

## Hoofbeats in the chasm

Popular North Country attraction can now be seen from horseback.

By DAN HEATH  
Staff Writer

AUSABLE CHASM — The Equine Center at AuSable Chasm is the newest attraction at one of the region's most popular destinations.

Equine Center Manager Travis deValinger said the center, located just behind the AuSable Chasm Campground, opened the last weekend of June.

"Tim (AuSable Chasm General Manager Tim Bresett) wanted us to open right away. We are concentrating on getting the word out," he said.

Bresett said the goal was to create additional recreational activities for visitors and guests.

"We want to turn this into a destination type of place rather than a roadside attraction," he said. "They seem to know what they're doing."

There are about 25 kilometers of trails on more than 500 acres, although not all are used for horseback riding yet. They are the old Nordic ski trails, which AuSable

Chasm no longer uses for that purpose.

"It's a good piece of property that was under utilized," Bresett said.

The center has 10 horses, two miniature horses for short children's rides and eight larger ones for older youths and adults. deValinger said the horses are hand selected, trained and handled to exacting standards of gentleness.

"We go through our dealer to make sure they meet our criteria. We don't have any nippers or pickers," he said.

The center will soon have two Belgian draft mixes, so the center will be able to accommodate people of all sizes. deValinger plans to acquire 10 more horses, to make sure none are worked too hard.

"If we find they are working too hard, we'll add to that," he said. "We're in this for the love of the animal."

To that end, the horses have access to plenty of food, water and shade all day.

Each ride starts with a 10-minute orientation lesson on horseback riding basics. deValinger said each rider uses a stool to mount the horse. That is done from the left

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See HORSES Page D6 ►



One of the two miniature horses housed at the Equine Center at Ausable Chasm explores his pasture area.



Above, a steady flow of water cascades down Rainbow Falls at Ausable Chasm. Along with the many attractions the Chasm already has to offer, trail rides by horseback are a new family friendly activity being offered. At left, A hiking trail overlooks the natural beauty of Ausable Chasm.



P-R Photos by Rachel Moore



Sinatra, a rescue horse housed at Ausable Chasm, takes a nap while Equine Center manager Travis deValinger gives a brief introduction on horse riding and handling safety.

## Horses: Other improvements made recently

► From Page D1

side, because long ago people wore their swords on their left hip.

The center uses hackamore (bitless) bridles, considered much gentler for a horse. Safety tips include not kicking the horse, and speaking softly.

"You'll get more attention by whispering than by yelling," deValinger said.

To stop, you should gently pull back on the reins and say whoa, then slack the rein. You should repeat if necessary.

"It's just like pumping the brakes," he said.

Control should be achieved as gently as possible, deValinger said. The ideal is to have control but also develop a bond with the animal.

"The horses are like children and you are like the substitute teacher," he said. "The more you demonstrate you're in charge, the better it behaves."

The center's staff try to match the horse with the rider's experience level.

"The girls and I go out and ride them to find out how they interact with other people," deValinger said.

Every rider has to wear a helmet, regardless of their riding ability. The center uses one guide for every six riders.

If a rider is nervous or scared, center staff will walk alongside the horse.

"We're all about safety first," he said.

The staff have more than 25 years experience of operating, training and teaching in the equine industry. deValinger most recently was involved with the Emerald Springs Ranch in Saranac Lake.

He and Natalia Fiedler are the guides, and Fiedler helps in all aspects of the operation as needed, including as liaison with their veterinarian.

Lance Falcon is the farrier, and also tends to the horse's nutritional needs.

"He's responsible for keeping our horses ship shape," deValinger said.

Sam Potter works where

the animals are housed. She is studying equine science at Stephens College in Missouri.

"I'm here for the experience with horses, to help myself along in the industry," she said.

Bethaney Ford works at the staging area, where the rides start.

Some of the horses were rescued from slaughter auctions, deValinger said.

"I would like to eventually have a rescue center," he said. "We could bring a lot of horse awareness to people."

While the center presently caters to tourists, deValinger would like to eventually provide equine education to others in the community.

They won't lease or sell the horses, but will instead let them retire.

"They give us years of love and loyalty, and we give it back," he said.

The Equine Center is not owned by AuSable Chasm. It is a separate business run by deValinger.

The center is open all year, with sleigh rides planned for winter. He would like to offer dinner rides in the future.

Rides cost \$55 per hour, with five-minute children's rides available for \$5.

