

LIFE ON THE FLY

INSIDE SISTERS ON THE FLY, THE NATION'S LARGEST LADIES' SOCIAL AND ADVENTURE CLUB, WOMEN DISCOVER HOW TO BE GIRLS AGAIN—AND MUCH, MUCH MORE.

BY SUSAN L. EBERT

Big, beautiful brown trout spawn in the crystalline rivers of Montana's Big Sky Country, and at least one big, beautiful idea has spawned there, as well.

"Back in 1999," says Becky Clarke, "my sister, Maurrie, and I were celebrating with a glass of wine after one of us caught an 8-pound trout while on a fly-fishing trip with Maurrie's fishing guide son, Austin Lowder, who operates Sea and Stream Outfitters. The river and the countryside were just so beautiful, we thought, 'Let's just invite more friends and get them out fishing.'"

"When we started, Maurrie and I did everything," Becky continues. "We organized it, did all the shopping and cooking. We each pulled trailers, as we decided we wanted to take it all with us—to each have our own little private room—when we went fly fishing. We had down comforters, wonderful dishes, tables, and chairs. We'd be parked right by the river and be very comfortable, so we wouldn't have to get a motel room and then drive to the river."

"Our plan was to get women outdoors; it was a great concept," says Maurrie Sussman. "We started by asking friends to come fly fish and camp with us. We started with just one event a year, on two-week road trips so we could fish all the rivers in an area. It was dry camping (no electricity or water), Dutch ovens, outdoor cooking; very rustic. We called ourselves 'Sisters on the Fly.' I'm Sister #1, and Becky is Sister #2."

Today, Sisters on the Fly is the nation's largest women's outdoor adventure group, numbering more than 10,000 Sisters in all 50 states, as well as in Australia, England, France, and Japan. Of that number, nearly half are "active" members, meaning that they've paid the most recent year's dues.

The unique numbering system means that once a Sister, always a Sister; your number is yours forever.



Maurrie Sussman, Sister #1 prepares to cast a fly on a Sisters On The Fly outing.



And while Sisters on the Fly was born through a shared love of fly fishing, only about a third of the Sisters today are anglers.

“You don’t even need to own a trailer, although many of the women do,” says Becky. “More than anything, it’s a support group for women; it becomes very close to your heart. A Sister recently came up to me and said, ‘You don’t know what you have done for my life. I was at my wit’s end, didn’t know where to go or what to do after my husband divorced me. I found Sisters on the Fly, and you have just supported me through everything.’”

Robyn Volkening, Sister #1600, who recently moved to Texas from Colorado and hits the open road in “Shasta Luego,” her 1962 Shasta 16sc, joined Sisters on the Fly about seven years ago, attending her first event, the SOTF Steamboat Springs Rocky Mountain High, with her 1970 Oberlin painted to resemble a log cabin.

“I like to camp off-grid,” she says, “and horseback ride, fly fish, ski, hike, mountain bike. I like meeting other women with similar interests. Still, for me, it’s really more about the network than the events. From everything to where to have dinner in a strange town to who to call when your truck breaks down in the middle of nowhere, you can count on Sisters to help.”

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CORPS VALUES

Sisters don’t limit themselves to just helping other Sisters, though. When Hurricane Harvey nearly scoured the idyllic island town of Port Aransas off the map, Leann Moore, Sister #2011, knew that the Sisters needed to help. She talked with a number of Sisters across the country, and within 36 hours they formed the SOTF Sister Corps.

“We started posting on social media that we wanted to do something to help,” says Leann, “and coordinated through Suzy Gray, Sister #6398, whose Port Aransas property was unscathed. Suzy served as liaison with the Port Aransas Chamber of Commerce, and we organized our mission—with sort of a Habitat for Humanity/Peace Corps attitude—for November, after some water and electric services had been restored.”

Leann and Sherry Gibbons, Sister #121, served as co-chairs of the Sister Corps. “We first set up a First Aid Station,” Leann says, “and had several sisters who are ER nurses and one who is a physician. Then, we set up a Base Camp at the Port Aransas RV Park, which was still limping along but was able to let us use their recreational pavilion for food service.

“This was one of the most marvelous team efforts I’ve ever been a part of,” says Leann. “We had about 80 Sisters come to help, many from Texas, but eight from California, two from Maine, and others from Washington, Oregon, Colorado, Kansas, Minnesota, Florida, West Virginia, and Georgia. Sisters did everything

from demolition work, tearing out sheetrock, and operating chainsaws to debris and garbage removal, meal preparation, nursing care, and clerical work.

