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Take a ride
on the
wild side
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OUTDOOR FUN

Happy Trails

Awaken your inner cowboy with a horseback ride at Rolling S Ranch

By TERESA DUNHAM
The Winchester Star

FREDERICK COUNTY — With a cowboy hat perched on his head, sturdy boots, worn jeans, and a full moustache that curls up on the ends, Bill Schwasta looks like a real cowboy.

His trademark dark sunglasses — so dark that you can't see his eyes even if you stare — are the only part of the ensemble that seems to break the mold.

Yet, all it takes is a glance down at Schwasta's huge oval belt buckle with "Aspen Colorado" branded into the metal to see that Schwasta isn't just putting on a show.

He worked on plenty of dude ranches out west in his younger days and joined the rodeo in Colorado, Montana, and Wyoming — and he's got the scars to prove it.

"That was Cody, Wyoming, 1980," says Schwasta, pointing to a mashed up elbow. His body is like a rodeo storybook, from the collarbone to the tip of his toes.

"Before you can be old and wise, you've got to be young and stupid," he said.

In lieu of frankincense and myrrh, this lone wise man comes bearing a horse and a grin.

He can ride both bare-back and saddle broncs, but folks who visit his Rocking S Ranch on Glaze Orchard Road in Frederick County don't have to feel intimidated.

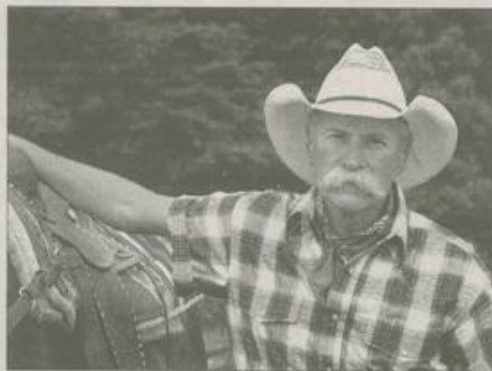
He's got gentle horses for gentle people, spirited horses for spirited people ... and for those who don't like to ride, he has horses that don't like to be ridden!

Schwasta and his two young children,



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Crickett Higgins stretches the front leg of Starlight, as Kristie Pullen watches. Crickett and Kristie help out at the Rocking S Ranch.



Bill Schwasta, owner of Rocking S Ranch in Frederick County, worked on plenty of dude ranches out west in his younger days and joined the rodeo in Colorado, Montana, and Wyoming.

RICK FOSTER/The Winchester Star

Hayley and Shane, opened the ranch because they thought the area needed another recreational activity.

Ever since 2004, his 25 horses — with names like Trooper, Dallas, Del Rio, and Star — have been giving guests a giddy-up good time.

When Schwasta takes groups out on trail rides, he's always turned sideways so he can carry on a conversation. He keeps the group's safety in mind — but you'd better believe he has fun in the process.

Forsaking flat land, his trail riders go up and down hills that look surprisingly less steep and intimidating once the horses are halfway up or down the slope.

For a special treat, he might even let the

group ride through the shallow end of a creek (and if that doesn't make a person say "yee haw," then nothing will).

He can accommodate groups of two to 15 — and his guests include everyone from corporate types and school groups to people involved with county government and the judicial system.

"It's amazing the different people I've met in this area. There's no rhyme or reason to who likes horses," he said.

Besides his trail rides, which cost \$30 an hour, he also gives lessons that range from \$35 to \$45 an hour.

"I am affording people in this area to be a part of the sport with as much frequency as they want without the cost of owning a

horse," he said.

Folks can ride 12 times a month and still save more money than if they actually owned a horse, he said. Plus, they don't have to worry about watering, feeding, or paying vet bills.

In addition, he provides therapeutic riding opportunities.

For example, one of his students, Kristie Pullen, 16, of Stephenson, gives lessons to a young autistic boy named Jimmy.

"Jimmy always gives me hugs. Riding the horses, he knows *hey, they listen to me*. He gets really excited about coming out," she said.

Pullen, who does work around the ranch in exchange for lessons, usually rides Del Rio.

"You get close to your horse. They all have personalities. You can tell which horses are friends with each other," she said.

In addition to getting close to her horse, Pullen has also made a friend named Crickett Higgins.

Like Pullen, the 15-year-old from Clearbrook does work on the ranch in exchange for lessons.

She says trail rides are the best way to see the countryside.

"I think riding is relaxing. You're looking everywhere at all of the scenery," said Higgins. "I could do this forever."

For some wholesome family fun, call the "Rocking S Ranch" at (540) 678-8501 to make reservations for a trail ride or lessons. Visit www.therockingsranch.com for more information.