

Pack Mule Memories

By Don Mc Daniel

Yosemite National Park in Northern California, with its awe inspiring views, lush meadows and countless miles of riding and hiking trails into the high sierra back country has long been a major attraction for outdoor enthusiasts.

In the 1940s trails were built and maintained by trail crews. The hearty group of seasonal workers under the supervision of a trail crew boss consisted of a dozen or so workers and a camp cook. They started their work in the valley as soon as the snow began melting, living in government tent houses and eating in the government mess hall located behind Yosemite Village, close to the mule barns in an area known as Government Center.

As the trail work in the valley was completed, the crews worked their way up into the high country, repairing washouts, rock slides and the like. Then as the hike to and from Government Center became too time consuming, trail crew camps were established. They were supplied and moved from one location to the next by pack mules under the semi control of a mild mannered group of gentlemen known as government packers.

Each packer had a string of pack mules issued to him, and as part of his job description he saw to the care and well being of his dozen or so charges, whether out in the high country or at home in the large wooden mule barn close by Government Center. And because of his constant contact with his string each packer knew them intimately.

He groomed them daily; saw that their pack saddles and pads were clean and ready for use. He knew how each mule had to be shod by a very large blacksmith of eastern European descent. This slightly off center blacksmith's joy of life came from nailing small pieces of shaped iron onto the bottoms of the hooves of any particular animal who was not entirely enthralled with



the whole concept. The tougher the battle, the more enjoyable the process to the blithering blacksmith, who was by the way a professional wrestler in San Francisco in his leisure.

Most of the mules were content to carry almost any sort of load if the load were not too heavy or clumsy; in those instances a simple lack of forward motion or a passive lay down manifestation was a sure signal of their displeasure and the loads were adjusted accordingly.

Each packer had his area in the park to cover, this way he grew to know his part of the park and its secrets. He knew the locations of the high country meadows where he and his string could safely camp overnight. He knew which shortcuts to take and which not to take. He also knew the trail crews that depended on him for their food, their mail and their personal needs.

One of the most difficult obstacles encountered in the high country were the short, steep switchbacks in the trails. The mules had to scramble to maintain their footing and also to make a sharp turn at the

end of every switchback. If the mules were tied head to tail the situation soon became a disaster of the first magnitude. Consequently most strings were not connected to each other once outside the complexities of civilization.

Great care was taken by each packer to introduce his charges to his particular concept of muleology and once his imaginary role of leadership was established, he did everything within his power to maintain status quo, although it was almost always a break-even situation.

Seniority played an important part in the selection of each string, and in as much as I was starting my third season in the valley, although still in my teens, I was able to pick the same string of mules that I had worked with for the two previous seasons and the same area to work in.

My lead mule, Bob, was a thousand pound, speckled grey, even tempered individual until some ill advised member of the string decided to take Bob's place at the head of the group out on the trail, then Old Bob couldn't keep them from trying, but he

most certainly kept them from succeeding.

In true packer tradition, I always added the choicest of morsels ordered by the trail crew on my previous trip to the top of Bob's load. Items such as fresh fruit, canned pineapple, canned tomatoes etc. were then within reach should my desire for a snack become unbearable.

The portable camps usually consisted of a large cook tent and several two-man tents for the rest of the crew. The crew's food was prepared in the cook tent on a portable wood burning stove, usually by someone of doubtful parentage, a criminal background, in most instances referred to as "Cookie."

Cookie's one and only area of responsibility was the "Haute Cuisine" which he prepared three times daily for the ravenous crew, who in all likelihood could have consumed the cans and packages in which the current offerings were originally packed. Fresh meat of any sort was considered "Bear Bait" and was to be avoided. Fresh fruit and vegetables were high on the priority list but difficult to pack and even more difficult to preserve.

Powdered eggs, powdered milk, dehydrated potatoes, and a variety of canned foods that stagger the imagination were included in the camp menu plan. And a camp cook who could combine these ingredients into something remotely edible was considered a prize possession with every effort being made to keep the often cantankerous, culinary caballero content.

In some cases, if the supply trip was short and the weather cool or there about, the packers would crack a few dozen eggs into a container, wrap the container in wet burlap to keep the contents cool. The well mixed mess was then delivered to the grateful trail crew for a hearty meal of fresh scrambled eggs and canned meat.

