

One Sharp Cookie

BY BOB GODDARD

ILLUSTRATION BY ANNIE KENNEDY

After surviving six days on the Florida Cracker Trail with 200 horsepeople, former *USA Today* reporter Deborah Sharp went home and wrote a book about murder. Given my years of living among the equine-obsessed, I suspect this may not have been a coincidence.

Sharp, who was conducting research for her new mystery novel, *Mama Rides Shotgun* (Midnight Ink, July 2009; www.deborahsharp.com), insists it wasn't like that: "I met the most amazing, generous, skilled horsemen and women on the Cracker Trail," she writes. "The cattle ranchers who opened their land to host the riders are also incredible folks, maintaining Florida's agricultural traditions in the face of development and other pressures."

So while the story is set on the Cracker Trail Ride, the people Sharp met on the real ride were nothing like the vain, spoiled, jealous, treacherous, dysfunctional prima donnas who populate her book. I'm guessing the author did additional research with the show-circuit crowd.

I admire writers who do this kind of hands-on research. For me, research consists of walking into the next room and starting an argument with one of my horse-crazed daughters. Fifteen minutes later, I have enough material for months. But Sharp is from the more dedicated branch of the profession, the branch willing to suffer for its art.

Easy Rider

The Florida Cracker Trail Ride (www.crackertrail.org) is an organized event held every February. The ride begins at a site just east of Bradenton, Florida, and ends with a parade through downtown Fort Pierce, for a total of approximately 120 miles. The purpose of the ride is to draw attention to Florida's horse and cattle heritage. And to have fun.

It should be noted that the word "Cracker" in this sense isn't the same as the less-than-brotherly term grouchy

northerners sometimes use for citizens who reside in the south. It's a reference to the distinctive cracking sound produced by the whips Florida cowboys used on cattle drives.

Riding wasn't that big of a problem for Sharp. While she spent her adult life as a confirmed city-dweller, she grew up riding horses. In fact, as young girl, she was a bona fide horse-crazed kid who badgered her poor mom until she got the horse of her dreams: a beautiful Quarter Horse named Val. Sharp still occasionally rides with her husband, Kerry Sanders, a reporter for NBC news.

Florida 'Cold'

For Sharp, the real challenge was horse camping. "I think I'm roughing it if the Cracker Barrel restaurant is more than two blocks from my motel on road trips," she, uh, cracks.

First, there was the "cold." Sharp grumbles that "one night it actually got down to 28 degrees. While grouchy northerners may scoff (we say "up to 28 degrees), for a Fort Lauderdale surfer girl, 28 is like 40 below. Ice formed on her toothbrush.

Wind and rain also made an appearance, as they sometimes do outdoors. Sharp wasn't exactly sure why that silly tent manufacturer included those stake things. At least not until a couple of cowboys had to round up her tent from a nearby field after a particularly strong gust.

And, after spending a night shivering soaking wet with her saturated nylon tent bowing inches from her face, Sharp came to understand why experienced campers recommend securing the rain guard *before* it starts to rain.

Southern Discomfort

The author endured other hardships. She learns the hard way which

direction to face while peeing downhill.

I'm not sure if she kept the boots. She gets tough with a cow that strayed too near her tent before noticing that the thing had the necessary features to qualify it as a bull.

She complains of getting hay bits in her private parts. She spots an alligator, but is reassured when told that alligators don't eat meat when it's cold outside. I think this is where I would've wanted to nail down a precise definition of "cold."

In the end, it was all worth it. *Mama Rides Shotgun* is a fun, easy read that captures the ambience of a long-distance trail ride. It's a southern-fried whodunit, sort of an Agatha Christie meets *My Name is Earl* on horseback.

It's a great book to take to the beach or even on a trail ride. Just don't get any ideas. **TTR**

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