Future activities for the Sister Corps include state park and river cleanups as well as being poised to respond to natural disasters.

SOTF’s other philanthropic efforts include its support of Casting for Recovery, a non-profit that promotes fly fishing as a healing process for breast cancer survivors, and its own foundation, the Maizie Morrison Foundation, named for “Amazing Maizie,” Maurrie’s and Becky’s outgoing, adventuresome mother. The foundation provides grant money and scholarships for women and children in need.

In addition, Maurrie started “Quilts on the Fly” in 2007 to provide quilts imbued with nurturing group love, hugs, and blessings for Sisters—and Sisters’ family members, friends, and even pets—going through cancer treatments.

“Each quilt has a personal patch hand-embroidered with a name, then hand-stitched to back of the quilt,” Maurrie says. “If you ever received and returned a Quilt on the Fly, then your patch is included with other patches on that lovely, blessed quilt that has comforted, kept warm, been held and cuddled, and sopped up endless tears. All of that love and prayers are held in one quilt.”

In the past 11 years, SOTF has sent out more than 200 quilts, most of which are returned so that they can be passed on to another Sister in need of comfort.

COMMON THREADS

Having been a military wife myself—my first husband, now deceased, was an Air Force RF-4 Phantom pilot who I met while he was stationed at Bergstrom Air Force Base in Austin—I sensed another common thread among the Sisterhood. Back in the day, the military families around us tended to be joyful, outgoing (even if they were naturally introverts), able to make friends at the speed of sound, and the first to pitch in when a call for help went out. After all, we shared an unspoken truth: Each morning that your spouse walked out the door might be the last.

“You’re right,” says Maurrie. “Maizie was a military wife, as my dad, Jesse, was a Marine colonel. I went to 12 different schools growing up, but Maizie had a knack for making friends, and making everything an adventure.”

Kate Dunbar, Sister #5267, shares this military heritage. “My husband is former military and my eldest son is stationed at Fort Bliss,” she tells me. Kate has twin 10-year-olds at home, and takes care of her mother, who has vascular dementia.

“Joining Sisters on the Fly five years ago means so much more to me than fishing,” Kate says. “It’s a place for me to find my own tribe. Whatever you’re going through, you can find Sisters who have been in the trenches—buried parents, husbands, even children—who can listen to you and value your feelings without giving judgement. It’s given me my ‘me’ time, and makes me a better daughter, wife, and mother.”



OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM THE TOP: Sister #2 Becky Clarke helps to show off a fellow Sister’s healthy catch; Sisters on a ride at Wyoming’s Hole In The Wall (photo ©2017 Sam Sherman); Sisters enjoying cocktail hour at the Junk Gypsy Wander Inn gathering; a Cowgirl caravan.



Sister #2 Becky Clarke (left) has a laugh with fellow Sisters (photo ©2017 Sam Sherman).

SOTF even has a patch for “Sisters Who Served,” available to all of the Sisters who served out country in the military, both past and present. It’s arguably the most serious of the dozens of SOTF patches, which run the gamut from individual state patches to ones for newly acquired skills—whether it be catch-and-release fishing, cattle-branding, outdoor cooking and the like to more tongue-in-cheek “new skills” such as the pottying outdoors, cigar smoking, trailer jack-knifing, and the Naked Nymph patch, which, ahem, “covers” everything from streaking through the campground nekkid to skinny-dipping.

FIND YOUR TRIBE

Most of all, SOTF lives up to its motto, “We have more fun than anyone.” The explosive growth of the organization makes it more and more possible for each new Sister to find, and network with, other Sisters who share her interests. With myriad events across the country every weekend to choose from, adventure awaits around every bend.

Want to go junking, or just get together for supper? Want to hike and camp in a national park? Want to up your Dutch-oven cooking game? With a members’ activity calendar chock-a-block with options, you can find a group to fit any interest.

Beyond the member-hosted events, the “Go Sister” trips-of-a-lifetime present women the chance to get outside their comfort zone in a supportive environment on week-long trips. Some of the annual events include international travel (past events include Costa Rica, Mexico, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand), the Cowgirl Cattle Drive on a working Western ranch, Cowgirl Boot Camp, Cowgirl College, and a plethora of fly-fishing trips from the blue-ribbon trout streams in Montana and Wyoming to Oregon’s famed Rogue River.

