

FEELS LIKE HOME

Stock Farm Club offers an idyllic Western setting and a palpable sense of community.

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY BILL BUCKLEY





HOME ON THE RANGE

To the east, a herd of elk relaxes on the club grounds in the foothills of the Sapphire Range.

*“Stood alone on a mountain top
Starin’ out at the Great Divide
I could go east, I could go west
It was all up to me to decide.
Just then I saw a young hawk flyin’
And my soul began to rise
And pretty soon
My heart was singin’...”*
—Bob Seger, “Roll Me Away”

In November, 25 years ago, I loaded my Chevy Blazer with 16 guns, one bow, and enough clothing to get me through winter. Unhappy living where access to land was scarce, people too numerous, and hunting as a way of life a distant past, I pinned my hopes on Montana and stepped on the gas. As I was crossing the North Dakota–Montana border two days later, right as evening light washed over the undulating plains, a lone sharptail sailed across I-94, directly over me. And I remember like it was yesterday my adrenaline spiking from the realization that *This is it... This is home*. I’ve never looked back.

Last October found me heading west again, from my house outside Bozeman to the Bitterroot Valley south of Missoula, home to Chuck Schwab’s 2,600-acre golf and residential development, the Stock Farm Club. I’ll admit I was a bit ambivalent. Exclusive golf communities are so contrary to my idea of the Western aesthetic, so mismatched to Montana’s arid and wild landscape

and the casual, we’re-all-the-same mentality I cherish, that I wasn’t sure I could do the place justice.

Whatever my reservations driving in from the quaint town of Hamilton, a short distance to the southwest, the club’s main entrance provided my first surprise: a modest, keypad-operated stone and wrought iron gate. No guardhouse, no massive, ostentatious log archway. Instead, nestled beneath tall, yellow-leaved cottonwoods that lined both sides of the drive beyond, the intimate setting reminded me of entering a small country manor, especially with the equestrian center immediately on the right.

My next surprise came when a quick left turn took me out of the trees and wending through the property’s lower elevations of pastures and open grassland. Beyond a cluster of large, white-sided houses with spacious, manicured yards, the foothills of the Sapphire Mountains dominated the landscape, gaining elevation in fits and starts, grass range giving way to sagebrush and ponderosa pines, with coulees accented with the yellows and maroons of aspens and chokecherry bushes. For a gated community designed around an award-winning golf course, development appeared to take a serious backseat to nature.

In fact, looking up at this quintessential Western landscape under

ALPINE VIEWS

The westerly views from both the lodge (above) and golf course are dominated by the Bitterroot Mountains.



an endless overcast sky, I actually felt a bit underwhelmed. Where were all the houses? The green lawns carved out of sagebrush flats? The 18-hole golf course? Turns out I needed to drive considerably farther and higher to see it, close to the 27,000-square-foot Montana Clubhouse Lodge, a massive log building that, like the golf course, is tucked into the property's contours and trees, and hence largely out of view—no small feat.

Stock Farm Club was founded in 1999 by Chuck Schwab and five other local investors. It was originally part of the 22,000-acre Bitter Root Stock Farm, where copper baron Marcus Daly had a full-scale cattle operation starting in 1888. The name was retained in honor of the property's heritage, with copper being one of the club's main color themes. But reverence for its legacy extends far beyond a name and a color.

Despite a first-class golf course being the impetus for developing the club, preserving the landscape was Chuck and Helen Schwab's top priority. It shows. So was offering a multitude of activities that wouldn't conflict with one another or infringe on anyone's privacy. Truth be told, the Stock Farm Club wildly succeeds in something few Western resort developers even attempt: retaining a distinctly natural environment by adapting development to the

the lifestyle and call the club and Bitterroot Valley home.

"Every morning I wake up I'm thankful to live here," Susie said, "but it's a lifestyle that requires a special passion for the outdoors. Winters can be hard, and it's not like you're right next to town. But we are so appreciative of what we have. That's something everyone at the club shares, especially people who buy lots here."

