



Their love of trail riding led Tom and Pat Seay produce *Best of America by Horseback*.

'Best' Man

BY HONI ROBERTS ~ PHOTOS COURTESY OF TOM SEAY

Regions of trail riders know Tom Seay as the host of the RFD-TV television program, *Best of America by Horseback*. What you might not know is that Tom Seay is a farmer first and television personality second.

The day that we caught up with him, he'd just put up 800 bales of hay from the fields of his Andora Farm, near Culpeper, Virginia. Seay drives a six-horse team, and still uses horse-drawn wagons to mend fences.

Originally surveyed by George Washington, the farm was home to Daniel Boone during the Cherokee Indian wars. "I love to farm — it's a true art," Seay says.

"When you're farming land that Washington surveyed, you feel it. Today, we use a river crossing that's been used since Revolutionary War times. General Custer spent his honeymoon at the farm next door. It all gives you a feeling of the rich history that we have in America."

That love for the good earth and our nation's history is put to ample use in the television show that Seay and his wife, Patricia, produce and host. It's a family affair; their son Brian and daughter-in-law Becky are an integral part of the operation.

An appreciative audience tunes in to see what scenic trail the show will tackle every week. In May, 2007, the milestone 100th episode aired, and the Seays calculate that this autumn, they'll mark 100,000 trail miles.

Right: While filming on the road, Tom Seay and his crew visit local schools, nursing homes, and youth groups (shown). "We invite trail-riding groups and individuals to ride with us while we produce the show," he says. "It's a real pleasure to meet riders, learn about their experiences, and hear their trail recommendations."



Opposite page: Seay aboard Flint, his Tennessee Walking Horse/Peruvian Horse cross.

Tom Seay, co-producer and host of Best of America by Horseback, is an intrepid trail rider – and down-home farmer.

Tom Seay — a former professional outfitter — is no stranger to such staggering trail miles. In fact, an ambitious coast-to-coast trail ride inspired the show. “I set a goal, one that was lofty, but reachable: I’d ride my horse coast-to-coast,” he tells us of what was to become the American Transcontinental Trail Ride. “It was a lifetime dream, and I decided to make it come true. It took a year to plan, organize, and coordinate.

“The ride took 4½ months, and covered 3,000 miles, from Savannah, Georgia, to San Diego, California,” he continues. “We were hosted by 83 towns, and had 257 riders join us for segments of the trip.”

In spite of such trail and show-biz successes, Seay manages to stay humble — albeit with a little help from viewers. “After I learned that we were one of the top trail riding shows in the country, I strutted around for a short period,” he admits. “But then I answered our office telephone, and a lady from Louisiana asked if I’d ever met Tom. Without revealing who I was, I told her I had.