Skills-based trips include a dog-mushing adventure in Minnesota, a welding class and the annual Western Ranch Life Photography Workshop, led by acclaimed Western photographer Adam Jahiel.

Sisters on the Fly has become much bigger and far more robust than Maurrie and Becky ever could have imagined that day on the river long ago.

“I’ve surprised myself with how tolerant I am,” says Maurrie. “Nothing upsets me. I’ve learned that I don’t give up. I don’t look at this as ‘selling a product;’ it’s more like an open invitation to come play with us. I love every minute of it, and I’m still happiest when I’m heading down the highway on the next adventure.”

So which sister caught the humungous trout that day nearly 20 years ago? Your guess is as good as mine, and neither Maurrie nor Becky will say. After all, when you’re Sisters, what happens on the river, stays on the river.



Sister #5267 Kate Dunbar and her 1962 Shasta SC, “Ellie.”



Junk Gypsy Wander Inn

TRICKED-OUT TRAILERS

What began as a way for “river rats in cowgirl hats” to sleep streamside on their own fluffy feather beds and dine on their own fine china whilst casting about for trout has arguably become the signature statement of Sisters on the Fly. From the spartan to the sublime, each trailer is as unique as the Sister who owns it.

Earlier this year, COWGIRL magazine Publisher Ken Amorosano caught up with Sisters on the Fly on its four-night campout on the grounds on the Junk Gypsy Wander Inn in Texas during Round Top Antiques Week. The Sisters—from as far away as Washington State—offered peeks inside the more than 75 vintage trailers they call their “homes away from home.” Some highlights:

Sister #2 Becky Clarke’s 1956 Westerner “Amazing Maizie”

“I like to redo trailers. This one came in on a flatbed, with tires flat and every window broken. The cowgirl on the side is Maurrie’s and my mother, Maizie, who passed away a few years ago at the age of 93. Maizie showed up at an SOTF event without any [party] clothes, and the Sisters all went running to their trailers to help her dress up. Red Solo cup in hand, she chose the red bra and red tutu outfit that she’s depicted wearing here.”

Sister #5919 Carol Hayes’ 1978 Airstream Argosy Minuet “Monarch”

“Years ago, I saw a field full of vintage trailers with gals in tutus on my way to the farmers’ market in McKinney, Texas. From across the field, the trailers looked like grown-up dollhouses, and as I gawked, the women beckoned me over and introduced themselves. I’ve been hooked ever since. I sold my first trailer about six months ago, after a two-year search to find this one, which has a no-rot, all-aluminum interior and floor.”

Sister #2348 Lisa Mora’s 1949 Crown “Rosie”

“I was in Reno for the Hot August Nights nostalgia car show when my ‘trailer radar’ led me to this little silver bubble with a ‘For Sale’ sign on it parked outside a Salvation Army store and I bought it on the spot. Since buying my 1953 Hudson Hornet, ‘Doc,’ a few years back, I’ve towed Miss Rosie more than 22,000 miles. I’ll spend most of this summer going from event to event, probably logging another 5,000 to 6,000 miles.”

Sister #5528 DeBorah Loomis’ 2015 Shasta Airflyte Reissue “Vintage Vagabond”

“The 2015 Airflyte Reissues were all pre-orders, but I got a call from a dealer whose sale fell through. He told me he would sell it to me, adding, ‘But you have to be here in the morning.’ I live in Georgia and the dealer was in Indiana. Within the next two hours, I had sold my car, bought a truck, and started driving. I got there by the next morning. My grandkids say, ‘Grandma got a camper with wings to make her go faster.’”

Sister #5380 Bonnie Shafto’s 1969 Lakeland “Gracie”

“She’s named for my grandma, a free spirit who loved to tell us kids that ‘life is invigorating’ just before she dove into the icy ocean, coaxing us to follow her. I completely rebuilt the inside about five years ago—and even though the outside’s Western with the bottom half in a bandanna pattern, as I now live in Texas, the inside is beach-themed to pay homage to childhood summers on the Jersey shore, as I’m originally a ‘Joisey goil.’”



“Amazing Maizie”



“Monarch”



“Rosie”



“Vintage Vagabond”



“Gracie”