

# The Shires of Stillwater

A horse is a horse, of course, of course.  
But, there are horses...and there are HORSES

by Nancy Owens Barnes

Meet Chance, Dicey, Duke, Wes, Palmer, Emerson, Jack, and Jill. As English Shires, they originate from the English Great Horse of the Middle Ages and the primitive Forest Horse. Bryan and Kaye Ross acquired the Shires from Idaho and Montana, except for Duke, the resident blueblood. As son and grandson of champion Shires in England, Duke traveled to the United States in style aboard a Boeing 747. Stout legs and white feathery feet support the big-barreled horses known for their docile nature. More importantly, these eight Shires make dreams come true.

At least they have for Bryan and Kaye.

My husband Tom and I arrive at Stillwater Ranch late morning to find Kaye in the barn tossing hay into a stall. A retired financial manager, she now works full time running the ranch with her husband Bryan. She greets us with a wide smile as she picks a piece of straw out of her blonde hair and leads us to the deck of their party room at the events center where we sit on a sun-warmed bench. To the side of us lie three dogs: Chase, Teddy and Gus.



“Gus is our official babysitter,” Kaye tells me.

A black and white long-haired dog, Gus enthusiastically greets all guests, hoping someone throws a stick for him before he jumps into the sleigh or wagon with them—an efficient foot warmer for winter outings.

As Kaye and I chat about the ranch, behind us Bryan shuttles loads of seed and fertilizer in the bucket of his tractor. With his day job in the financial business, Bryan

scrambles on weekends to complete his ranch work.

Born in Coeur d'Alene, Kaye admired the Sandpoint area for years before she and Bryan, an Air Force brat who landed in the Spirit Lake area in 1970, purchased ten acres at the west end of Jewel Lake Road in 1993. They also wanted horses and, at a draft horse show, fell in love with what Kaye refers to as the "big guys."

So they moved a double-wide onto their ten acres, built a barn and purchased English Shires. To honor the horses' natural inclination to work, Bryan and Kaye began a business offering wagon rides and sleigh rides. Eventually, they needed more space and moved to where the ranch sits today along Dufort Road near Cocolalla Slough, providing expansive pastures plus 40 acres of forest.

The couple thinned their forest to create trails for their wagon and sleigh rides. Extremely selective and protective of the trees, Kaye carefully marked each one for cutting. Bryan then cut the trees and hooked them to the powerful Shires to drag out of the forest, where a friend milled the logs into lumber.

After hiring a contractor to build their house, Bryan and Kaye built their barn. Except for the electrical work and purchasing trusses and treated posts, they constructed the barn themselves. In the end, the trees cleared to make the trails supplied lumber for every structure on the property.

"I've gotten to be very good friends with the chop saw," Kaye laughs.

In December of 2003 they began having parties at the ranch and now offer year round activities such as catered dinners and events for all types of celebrations, including reunions, weddings, and birthdays. The summers buzz with wedding parties, hay rides, and outdoor barbecues, and the Christmas season brings a multitude of family and office parties. During summer weddings, Kaye delivers the bride to the ceremony in a horse-drawn carriage, and during winter weddings, a sleigh.

Between entertaining and taking care of guests, Bryan and Kaye maintain the ranch, which requires continuous attention. They grow their own hay, keeping what they need and selling the rest. Trained by a man who once shod the Budweiser Clydesdales, Bryan shoes the Shires himself. Kaye builds 50 to 80 flower pots every summer for weddings and other events, spends 20 hours a week on the lawnmower, and manages the nutrition and vet care for the horses. Although they employ extra help when necessary, Bryan and Kaye do most of the work themselves. But despite the long hours, Kaye tells me, "We love the work and we love the people."

Kaye takes us to see the Shires up close, leading us across a patio of picnic tables to the party room entry, where a wide drape of treated and dried hops dangle above the double doors. Inside, more hops wrap beams and columns and serve as valances above windows. The hops contain tiny white lights, creating a festive feel. Kay points out

newly-constructed cabinets in the kitchen area. Across a span of tables and chairs, a robust wood stove fills the corner of the room where winter guests warm up after sleigh rides, while sipping spiced cider and hot chocolate.

Inside the huge barn, the main corridor stretches before us with open-ended horse stalls lining the south side, allowing the great Shires to come and go as they wish.

“We try to create a space for the horses as close as possible to nature,” Kaye says.

From a beam hang a row of harnesses, each harness looped over a steel rod attached to a rope and pulley for easy access. Like gear in a fire station, they hang ready for action.

We find most of the Shires grazing outside the barn and in the pasture, but in one stall stands Duke. I cup one hand beneath his lips and pet his long nose with the other. Duke shuffles his velvet muzzle against my palm. Kaye refers to Duke and Palmer as their “Porsche” team because “they work together so smoothly,” she says.

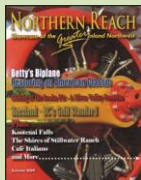
Whenever Kaye and Bryan wish to call the Shires in from the pasture, they each employ their own technique. Bryan whistles loudly and Kaye, unable to do “the guy whistle thing,” motors her golf cart along their driveway waving a towel and shouting, Hup! Hup! Hup! Either method brings the Shires in at full gallop.

Many guests of Stillwater Ranch return year after year. Even customers from the old Jewel Lake Road place come for sleigh rides at the new location, and their parents or children. Bryan especially enjoys the elderly and the kids, often hoisting someone onto the back of a Shire and walking them around to let them have the experience.

Tom and I eventually leave Kaye to her work and follow a wagon trail, winding through the 40-acre forest where sunlight slips between the trees. Gus joins us, snookering Tom into tossing sticks for him. This forest once contained the largest Blue Heron nesting area in Idaho, but a violent windstorm ripped through the area and the herons resettled elsewhere. Bald eagles, though, have moved in.

Along the western edge of the forest, lies the long driveway connecting Dufort Road to the ranch. The driveway follows the fence line of a green, rolling pasture with a Hoodoo mountain backdrop. Respectful stewards of the land, the Ross’ have made Stillwater Ranch a safe place for birds, wildlife, and people.

Kaye and Bryan are living their dream. They most enjoy sharing their beautiful ranch with others, made possible by long hours of hard work, with help from the heart of the ranch—their beloved Shires.



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