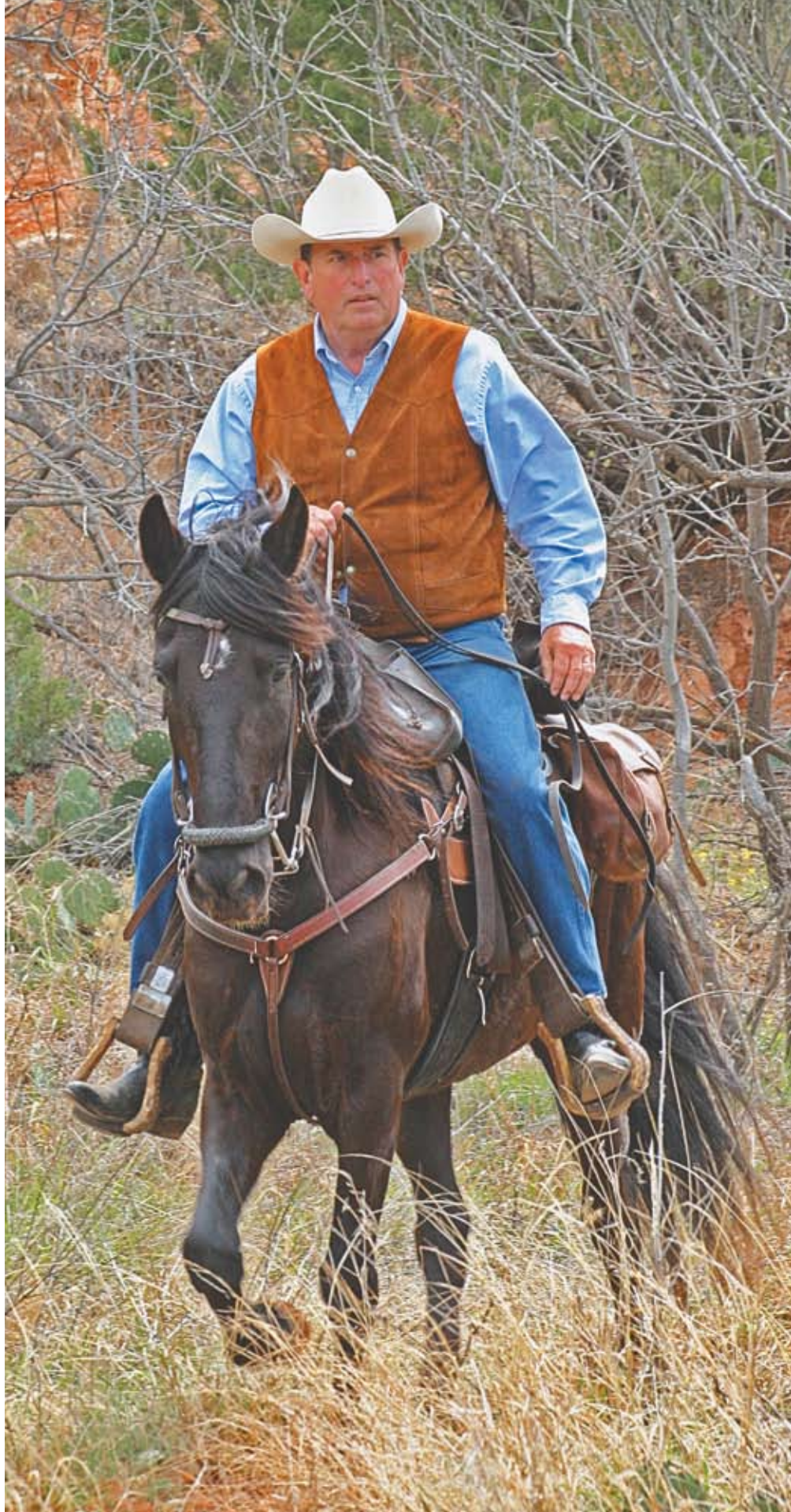
“She asked if he was as nice a person as he appeared to be. About that time, my ego got in the way, and I said, ‘Oh, yes. Tell me, what do you like best about Tom?’

“And she said, ‘Well, he’s just so common. He doesn’t ride that good, and his horse isn’t that fancy — but if he can go to those places, I can, too.’”

At that, Seay has a good laugh at his own expense. “That’s the strength of our show,” he adds. “You don’t have to be rich and you don’t need a fancy horse to go to the places we go. This is America — isn’t it great?”

Read on as we chat with Tom Seay: folksy, fun, down home, and smart; the man with the job we’d all love to have.

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'Best' Man

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TTR: *Tell us about your first horse.*

SEAY: I got Buddy before I started school. He was my best friend. I'd make a sandwich, saddle him, and go explore. I thought I was taking care of him, but it was probably the other way around. I went to a two-room school, and I'd ride him bareback to school.

TTR: *What horses are in your barn today?*

SEAY: We have about 23 fat and happy horses: Peruvians, Quarter Horses, Arabians, and Tennessee Walkers. We enjoy them all. We don't breed them, but apparently we collect them! Most of them were acquired when I had the outfitting business. They served me faithfully for many years, and they've earned their retirement.

TTR: *Who was your all-time favorite trail horse?*

SEAY: A gelding named Marshall Dillon. I bought two horses at a meat sale: a palomino mare that I named Miss Kitty, and Marshall Dillon, a large, mostly Tennessee Walking Horse. At first sight, he appeared on the high-strung side, but he had a kind eye that seemed to say, "Take me out of here!" So I did.

