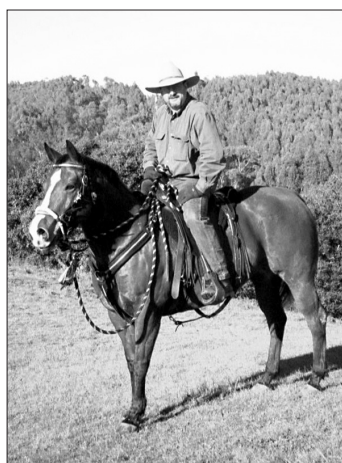


# Safety and self defense on the ambassador's trail



In 2003 Garry Stauber completed a 1350 mile, 3 ½ month horseback trip, riding the length of California with a packhorse.

He is on the Board of Directors of the Ohlone Riders of the Backcountry Horsemen of California, DreamPower Horsemanship Foundation, and the Aromas Hills Trail Club. He is also a member of the Long Riders Guild. Garry has written articles for Trail Rider and the Bay Area Equestrian Network ([www.bayquest.com](http://www.bayquest.com)). Garry's trip is chronicled on his website at [www.dream-adventures.com](http://www.dream-adventures.com) and on the Long Riders Guild site at [www.thelongridersguild.com/LRG.htm](http://www.thelongridersguild.com/LRG.htm).

**N**ear Fairbanks, Alaska, the Tanana and Nenana Rivers merge on their way into the Yukon River. The waters of the Nenana River are a pure, clear blue and the Tanana waters are a light reddish-brown, from the silt of the glaciers.

Where the two rivers meet, the pure blue waters and the muddy brown river waters swirl together and you can clearly see the two colors within the turmoil of the streams for a distance, before they settle into one color.

I am a huge advocate for "trail ambassadorship." This is the concept of all equestrians putting our best "foot" (or hoof, so to speak) forward in public places and making our presence known in a positive manner. This concept includes the idea of developing relationships on trails by being cordial, talking and even educating other trail users about horses and horse behaviors. Casual meetings on trails provide opportunities to allow other trail users to pet our horses and educate them about horse behavior and issues. This is the role of an Ambassador.

Currently there are individuals and groups working to eliminate equestrian trail access across America, and here in California. Some past actions by equestrians have not been favorable in the public's eye, thus fueling arguments that we should not be allowed on multi-use trails.

Recently I read an article on the subject of self-defense for trail riders, a subject I previously hadn't given much thought. The author of that article interviewed Scot Hansen, a retired police officer of twenty years, who is currently a horse trainer and teaching self-defense for trail riders.

The paragraph that really caught my attention was where Scot Hansen was quoted as saying, " 'Don't be polite, keep strangers away.' Hansen advises the best way to do that is by LOUDLY shouting, 'Stop! Stay away.' At the same time give the universal sign to stop by sticking out your arm and raising your hand, palm up."

As I read that paragraph, suddenly the colors of the waters were different and I could see the turmoil as the currents of these two rivers of thought churned in my mind. What kind of impact would it have if every trail rider shouted, "Stop, don't come closer!" at every hiker on the trail? Equestrians would be hated. But keeping ourselves safe is a much greater goal than "ambassadorship." But if we lose our trails, we won't be in any danger because we will have no place to ride.

You see how my mind works. After a real conversation with Scot Hansen I realized the colors of our waters are not so different, even though the streams begin in different places. As trail riders, we obviously need to use common sense and be aware of our surroundings.

Many equestrians think that if confronted by an assailant while on a horse, we would just ride over the assailant, hit them with our reins or put the horse into a "racehorse" gallop. Scot says, "We have for a long time been training our horse not to run over us." The more trusted of a friend our horse is, the less likely he will assist in pushing the possible assailant away.

Scot has made a video where he demonstrates the idea that hitting your assailant with a crop, reins or rope doesn't work. In the video, in only a split second Scot demonstrates how easy it is to grab the rider's arm as it is tipped forward to swing down, making it easier for the assailant to unseat the rider as momentum carries the rider downward off the horse.

Putting your horse into a breakneck gallop is likely to place you in more danger than the previous situation. Unless you are used to riding your horse at breakneck speeds and the area is safe for this kind of riding, this could be even more dangerous.

So what should we do, if we are working to be ambassadors on the trail? One of the best things to do is to not ride alone. If you do encounter a person on the trail who concerns you, the first step is to remain calm and balanced in your saddle. Be very aware of your surroundings. Use your voice and engage the stranger in dialogue. If you assess it to be appropriate, tell the stranger to keep their distance and look for alternate paths to keep you and your horse away from the stranger. If you have determined that someone is not a threat, you can invite them closer to your horse. But prepare for and consider your safety first.

If you are riding with others, it is probably not necessary to shout for strangers to stay back. What is

important is assessing the situation and being alert. When telling someone to stay away from your horse, Scot says you might say your horse is easily excited or kicks.

The one place a rider is exposed to the most risk is when dismounted at the trailer. Try to park in well-lit and safe places. When returning to your trailer after a ride, be aware of the surroundings before dismounting. It really helps if your horse is trained for quick loading, and a better reason to never ride alone, so that you avoid being alone at the trail head. Should you be approached, be aware that your horse is the best barrier between you and the suspect.

In the future, trail safety while riding in urban areas may become a bigger issue. Learning to be safe on the trail is very important, but, if we are not good ambassadors, we may not have trails to ride. Both streams of thought are important to all equestrians. When you have a true sense of safety, take the time to be an ambassador. This investment of time will allow all of us to ride in the future.

For more information on trail self defense, contact Scot Hansen at [www.horsethink.com](http://www.horsethink.com). 