

Hells Canyon Journal

A Lesson in Riding and Ranching – Western Style by Pattie Walker



Annica Frilund and Micaela Ström are agricultural students at Lannäslundskolan Optima, a small vocational school in Jakobstad, a town of about 20,000 people in western Finland. They are completing a six-week practicum with Mitch and Jolinn Hoover at the Rising H Ranch in Richland. The exchange was promoted by Halfway Mayor Gordon Kaesemeyer through his work on an informal village partnership with Jeppo, Finland.

Micaela Ström's father was a bit worried when he heard that his nineteen-year-old daughter would be traveling to the United States to complete a six-week agricultural practicum. No, he wasn't concerned about sweet-talking American guys, he was afraid that the United States would steal his daughter's heart.

"He was afraid that I wouldn't want to come home," Micaela said. "And I don't."

Micaela and classmate Annica Frilund are having a grand time learning about western riding, with masters of the trade, Mitch and Jolinn Hoover at the Rising H Ranch in Richland. The young women have been with the Hoovers since the middle of April and will be returning to Finland at the end of May. Both women attend Lannäslundskolan Optima, a small vocational school in Jakobstad, a town of about 20,000 people in western Finland.

Micaela and Annica barely had time to catch their breath after the 31-hour journey to get here before they hit the open road with the Hoovers, traveling to Eugene for the Oregon Mountain Trail Championships and Bend for cow-cutting clinics.

"We had this 10-day trip scheduled before the girls arrived," said Jolinn. "So we gave them a crash course in western riding and taking care of the horses and headed out."



Micaela Ström, a nineteen-year-old Finnish agriculture student doing a practicum at the Rising H Ranch in Richland, says she isn't ready to return home. Before embarking on the journey, Micaela's father expressed some reservations about his adventurous daughter's plans. He feared she would find the United States so enticing that she would not want to return to her homeland.

The young women were able to see the Hoovers in action - competing in the professional class, coaching clients and teaching clinics. Annica and Micaela jumped right in helping where they could and competing themselves.

With a fast bit of relearning, the two, both riders since childhood and quick studies, took top honors in the mountain trail novice class. Like most riders in Europe, Annica and Micaela are trained in the English style, which evolved from a mounted military method of riding, rather than the western style used in the United States, which developed according to the needs of cowboys. There are several important differences: a western saddle is deeper than an English saddle; western riders use one hand for the reins rather than having a rein in each hand as with English style; and in western style, riders make contact with the horse more with the seat, a rider's weight and reining than with the bit. Annica found reprogramming her muscles to be the most difficult; for Micaela, one-handed reining was the biggest challenge. Back to Richland with just enough time to do a few interviews, their laundry, and learn to rope, the pair will be heading with the Hoovers to Nevada to visit Jolinn's son, Ry Olsen. Ry is currently a ranch hand at one of the largest working ranches in the United States. Annica and Micaela are looking forward to pitching in with cattle branding and other ranch work and helping the Hoovers complete their trail riding training DVD.

"Yea, we're going to be famous!" quipped Annica.

It is hard to say who is having the most fun during this cross-country practicum. There has been surprise and unexpected pleasure on both sides of the equation. The young women were pleased to find their time here would not all be spent mucking out a horse stall or doing the

other practical work of agriculture.

“My twin sister is doing her practicum in Finland and there you mostly build fences and clean stalls, not ride horses,” said Micaela. “We came to a good place to learn and we’ve gotten to do a lot of riding.”

“I just figured they were here to learn western riding and to ride,” Jolinn added as way of explanation.

That doesn’t mean the young women don’t know how or haven’t had the pleasure of doing the messier task of horsemanship. In fact, it’s something Jolinn says they’re quite good at.

“We know how because we do it so much,” laughed Annica. “We’re fast and good so we can get it over with and not have to redo it!”

From the Hoover’s perspective, having the Finnish students with them for this practicum has come with unanticipated enjoyment and friendship.

“Gordon Kaesemeyer had to talk pretty fast to get us to do it,” admitted Jolinn. “We’ve had students who wanted to stay here and learn, but it turned out we had to do a lot of babysitting. These girls are smart, hardworking, mature and very focused on what they’re doing. We’ve really enjoyed them.”

Mitch Hoover, who has worked on ranches and with horses most of his adult life, is impressed with the young women’s knowledge of agriculture.

“I was skeptical at first,” he said. “But it’s been really good. They know a lot and have a firm understanding of the realities of agriculture. I think they get a broader agricultural education than students here do.”

When home, the Hoovers say Annica and Micaela will be in charge of screening any other Finnish students interested in a practicum at the Rising H Ranch.

Annica Frilund has found her practicum at the Rising H Ranch surprisingly pleasurable as she enlarges her horsemanship to include western-style trail riding. There’s work, too, --the inevitable mucking out of stall. “We know how because we do it so much,” she laughed. “We’re fast and good so we can get it over with and not have to redo it!”



Even though their time here has been action packed, the pair has had a few spare moments to take note of what they are seeing and experiencing. When asked what had first struck them about the United States, Annica was quick to answer.

“Food! It’s so different.”

The women noted that larger portions, greasy fast foods, sweets and chips figure prominently in the American diet while Finlanders dine more on smaller amounts of boiled potatoes, rice and pasta. And, even though coffee is ubiquitous in the United States - Annica says there are American’s with *big* coffee cups everywhere - they say our bitter coffee is nothing to write home about. According to Annica, Finlanders have honed their tastes by drinking more coffee than any other country in the world.

We might not have coffee worth a second cup, but it seems we beat Finlanders hands down for friendliness.

“People talk more here,” said Micaela. “We wouldn’t talk to a stranger in Finland.”

At first the girls were unsure of how to respond to the American version of cocker spaniel-like friendliness, but quickly got past their surprise when strangers would strike up a conversation.

One thing that the woman have not grown used to is the natural beauty. They describe Finland as completely flat and are in awe of the beautiful mountains that make up much of Oregon. Asked what they would take, if they could take absolutely anything back home with them, including those beautiful mountains, Annica didn’t miss a beat.

“An American truck, and a horse and trailer too.”

The pace of life will not slow down for the pair who will arrive in Finland in the evening and attend graduation the very next day. Nor will it be the end of the story.

“I feel we’ve made friends forever,” said Jolinn, “and this is the start of a long-term friendship with these girls. We hope to visit them and they’ll be bringing their children over to visit us in the future.”

What better outcome could you wish for from a cross-cultural exchange?