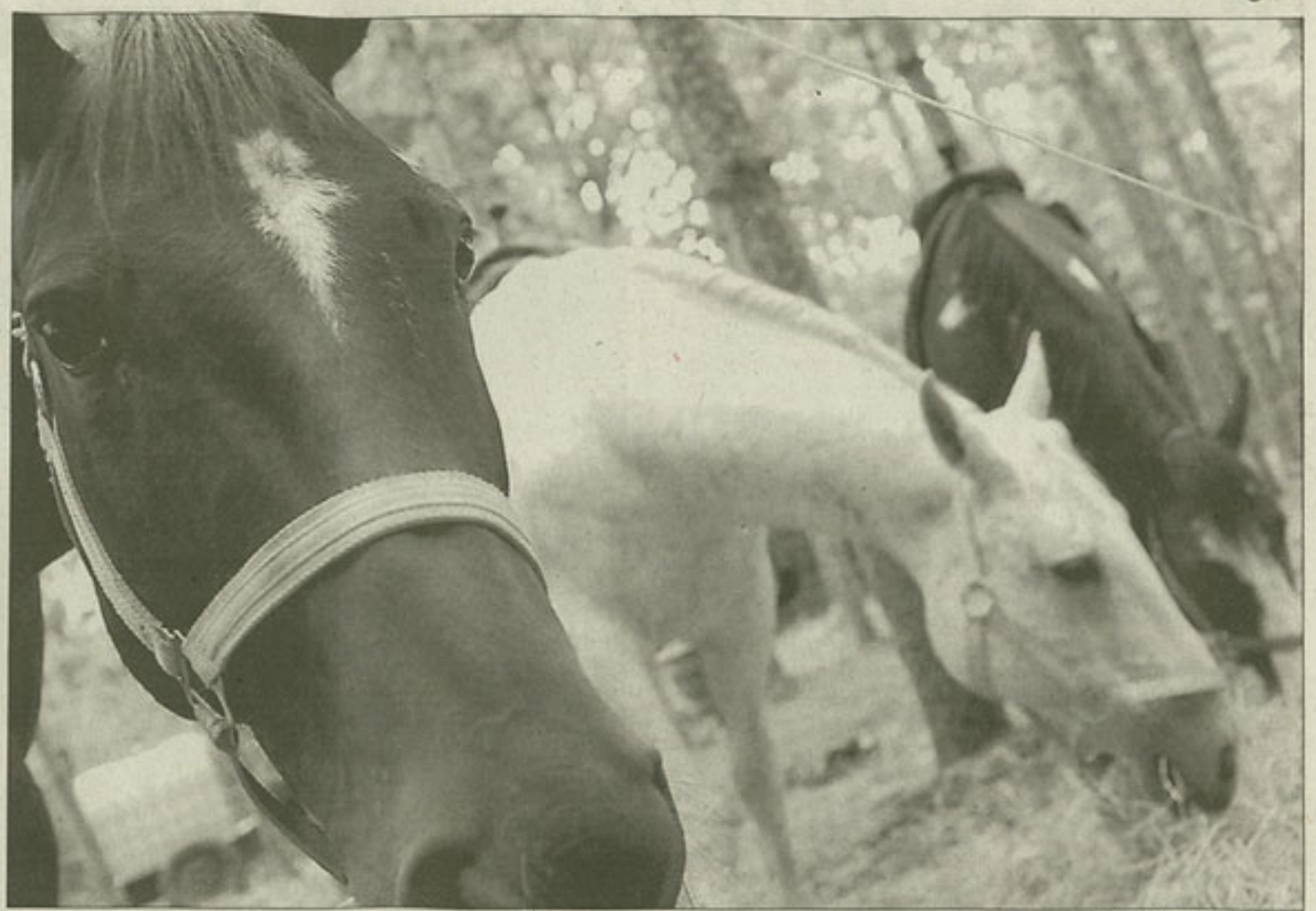
deValinger also wants to offer wagon rides from the end of the AuSable Chasm rafting trips on a trial basis in August. That will be offered directly through the AuSable Chasm offices.

Bresett said there have been a lot of changes at AuSable Chasm since the twin floods of 1996 destroyed many of the bridges and hand rails along the trail network. New trails and bridges were in place for the start of the 1997 season, Bresett said.

The wooden boats used for rides through the chasm were replaced with raft and tube rides.

Lantern tours of the chasm started in 2002 and have been very popular, Bresett said.

"They are booked almost every weekend throughout



Dakota (from left to right), Sinatra, and Dean Martin munch contentedly on hay after a trail ride through the Ausable Chasm Campgrounds.

the summer," he said.

New trails built within the last two years allowed people to walk the chasm from end to end for the first time. Previously, the second half was only accessible by boat and raft.

