

An Occupation with Outfitting

By Carole Audet

A lifelong nature lover and horseman, Stan Walchuk didn't exactly set out to have a career in the horse industry. His teaching and biology degrees saw him start out his work life in a completely different way.

"I hated school as a kid but I like children and I like nature so I wanted to be a science teacher," Walchuk rationalized.

However, a personal odyssey taken during a break from teaching steered his career down another path.

"I've always loved traveling with horses in the woods, so it was a natural progression to end up there but in reality I was in biology. So that would have been my career and the horses would have been an interest thing on the side, except for the Cordillera adventure..."

Growing up in central Alberta, Walchuk quit school at the age of 16, and traveled to the Yukon to work for some old time outfitters. Spending two years with those adventurers provided Walchuk with an education that would later prove to be invaluable, with training that included making pack saddles and pack bags from animal hides; those same saddles are still in use in his business today.

"I'm one of the few living people in the horse business right now who has actually rubbed elbows with the first adventurers in the north. I was very, very lucky. I was able to learn from some of the people who were truly the originals," says Walchuk.

Returning to Alberta at the age of 18, he completed his high school education during one summer, and went on to obtain a degree in biology followed by a teaching degree. He then began his teaching career in Hinton, Alberta.

However, in 1982, at the age of 26, Walchuk undertook a wilderness journey that saw

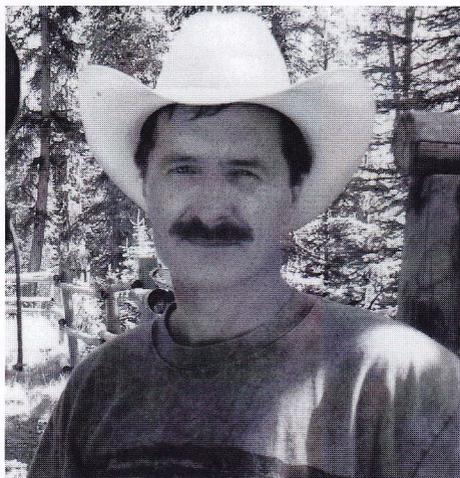


Photo courtesy of Blue Creek Outfitter

Traveling in the wilderness with horses has called to Walchuk's soul most of his life. "That's part of the reason I got out of teaching full-time, I really felt like I had to do something else."

Self-guided horseback adventures are a popular holiday choice for many. From Walchuk's Blue Creek Camp at the base of Lucielle Mountain, at McBride, B.C., one can travel to Jasper National Park on horseback.