The crew slept in either their tents or in the open, on the ground, using pine needles or pine boughs for mattresses. A campfire every night was a must, and the crews gathered campfire wood as needed. Cookie gathered his own fire wood for his portable wood burning cook stove and, to say the least, was severely reprimanded by the rest

of the crew and the crew boss if he so much as turned a covetous eye toward the camp woodpile.

Each camp was treated as a base camp. Every day, the crew hiked up or down the trail to begin their labors. They carried a bag lunch, a canteen of water and a hand tool of choice. Leaving any wooden handled tools behind at the end of a day's work was an open invitation to the local critters. If left unattended overnight, porcupines, bears, beavers and even deer would lick or chew on the wooden handles for the sweaty, salty residue left behind by the crew's hard working hands.

The crews ended their day back in camp around dark, having consumed a bag lunch prepared by Cookie, washing it down with the cold water from their canteen or the ice cold water from a convenient stream. Supper was eaten from tin plates with basic hand tools along with plenty of good strong camp coffee sipped from tin cups. Then time would be spent around the campfire, complaining about Cookie and his lack of culinary skills, telling half truths about ones manhood or exploits, maybe another cup of camp coffee, then into their bedrolls for another night under the stars.

Personal hygiene, to say the least, was almost non-existent. The only source of water was usually a local stream fed by the

snowfields and glaciers further up on the mountain. Only the bravest of souls would use part of their one day off per week for a quick bath. Then only after building a roaring fire alongside the wilderness bathtub in an attempt to coax some warmth and circulation back into frozen extremities after their short-lived skinny dip.

The even more foolhardy bathed inside their well worn work clothes, washing their clothing first then themselves. The wet clothing was hung to dry on a convenient branch close to the fire and the shivering simpleton would hopefully have a reserve set of dry gear available to him.

Generally speaking, most of the crew would spend their day off mending and washing their clothes and airing out their bedrolls. Additional chores around camp also included bringing in fire wood for the nightly campfire and camp clean up. Often, a poker game would commence, using large wooden matches as poker chips. For those not interested in the gaming aspect of their swinging lives, a little sack time was always welcome. Some took advantage of the time off to write to family or friends and incoming and outgoing mail service was provided by the government packers when they moved the camps or delivered fresh supplies every two weeks or so.

My territory was the southeast part of

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Yosemite, as far as the southeast park boundaries, up over Red Peak Pass at almost twelve thousand feet, past Upper and Lower Ottoway Lakes to the South Fork of the Merced River. This trip usually took three days in, a day or two layover, depending on the condition of the mules then another three days out. If it was necessary to move the camp that added another two or three days.

One day, well into the season, one of the packers had injured himself and was unable to take needed supplies to the crew working the trails on the northwest side of the park down in the Grand Canyon of the Tuolumne. Bob McGregor, the boss packer, volunteered my string to do the resupply, and as I was considered to be a part of that string my services were also requested.

The area was very remote and I had never ridden it, so there was some concern on my part, "It's easy, just head down the switchbacks to the bottom, and when you get to a fork in the trail, hang a right and follow your nose. The first big meadow

you come to, camp there overnight then the next day you'll be in camp".

My mules, myself and the supplies were delivered to the trail head by truck, then with the ill advised self confidence of youth we headed down the steep switchback trail toward the bottom of the canyon. From the first, things did not go well; the pack string seemed to be uncomfortable in their new surroundings, frequently stopping. A few loads shifted and had to be repacked and the steep, rocky, downhill trail took its toll also.

As it does in the high country, night fell with a resounding thud, finding me still on the rugged steep trail and hours behind schedule, looking for the bottom of the canyon and that right turn that was so all important. I had a small flashlight that I used sparingly and eventually the trail flattened out and I located the right fork in the trail.

After my right hand turn and traveling several miles, the trail became almost impassable, it was very narrow with no room for passing or turning around and my flash-

light had long ago died a lingering death. The mules were increasingly unhappy with this turn of events and at one point, my riding mule, Soldier, refused to move on any further, despite my urgent "requests"

I had several choices; stay where I was at until daybreak, get off and lead the group on foot, or use some of my wooden matches to see what the trail in front of us looked like. I struck a match moved forward on foot for a few feet to look at the trail, and there was no trail, a huge wash out had destroyed fifty or so feet of the trail, leaving a small, seemingly bottomless canyon in its wake. Soldier's refusal to move forward had once again proven that mule mentality exceeded mere human judgment by several score.

Spending the night there at "Trails End" on a narrow, unknown, remote trail was not an attractive option. I had to get the train turned around and go back to the fork in the trail, then decide on the next move. Turning the mules around presented a minor problem; the front of the string would then become the rear of the string and vice versa.