Not long afterward, I was in a serious horse-related accident. Driving a wagon, an axle broke. I fell underneath the wagon and was dragged. It wasn't the animals' fault. I wasn't expected to recover. Marshall Dillon brought me back and took care of me.

Later, I took him to schools, into nursing homes, and used him on our coast-to-coast trail ride. I knew him, and he knew me. He was a bit of a showoff and learned that the presence of cameras meant treats were sure to follow.

Eventually, I retired him to a beautiful paddock next to the house. Every time I'd leave, he'd hang his head over the fence. Once, as I was leaving on a trail ride he got loose and ran right to the front of the line, eager to lead again. Marshall Dillon was one of a kind: a companion and best friend.

TTR: *Do you have a training philosophy?*

SEAY: Animals often reflect their environments. When I see a horse trainer work, I ask myself, "Would I like that guy to own me? Would I like to wear that wire bit?" When you train a horse or any animal as your friend, they become devoted

to you. They have a master that they can trust and respect.

TTR: *What's the most important lesson horses have taught you?*

SEAY: Patience. Once on a trail ride, I was ridiculed by a trainer for the way I introduced a young horse to a metal bridge. The bridge was shaky and scared the horse, but the trainer said, "Make him do it — just ride him across." Instead, I dismounted, dropped the reins, and walked alone across the bridge. Then I walked back and led the youngster across. On the return trip, I pointed him at the bridge and rode him across without hesitation. Horses teach us patience, and we teach them understanding.

TTR: *How did you become a professional outfitter?*

SEAY: When my dad died, we sold off most of the family farm. I went into the cable-television business, owned stations, and for a dozen years hosted and produced programs, specializing in outdoor-sports shows. I met my wife, Patricia, when she left her job in the motion-picture industry, returned to Virginia, and went to work for me as production manager. Eventually, we started the outfitting business, first with just one horse, then two. We did that, traveling America, for 19 years.

TTR: *What was your most humorous experience during the American Transcontinental Trail Ride?*

SEAY: We had lots of fun, but when you do a coast-to-coast ride there are boring moments. One day, as we rode along the side of a road, we came on a dead rabbit. I tucked it into my saddlebag. Later, I radioed our safety vehicle and asked them to go to the nearest grocery store and buy rabbit to cook for our dinner. That night at dinner, one fellow said, "Hey, this is pretty good. What is it?" The cook said, "It's rabbit that Tommy picked up somewhere today." You should've seen their faces!

TTR: *What was your biggest surprise during that ride?*

SEAY: A lot of people have a dream — to do a hike, take a trip — but they're afraid to do it without the help of someone that they trust. At the beginning of the ride, I was criticized when I initially turned down a man who wanted to drive his wagon with us. We were going to cross bridges and encounter heavy traffic, and I wasn't convinced he was up to it. A run-

away wagon would jeopardize others, and I couldn't allow it.

But on the second day, I let him go. He told me he didn't know if he'd finish the trip, but that he really wanted to start. He hitched up his team, and as he was getting ready to start, he had a heart attack. I gave him CPR, and he revived enough to go to the hospital where he died. It was horrible for everyone. I was a wreck, but couldn't let on. I knew we needed to get riding.

The next day, on his radio show, Paul Harvey told how this man was able to live his dream and start the ride. It didn't matter that he didn't finish. All across America, people surprised me by saying they'd heard Paul Harvey encourage folks to follow their dreams and that this ride was something they'd always dreamed of. [Harvey] turned what had been a disaster into an inspiration.

TTR: *How did President Carter become involved in the coast-to-coast ride?*

SEAY: The ride was passing through Georgia, so I wrote a letter and asked if he'd consider being our Sunday school teacher for the ride. They responded that if we would come to his church, he'd be glad to do it. So we rode to his church, and he taught our class of 20 to 30 people.

At the church, when President Carter walked into the room, you could feel that he was a great man. At the end of our visit, I shook his hand and told him I really appreciated his message. "But," I admitted, "I didn't vote for you, nor did my family, and I'm sorry, because I believe you're a great man." He smiled and said, "You might be the only one who's ever admitted that, and I appreciate it." I got a Christmas card from him the next year.