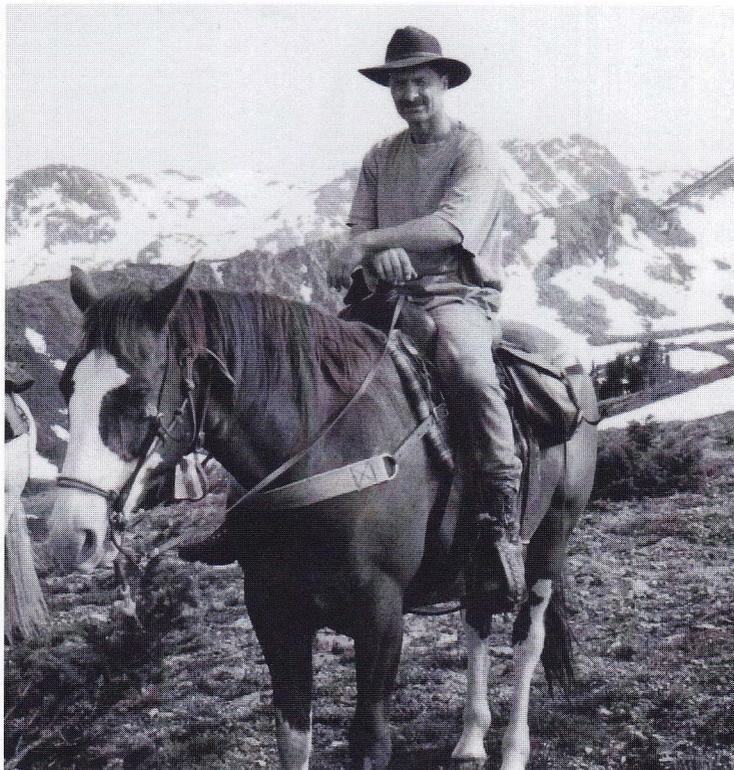


Photo courtesy of Blue Creek Outfitter

him travel over a thousand miles on horseback, from mile 178 on the Alaska Highway, on the eastern border of British Columbia, to Wrangell, Alaska on the Pacific Ocean. The region, referred to as the Cordillera, is an area of mountain ranges (Canada's tallest mountains), lowlands, deep valleys, plateaus and coastal islands, which includes the Rocky Mountains and the Coastal Mountains.

The documentary he filmed of his adventure generated so much interest that it catapulted him into a two-year promotional tour, with over 200 shows in wildlife federations, schools, auditoriums, and the Robson's Square Theatre in Vancouver. This tour effectively put an end to Walchuk's full-time teaching career.

"The response from the public was phenomenal so I felt very committed," he explains. "Since that very first show that I did back in 1982, it was apparent that people really have a need or a want for adventure." This realization led to the launch of his business, Blue Creek Outfitter.

Like many businesses though, it hasn't always been easy and Walchuk has learned to adapt over the years. "It's just been a survival adventure, one thing after the other, trying to jump to something that floats better than [what] I just left. If you're going to survive, you need to be creative. You need to be able to find something that people don't have. In terms of our business, it's really quite unique and I think that's the only reason it can survive."

The business currently sees one-third of revenues from tack, book and video sales, another third from hunting and holiday pack trips, with the final third generated from clinics in trail riding, packing

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Creative Compulsion

By Carole Audet

Q: What do you get when you cross one Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disordered (ADHD) individual possessing a background in sewing and design with a need for durable, affordable endurance riding tack in Canada?

A: Paddi Sprecher, Founder of Canadian Trail House

An endurance rider for many years, in 1993, Paddi Sprecher ordered a bridle for that discipline from the United States. Disgruntled with the high cost, the exorbitant taxes, duty and shipping fees, Sprecher's immediate reaction was, "I can make these!"

You have to recognize it as a job. That's the hardest thing to learn when you're self-employed.

Already in business with a retail quilt and fabric store, Sprecher sourced out the materials and started making tack for herself, quickly followed by filling orders for friends. BioThane®, a urethane-coated nylon, is a difficult material to work with. "It never would have become a business but I blew up so many sewing machines I had to invest \$4000 into having machines specially built to handle the BioThane®. Then I thought, I have to pay for this! So, I had to start selling more than to just my friends," explains Sprecher.

Sprecher's training and education seems to be tailor-made for her business, although clearly by coincidence. Sewing from an early age, she supplemented her experience with night school and specialty courses. And, when it comes to the machines she uses for

the hard-to-work-with BioThane®, she has that covered as well.

"It not like working with leather, it's much harder to work with than leather so it's so specialized — I have to do a lot of research until I find equipment that works or find someone who can fix it. Actually this is funny, I am a machinist. That's what I went to school for and apprenticed for in the late 80s early 90s. So I understand machinery and how it works. I know what I need to do, it's just a case of

to close her retail store in 1998.

Further growth was managed by working as a cook in the oil fields during the summers of 2000 and 2001. "That's the only place I could go out and make enough money in a short time to buy the equipment and machines that I needed," explains Sprecher. "We were getting busier and busier and that's when I decided I needed to buy extra equipment and industrial burners and we had to put in a ventilation system."

While most of the manufacturing is done



Photo courtesy of Canadian Trail House

With an extensive background in sewing, Paddi Sprecher of Canadian Trail House has found her niche in the horse industry: sewing custom-made endurance tack.

then designing it and taking it to someone that has a machine shop," says Sprecher.

"I love machinery, I love design, and I love working in all mediums. That's part of the ADHD. You see a pop can and I see a thousand things it can become. I happened to find my niche in the horse industry. Anything mechanical I like. I just fell into this. It's just a fun thing to do. How many people wake up in the morning and like their job every day?" she adds.