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The fact that the mules were not tied head to tail became another dilemma, because if I could eventually get everyone turned around safely, I didn't want to leave part of the group behind.

The mules seemed to know what I was trying to accomplish and as I first turned Soldier around then Bob, I felt the top load on Bob and found that the mesh sack of apples I had placed there for snacking purposes was almost empty due to a large tear, probably caused by an overhanging tree branch on the hell trail.

Eventually the entire string was turned around on that narrow dark trail, tied head to tail and grasping the lead rope on the now lead mule I commenced to lead all of us to safety on my hands and knees, blindly groping for the apple trail that Bob had so thoughtfully left behind. Of course with several head of mules there was also a copious amount of other sign left behind and in my blind groping process I occasionally encountered some of that sign with my bare hands and just considered it a blessing and part of our path to safety.

That the fork in the trail was eventually reached was a tribute to the now exhausted mules. I found a small clearing next to the river, pulled the packs off the mules, tied them to several trees around the clearing and with my last matches started a small camp fire, and by firelight led them down to the river for water, then filled their nose bags with a good feeding of grain.

The next morning arrived as it usually does, even in a deep canyon in the middle of the wilderness. The mules were again watered and fed, saddled and loads lashed on. Once more on our way to the trail crew camp, taking the correct fork in the trail and following our noses as we were instructed to do, after a very long days ride, we arrived at camp and were greeted enthusiastically by the entire crew.

This particular crew had a Cookie named Ray. A rather rotund gentleman with a well waxed handle bar mustache, dressed to the hilt in stripped, denim, bib overalls, and a plaid shirt. A full blown semi-white chef's hat covered a mass of long, dirty, brown hair, with the top of the well used, seldom

washed, chefs chapeau collapsed over his left ear and his watery left eye. His thick British accent completed his rather individualistic image. One could say that "Cookie" always had an unmistakable "Air" about him, but no one could ever figure where or how he acquired the adult beverage and how he kept it concealed from the rest of the rowdy, hard drinking crew.

Ray insisted on spending his nightly trip to la-la land on a fold up, portable, steel framed cot with its lumpy, complimenting mattress. Since camp, crew, and equipment all had to be moved to the next camp site by pack mules, it was almost mission impossible to take a folding, wood burning cook stove apart, load it onto an ill tempered, long eared, scaly hided, slab sided, thousand pound pack animal along with Ray's folding cot and lumpy mattress.

In the opinion of Bob Barr, the trail crew boss, Ray was a half way decent cookie and every effort should be put forth to make him feel wanted, warm and fuzzy, so the whole iron bed issue was reluctantly accepted. The anguished protests of the mild mannered mule mushers whose job it was to lash the entire contents of the camp onto the backs of a bunch of bucking, squalling, long eared beasts fell on deaf ears.

This was the unknown situation I faced

when I arrived in camp two days late, a dollar short and mad and mean enough to call Jesse James a nasty name. The supplies were unloaded, the mules turned out into a nearby fenced meadow with lots of grass and water. And plans made to move everything to the next campsite.

Among the crew's favorite snacks were raisins, packed in small individual boxes and included in the bag lunches for the hard working crew. These small wrinkled bits of ambrosia were the source of innumerable hours of plotting and a long uninterrupted series of petty thefts.

The acquisition of these choice morsels by the undaunted, imaginative, hardy group of outdoorsmen was the sport of the day. Of course, it was Cookie Ray who had the onerous job of protecting these much sought after bits of bliss, making them last until the next supply train delivered more nuggets of nourishment. Ray's favorite method of guardianship was to put the cases of raisins under the much despised, fold up, portable, steel framed cot with the lumpy mattress on which he laid his overfed person every night.

The crew was working the trail up around Ranchiera Falls, and due to the extreme wilderness, the local bear population was becoming a problem, due in most part to the bears' lack of exposure to humans,



which led to a lack of respect on their part and also increased their inquisitive bear nature.

Because of Cookie Ray's innate fear of anything remotely resembling a wild thing, one of the trail crew had to stay behind in camp to chase the ever inquisitive bears away. "Yaaghh" breaking the critters was one answer. This intricate set of humane behaviors consisted of several stages. Upon a sighting, the camp guardian would locate an implement of some sort, usually a long handled shovel. He would then grasp the implement by the handle and bang it against a convenient tree, producing a much desired clanging effect. At the same time, he would vocalize a sound roughly equivalent to Yaagh !!! Under normal circumstances, this would sufficiently traumatize Mrs. /Mr. Bear resulting in a hasty retreat from whence they came. The camp guardian would continue the banging and vocalizations until the offending animal disappeared into the surrounding wilderness.

