calf or a goat that's been orphaned, so we can do the same thing with it. Most youngsters really haven't had any close touch with ranch animals, and find them fascinating.

"A few years ago we had two French-Alpine billy goat kids that were given to camp. We couldn't keep them penned up, so they pretty well had the run of camp. One morning there was a terrible commotion in the ballet studio, when the goats attended ballet class. They managed to race around the studio until they were caught and tied. Everybody enjoyed it quite a bit."

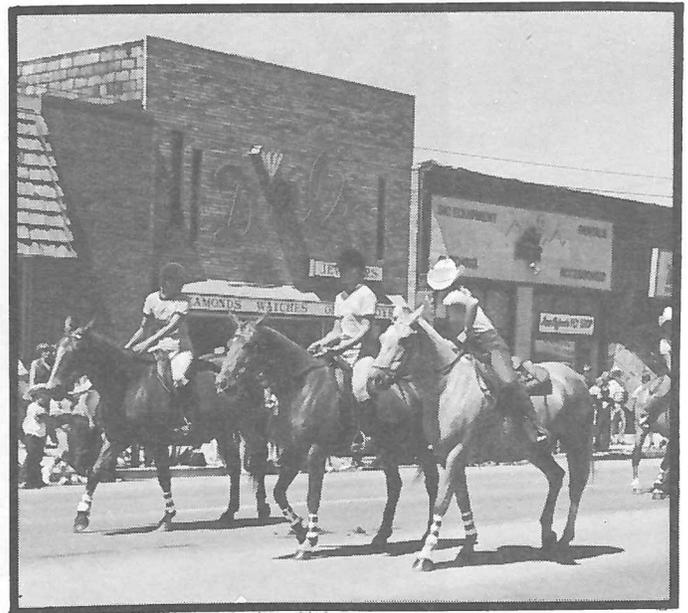
Chuck also mentioned some of the things they did last year. "Performance wise, we usually have a dance concert or a demonstration in the first week of camp. The fourth week of camp finds the high school and college theater students putting on "An Evening of Scenes". The fifth

week of camp we feature our children's production. Last year it was "Joseph and His Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat". The fifth week of camp is also when we hold our dance concert. All performances are open to the public. The last week of camp we have our major musical. This year it was "Annie, Get Your Gun."

As far as camping activities go, we find ourselves working around the productions and the classes, so the camp-outs are limited.

"Each year, we expect about a hundred and ten or fifteen residential students. I would guess that we'll probably have twelve in the junior group (fifth and sixth grades), twenty in our intermediate group (seventh, eighth and ninth grades), and thirty-five in our high school group (tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grades), and probably forty-five or so in our college group, and ten to twelve students in our boys' group. We could actually house 200 people in total, with a hundred and twenty residential students, and staff of fifty. That's getting us pretty close. We had about fifty day students last year and expect that will be repeated again this year."

I also wanted to find out what most campers do during the day. Chuck told me what the day would be like for the average camper. "The average camper would probably get up at 7:30, shiver, and crawl out of her sleeping bag in a small cabin with wire screen all around. Then she'd get dressed in leotards and warm-ups, hurry down the trail to take a shower, brush her teeth, and go to the main lodge for breakfast at 7:45. After she has completed breakfast, she'd run back to her cabin to get whatever materials necessary for her first class, which would probably be a dance class or a technique class. She would attend a dance class or maybe even a riding class for the second class in the morning. The third class in the morning might well be arts and crafts, then lunch at one o'clock. The first class of the afternoon might be a acting class, and the second class could be a mountain culture class, dealing with our surrounding environment. Plants, animals, birds, orienteering, map and compass, and outdoor cooking are topics of interest. Also in that class, students listen to some of the old-timers in Steamboat who might come out to speak to a class in this setting. Generally two or three classes in the afternoon would handle it for the average student. They have one hour off and then dinner at six. At 7:00, they've completed dinner and chances are they've got a rehearsal from seven until nine-thirty or ten. They go back to their group cabin and have an evening get-together and hit the sack. If they don't have rehearsal, they would probably have a group activity of some kind. They might also gather in the "Green Room", which is an evening snack bar, and sit in front of



Perry Mansfield campers participating in the Fourth of July parade.

the fire, play cards or records, and relax. Our classes are held Tuesday through Saturday, so Sundays and Mondays are "free". On Sunday, we try to plan camp-wide activities such as picnics. This is also the day the younger groups might go out for an overnight campout, a picnic, a cook-out, a long trail ride, or go to church in the morning, and play volleyball in the afternoon. It's generally a relaxing day to break the routine and lessen some of the pressures that do exist. We run our raft trips on Monday, and Monday is also laundry day. The kids who are going on the raft trips would probably want to do his laundry on Sunday. On Monday we run the bus on a schedule to town and back. Everybody does their laundry at a laundromat, goes shopping, buys an ice cream cone, or maybe has lunch downtown. That's pretty well the typical Monday for a camper at Perry-Mansfield."

I was also curious about how someone applies to attend camp. "Students apply either directly here at the camp or through the Admissions Office at Stephens College, in Columbia, Missouri. Since our students come from all across the United States and several foreign countries, it's a big difficulty, if not impossible, to audition them as such. We often receive applications accompanied with references. In our advertising, we specifically ask for serious students in the fields of performing arts and riding. It's really not a case of setting up auditions. Generally speaking, we find that our student body is made up of youngsters who are very interested in dance, theater, riding, and the accompanying outdoors program."

I asked Chuck about some of the differences between the camp today and the camp when it was run by Charlotte Perry and Portia Mansfield. "Charlotte and Portia, the founders of the



Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

William Wordsworth

camp, and the life and blood of the camp for its first fifty-some odd years, are no longer associated with the camp. Whenever the active management of an organization changes, many things change. Physically the camp isn't much different; we're still operating many of the same facilities which they built through the years. With renovation and maintenance they're still serving us well. We recently built several log vacation lodges available to Steamboat visitors year around. This has added an exciting new program to Stephens/Perry Mansfield.

"Being owned by Stephens College, with college credit being offered, changes the aspect of camp. If camp vibrations come to the point where everybody needs a break, you used to be able to say, "Hey, tomorrow we're going to the Hot Springs!" They could just take off and do that. Unfortunately, when you're doing classwork for college credit, you have to get that classwork in. You have to have so many hours of instruction. We also found ourselves restricted much more than in the old days. We're restricted by many federal, state and county regulations that certainly didn't prevail. We also are regulated by sanitary codes, building codes, food service licenses, reports, and inspections. We still do backpacking and camping, and run the upper Colorado for river rafting trips. We have a very active riding program, and we do still occasionally pack a horse in and get out into the woods. This way, the students who are coming to camp who are not totally dedicated to the dance or theatre, have an opportunity to pack a horse, raft a river, and camp out in the Mt. Wilderness Zirkel and do some of the more relaxing things."

Since the camp's beginning in 1914, it has had thousands of students. Chuck Harrington still senses the presence and spirit of Charlotte Perry and Portia Mansfield. "It seems like a day hardly goes by, winter or summer, that a car doesn't come down the lane with a P-M alum: who was here in the summer of '28 or '36 or what have you. It's amazing the people that show up at the door who haven't been to the camp or communicated with the camp for maybe twenty or thirty years. They find themselves in the area and they want to know if the camp still exists. They are usually amazed that camp is alive and well and that many of the buildings are as they remember them, and are still being used. Jan Harrington tells about the influence of Charlotte and Portia on their students. "They never forget...never."