TTR: *How did Best of America by Horseback come about?*

SEAY: After we did the coast-to-coast ride, I told my wife that I'd like to do it again, but in a way that we could enjoy the ride and the country more. She said no, emphatically. But months later, she said, "Wouldn't it be great to travel to some of the best places in America by horseback, visit them, then come home?" That's where the idea and the name of the show came from. Before she knew it, I contacted RFD-TV and booked a show that became the series.

TTR: *How do you select the trails you spotlight?*



Before filming a show, Tom Seay (right) often meets with state officials, such as Florida's Commissioner of Agriculture, Charlie Bronson (left), to invite them to be his special guests on the trail. During filming, the Seays often organize free trail-riding seminars and other events.

SEAY: From suggestions by people who e-mail and call us. I have a big map on the wall with push-pins, and every call gets a pin. When we start getting a cluster of pins, we go. I'd like to say there's a scientific approach, but it's really very simple!

TTR: *How is the show put together?*

SEAY: It takes three to five weeks to produce a show properly. After the ride, it takes about a week to review all the tapes and select the shots we want to use. Then we write the script, edit, and add closed-captioning.

The opening of every show is a tribute to my parents and grandparents, and the rest of the show is a tribute to great places in America and the people we visit. Every show starts out with beautiful scenery, but there's no voice-over as a tribute to my grandparents, who were deaf. My father's favorite show was *Bonanza*, so we open each show with an old map.

We spotlight the best of America: best trails to ride, best people, best barbecue, best apple pie. There's nothing more American than apple pie! And we hope that if you don't ride, you can still enjoy the show as a travelogue.

TTR: *Which trails have been your favorites?*

SEAY: When I think about the different trails, I think more about the people who rode them with us. Trails are like the cake, and the people are the icing. But if I had to pick, my favorites would be the Alaskan Yukon, the Valle de Bravo in the heart of Mexico, and at home, here in the Blue Ridge Mountains.

TTR: *Your family is an integral part of your show. Is it hard to work with family?*

SEAY: No, it's not hard to work with people you love, people who love what

they're doing. There's a sense of pride in the show. The show isn't about me; it's about great places that average folks, like us, can ride. And nobody works "for" us, they work with us. It's not a 9-to-5 job. Our crew travels together, and I love each and every one of them.

TTR: *What's your future dream project?*

SEAY: I'd like to do a major cross-country ride that would connect as much public land, wilderness, and backcountry as possible, from coast-to-coast — a major event. I'd also like to use the show's status to encourage state and federal agencies to open more horse trails around the country.

TTR: *What people — living or dead — would you invite for campfire conversations?*

SEAY: My late father, Andrew Seay. He was a farmer, a teacher, and an elected local official. I'd love to listen to his stories again. Teddy Roosevelt: I'd like to hear about his exploration of Yellowstone. Kenneth Abbott of Georgia and Hayward Simmons, of South Carolina, two hardworking men who love life. And Onzi and Donna Colbertson, a couple from Tennessee, who ride with us and appear in many of our shows.

TTR: *What's your greatest extravagance?*

SEAY: I love to cook. Just because you're camping doesn't mean you have to eat a can of beans! When we had our outfitting business, every night on the trail we'd eat well-prepared country food off china plates on a tablecloth. So when I have the opportunity, I love to have a great campfire meal, and afterwards, smoke a cigar by the fire and talk with friends. It just doesn't get any better.

TTR: *What do you most treasure?*

SEAY: My family and my farm; together, they're a way of life.

TTR: *Complete this sentence: People would be surprised to know that I...*

SEAY:greatly enjoy going to the symphony. I don't often get the chance now, but I like to go before they start to see the artists tuning up. It sounds chaotic, but when the concert begins, the music is a world all its own. It's like life. Turning obstacles into opportunity is like turning chaos into music.

TTR: *What's your idea of perfect happiness?*

SEAY: To be satisfied that you're doing the best that you can with what you have, and that when you're finished, things are a little better. You've left a good footprint. **TTR**

For more information on Tom and Pat Seay, and Best of America by Horseback, call (540) 829-9555, or visit www.bestofamericabyhorseback.com.



In Florida, Seay pauses to speak with another trail rider, Nicole Carswell.