In this particular instance however, there was a half-grown brown bear that refused to be deterred from his appointed rounds. This young bear stayed pretty much concealed while there was activity in camp, but when the crew left, he would boldly walk into camp, sniffing and exploring the hostile territory of the invading hordes to his heart's content.

One dark night, a night to be fondly remembered by all of us who were present, this same young bear infiltrated the camp while the crew slumbered. His infiltration plan was brilliantly conceived and executed. Unknown and unseen he crept inside the cook tent, the target of his previous reconnaissance. This was no target of opportunity, this was a designated, special op with a pre-determined target— Ray's Raisin Cache.

In the raisin acquisition phase of his operation, Mr. Bear went down on all fours into his Best "Sneak and Peak" profile and inserted under Cookie Ray's fold up, portable, steel framed cot with the lumpy mattress to the treasures stored there.

The cot and its horrified occupant ended

up on the intruder's back, but intent on his midnight acquisition the young bear paid no heed.

This was not the case with Cookie Ray. He awoke to the gyrations of his beloved bed (now on the bears' back), heard the slobbering sounds of Mr. Bear, intent on enjoying his long awaited raisin repast and was instantly aware of the musky scent that had invaded the cook tent along with Mr. Bear, and immediately reached the decision that there was a problem in paradise.

The crew was awakened by the sub-human sounds emanating from the cook tent in concert with the grunts and growls of a large animal fully engrossed in enjoying a midnight snack. The cook tent flap was open, and by the light of the dwindling campfire we were witness to a sight that will forever be etched into this old mule packer's memory.

The bear's body was half under Ray's cot, just enough to raise it a few inches whenever the bear reached for another raisin snack. Cookie Ray lay on his back, gripping each rail of his beloved cot in a death hold. His face was toward us and the opening in the tent. His eyes were shut tight. His mouth was wide open. His face was contorted and resembled the color of the almost white long underwear he was wearing. Tears were cascading down the horrified cookie's face and his wide-open mouth was emitting those unearthly sounds, which had awakened the entire crew

What to do? If we Yaagh the bear, he in all likelihood would destroy the cook tent in his efforts to escape. If we didn't chase the bear off, poor ole Ray would probably have a coronary. Bob Barr, the crew boss, made the decision to just wait it out and see what would happen. After a few minutes of gluttony Mr. Bear had apparently consumed all of the raisins. He backed from under the cot, noticed us, then ambled out of the cook tent emitting what we thought to be a few bear burps and disappeared into the woods with a definite swagger and not so much as backward glance.

Next morning, instead of the welcome smells of breakfast coming from the cook

tent, we were greeted by a string of profane language that was a wonder to behold. The tent flap flew open and out came Cookie Ray, his clothes in wild disarray. His hair tussled, his face almost purple with rage. In his arms he cradled his fold up, portable, steel framed cot and it's badly stained, wet, lumpy mattress.

As we watched in wonder, Ray staggered toward a nearby small, rugged, canyon; arriving at the edge of the canyon he first flung the sacred cot out into space then the soggy, lumpy mattress followed, with basically the same trajectory, to be swallowed up by the heavy forest and rocky wilderness. The hysterical Cookie's simultaneous, screaming epitaphs concerning all bears in general and one bear in particular were an almost endless masterpiece of profanity, with the same wondrous words seldom being heard more than one time.

Camp was moved, the supplies were moved again and when all was settled, Cookie Ray tied one of my lash ropes around the cases of raisins that I had packed in. He threw the end of the rope over a convenient limb and hoisted the large cartons of ubiquitous comestible's high into the air well above any belligerent bruin's reach. Once more his unprintable eulogy of epithets regarding the location and the unavailability of his cache were considered by all to be the pinnacle of profanity.

My return trip was uneventful. I stopped at the correct meadow for an overnight, stopped once more at the wrong fork in the trail and cut down a pine tree felling it across the trail to hell to block any future visitors, then a day later at the trail head the trucks arrived to take my entire string and myself back to the big wooden mule barn in the valley for a few days of rest.

With the passing of years, I've often times wondered if any one would ever discover that cursed cot and smelly old mattress at the bottom of a nameless canyon up there in the high country, and if they did, what story would their imagination conjure up? Not the real one I'd bet!