Sprecher spent the early years educating endurance riders on the tack, which looks like it is sewn inside out since it is made specifically for the comfort of the horse. This paid off with increased business enabling her

in the basement of Sprecher's home, located near Devon, Alberta, 30 minutes southwest of Edmonton, she was obligated to farm out the saddle bags, gear bags, canteen and pom-pom bags to a Canadian sewing contractor when she outgrew her facility.

Sprecher has no plans to go retail, but is confident of further expansion of her internet business through word-of-mouth and trade shows. Currently, approximately 80 percent of sales are done online, with the remainder generated at horse shows where Sprecher sets up a mobile sewing centre in the back of her trailer. "The thing with BioThane® —

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and training. His teaching degree proved to be valuable training that easily transferred to his business, particularly when instructing his clients.

While Walchuk enjoys being outdoors and working with horses, there are other parts of his business that are not nearly as enticing for him. "Being away from my family at this point in my life is tough and I think if I could do less paperwork, less internet... I'm not a computer person but the internet is huge now to anyone involved in a business in the horse industry because a percentage of your business comes from the internet and it's getting bigger all the time and I don't like that," he admits.

Walchuk's customers keep him motivated. "The person who wants to go out on the trail

A personal odyssey taken during a break from teaching steered his career down another path.

with a horse is a different kind of person. They are people who have an understanding, a sensitivity about life, about animals, about nature, they are quality people.

"I really believe that to enjoy something and persevere you have to really believe in it and want to do it. It's got to be something almost internal and I think for me I just had a love for animals and nature and the out-

doors ever since I was a young child, and I think that's the first prerequisite because if you don't have that when you go through all the hardships that you go through in a career with horses, you just wonder why you're there. I think in those difficult times the love always comes through, you get on that horse, in the saddle, and say, well... this is what it's about and you really feel it. Sure my education, a university degree, it all helps with the communication and the educational-teaching part, but I think you have to have that love there first.

"It's my life, it's what I know." ●

Blue Creek Outfitter is located on Walchuk's 200 acres in McBride, B.C. For information about clinics, pack trip adventures or the book, Cordillera!, please visit www.bcoutfitter.com.

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with all the colours, there are not a lot of off-the-shelf orders," she says.

What's the secret to her success? "Anyone who is self-employed, working alone has to have the focus and the drive. I get up every morning, I do my chores and I'm at my desk

treat it as a job. Because, without that self-discipline, your orders get behind. It's a hard thing to obtain. I've had a home business most of my life and the first couple didn't do as well because I'd get up and go riding instead of going to work. Friends would come over and have coffee, school would phone and need me

Germany, Denmark, Scotland and the UK.

Her advice for folks contemplating a similar business, "Take bookkeeping courses. If your book work gets out of hand, the business is out of hand. Most home businesses fail because they don't keep accurate books. People just go into it and think of it as a hobby and don't take it seriously."

Now that Sprecher has found her niche, she plans on sticking around. "I just say this is my retirement plan: I'll just work till I die. It's something I can do at any age," she concludes. ●

With her three horses, Sprecher takes part in as many endurance events as will fit into her busy schedule. She's a member of the Endurance Riders of Alberta and mentors the juniors in the club. For more information, please visit the Canadian Trail House web site at www.canadiantack.com.

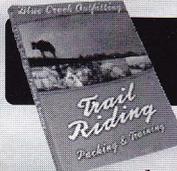
This is my retirement plan: I'll just work till I die.

for 8:00 or 8:30 at the latest. You have to recognize it as a job. That's the hardest thing to learn when you're self-employed. I think that's why most home businesses fail [because] people don't see it as a job. I get dressed, I put on shoes, it's as if I'm going out to work. I take very few personal calls. People don't get to come over and have coffee because I'm here. I

for field-trips because they considered me a non-working at-home mom. So the hardest part of running this business was convincing my friends that it's really a job."

This self-discipline helps explain the tremendous growth Canadian Trail House has seen over the years. Products are now shipped world-wide with distributors in

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