The club property is a long rectangle running west to east, with the western end extending onto the valley floor. Susie explained that there are three categories of home sites, restricted to certain locations and building styles. At the lowest elevations are ranch homes like the ones I passed next to the main gate. Then come the prairie homes that, due to being situated in more open country, are low-profile, timber-framed, and tucked in. The mountain homes in the higher elevations have log or board-and-batten exteriors and cedar roofs. It's all part of the Schwabs' effort to protect the club's viewshed, leaving the majority of land unspoiled for golfing, horseback riding, hiking, biking, shooting, and watching the resident wildlife. Driving around we saw part of the 200-strong resident elk herd bedded on an open ridge. Other popular residents include deer, pheasants, Hungarian partridge, ruffed and blue grouse, valley quail, and turkeys.

It's a humbling reminder that no matter how grand man's dreams, out West, nature is indomitable—something Stock Farm seems perfectly happy to acknowledge.

land's contours and vegetation versus running roughshod over them. Its understated ambience is a real tribute to the founders' stewardship and land-use ethics.

Which isn't to imply the facilities are less than top-notch. The fitness center, pool, and tennis courts, hardly timeworn or dated at the time of my visit, are being replaced to offer more family-oriented amenities. And the log and stone clubhouse that functions as Stock Farm's social center, housing the main dining facility, bar, lounge, plus locker room and golf shop, is elegant and intimate despite its size. Western art and mounted elk go hand in hand with the stunning vistas overlooking the Bitterroot Valley. This is where members and guests are encouraged to mingle through informal get-togethers and special events, which is all part of the club's mission to have like-minded people relax and enjoy one another. It's also where I met Susie Thomas, my tour guide for the afternoon.

Susie is everything you'd want in a homeowners association manager: affable, efficient, and—thanks to having been at the club for 17 years—the perfect person to help me make sense of the property. A Cleveland, Ohio, native, she moved to Montana 20 years ago to marry her high school sweetheart, Bill, who also works at the club. Like other staff members I met who moved here from out of state, the Thomases cherish

Before reporting to the golf shop, we checked out the casting pond, used for picnicking, swimming, and as the name implies, having a try at one of the stocked trout. On Mondays during the summer—an off day for the golf course—it's also home to Dog Days, where a local dog trainer brings his Labs up and conducts informal training sessions. Members, many of whom are avid bird and duck hunters, are encouraged to bring their dogs. The club sets up tables for drinks and dog treats—my kind of event.

Stock Farm's main attraction, of course, is its world-class golf course designed by Tom Fazio. Frankly, I haven't touched a golf club since age 16, when it was apparent my temperament was ill-suited to the game. That said, I could have kept Assistant Golf Pro Ryan Tellock, a transplant from Wisconsin, out until dark photographing the course. The fairways and sculpted sand traps and greens are gorgeous, in part because, without a house in view, you feel immersed in nature despite the fact that you're on an extensively manicured golf course. Because the course was laid out on a broad mountain bench, the valley-side holes run right up to where the land drops off, dramatically setting off the massive Bitterroots to the west.

While the club rests on the western slope of the Sapphire Range, pretty in its own right, it's the Bitterroots that dominate

Horseback riding is a prominent activity, with plenty of trails and spectacular scenery.