Some of the trails are used for hiking and biking, and extend all the way to the Wickham Marsh area and Lake Champlain, he said.

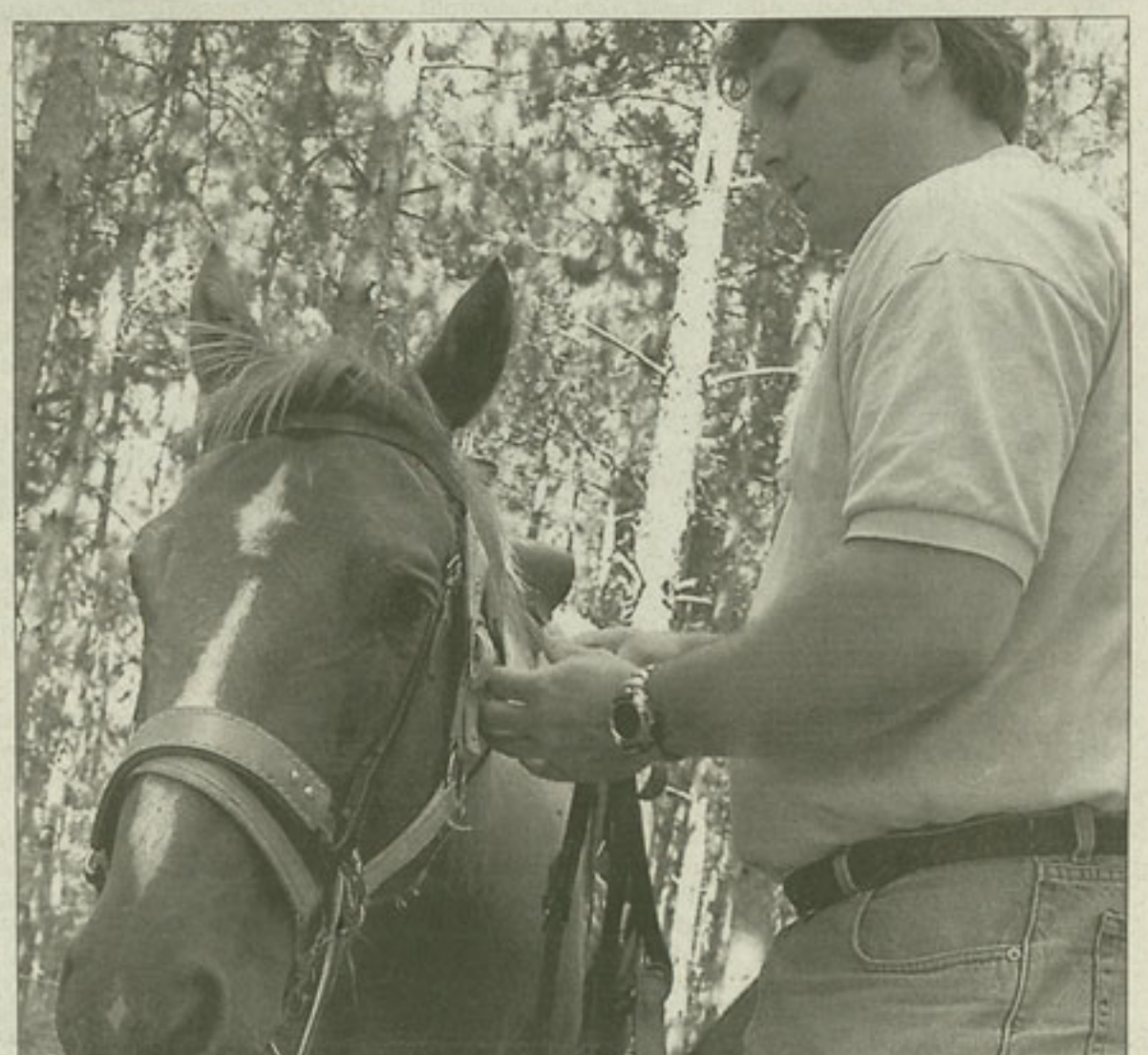
There's also a small motel on the property, Bresett said.

The AuSable Chasm campground opened in 1972. He said packaging the campground and the chasm tours has been successful.

"In my opinion, it's one of the nicest campgrounds in the area," Bresett said. "It's full most weekends."

He said there used to be a farm on the grounds in the 1870s. It was used to raise the food for the operation.

"It's nice to see the horses bring back a little bit of yesterday," Bresett said.



Travis deValinger adjusts a hackamore on Willy Nelson, a gelding used for trail rides at the Equine Center at Ausable Chasm.

E-mail Dan Heath at: dhealth@pressrepublican.com