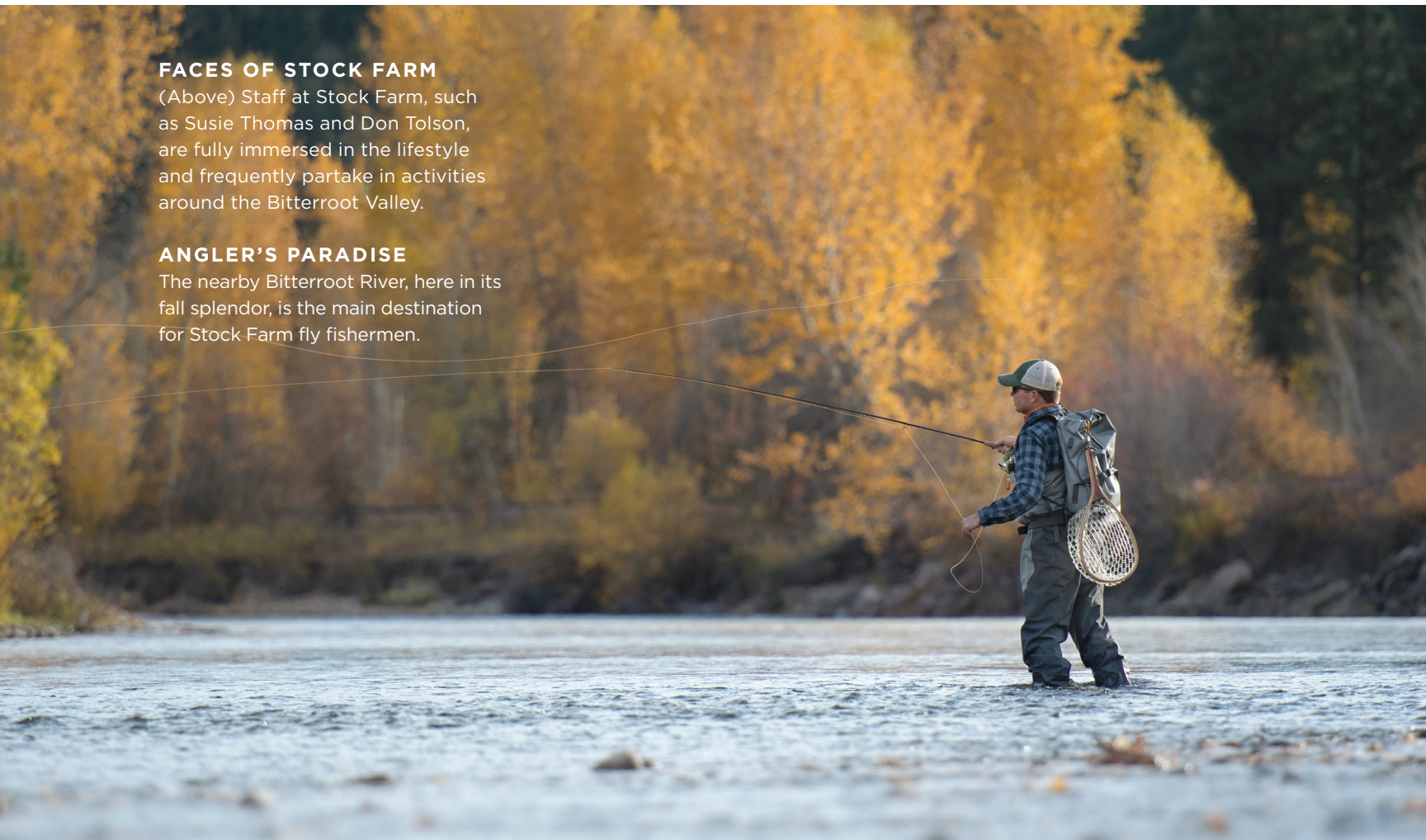


FACES OF STOCK FARM

(Above) Staff at Stock Farm, such as Susie Thomas and Don Tolson, are fully immersed in the lifestyle and frequently partake in activities around the Bitterroot Valley.

ANGLER'S PARADISE

The nearby Bitterroot River, here in its fall splendor, is the main destination for Stock Farm fly fishermen.



Stock Farm's vistas, no matter where you stand. And the higher you get, the more impressive the view, as you can now glimpse more of the jagged peaks and valleys that lie beyond its easterly face. To a backcountry enthusiast who has to know what lies over the next ridge, that's about as titillating a sight as it gets. It's a humbling reminder that no matter how grand man's dreams, out West, nature is indomitable—something Stock Farm seems perfectly happy to acknowledge.

The next morning I met Susie and her friends Becky and Carol at the equestrian center to ride horses along one of the club's many trails. The clouds had lightened overnight, and the sun poked through enough to highlight the ubiquitous yellow foliage of a Montana October. Golf Course Superintendent Don Tolson joined us for the hour-long ride along a cottonwood-lined lane, up through a grassy coulee to the sagebrush foothills, after which we visited the shooting center he also oversees.

Don grew up in Sheridan, Montana, and got into the golf business right out of college. He's been with Stock Farm since its inception, but watching him saddle his horse—rugged-looking, self-assured, and clearly at home—it was impossible to picture him dressed for the links. A passionate horseman and hunter, Don grew up shooting shotguns competitively; he proved the perfect person to take on a shooting facility once membership demand exceeded the practicality of renting a local shooting range by the day.

"We have about 55 to 60 active shooters, including Chuck Schwab, and lots of them are avid bird hunters," Don told me.

"Chuck is a big duck and bird hunter as well as a fly fisherman. A lot of the guys hunt and fish together, locally as well as trips to South Dakota for pheasants, and to Canada for waterfowl. It's a passion they also share with most of the staff. Hunting, fishing, and the outdoors really do bring us all together."

The shooting center lies at the uppermost end of the property, to prevent gunfire from affecting the rest of the club. While I didn't tour the brand-new, 10-station sporting clays course, I did see the five-stand course in action. Here the shooting stations are covered under one roof and designed for safety first. The targets, launched over a narrow valley that further mitigates the sound of gunfire, were a good mix of moderate to challenging shots. Stock Farm has two certified shooting instructors on hand, one being Don Tolson. I loved that the shooting center doesn't open in the spring until after the resident elk have finished calving. "Being hunters," said Don, "pretty much every staff member carries a binocular in their vehicle, so we're always up-to-date with what's happening with the elk."

In the afternoon Director of Golf Gary Nye took me to the Bitterroot River a short drive away to sample some of the area's blue-ribbon trout fishing. Flanked with golden aspens at every turn,

FIVE STAND IN ACTION

Guests can try their hand shooting clays at Stock Farm Club's Five Stand Shooting Centre.

The club is nestled into the land's contours and trees, preserving the spectacular vistas.



this medium-size river is stunning, easily accessible, and accounts for about 75 percent of member fishing days. The Blackfoot and Clark Fork Rivers, a bit farther from the club, account for the rest. I'm afraid Gary came up empty-handed due to my constant interruptions for photography. But since he's not going anywhere anytime soon, he'll recover. Having moved from Ohio five years ago for the job at Stock Farm, he's having a ball discovering the area's sporting opportunities.

Back at the clubhouse for my final meal, I took then-Executive Chef Toby McCracken's suggestion for trout on a bed of rice and morels. After 17 years at Stock Farm, Toby left last December for a new challenge, but my two dinners there were creatively prepared and superb tasting, the kind where you take small bites and chew deliberately. Toby's passions, other than fly-fishing, are cooking seafood and wild game, and at the clubhouse he's cooked everything from elk and antelope to ducks, grouse, pheasants, and doves. The quail dish he prepared the first evening was spectacular. No doubt his replacement will be well acquainted with the sportsman's palate.

One of the few advantages to eating alone, as I did that night, is being able to sit back and observe. What really impressed me was the good-natured familiarity between patrons and staff—not surprising with servers like Daniel, a human dynamo who flits around the dining room in a charismatic whirl, leaving a wake of smiles and laughter. Member-staff interaction is encouraged at Stock Farm, and it fosters a truly convivial atmosphere. The

Schwabs, whom I'm told take an active role in shaping every facet of the club, seem to understand that great amenities and facilities are ultimately joyless if you're stuck socializing with a bunch of stiff.

Early the following morning I closed the door to the William Clark Cabin, my lodging for the previous two nights, and loaded up for the trip back to the real world. To call this beautiful log and stone home a "cabin" is like calling an elephant a mammal without further qualification. One of 23 cabins located near the clubhouse, it is twice the size of my house, but perfect for accommodating large groups. These cabins are available for sale and/or rent to members and their guests. Members might need cabins themselves because many live offsite or out of town, and membership in Stock Farm Club is not predicated on owning property. In fact, one can live on the property and not belong to the club with all the attendant golf and other privileges.

Driving out of Stock Farm Club's main gate back toward Hamilton, it occurred to me that I'd just met a lot of folks who, like me, came to the West searching for a change in life and in so doing found home. As one member told me recently, "We love our privacy here, but we love our friends, too. This is such a welcoming place, and my husband, who has a real 'quack' problem, loves duck hunting with his friends at the club. I don't usually attach to places deeply or easily, but every time I fly in to Missoula from Minnesota, where we live most of the year, I really feel like I'm returning home." 🍂