

“Get My Feet Wet!” “Are You Crazy?”

By Ed Haefliger

In a mixed group of new and experienced trail riders and packers, a great conversation starter is the question, “How do you deal with a water crossing?” That should get the room rocking. We have all had an adventure or two on the bank of a stream, looking across it at where we had planned on continuing to, only to have the plan dumped into the field change file by a reluctant mule or horse. “You devil, Ed, I was trying to get this out of my mind!” The only ones of us that have never been there are the ones who only ride on groomed bridle trails or who ride a critter who someone else has had this adventure with before and won, convincing them that it is safe to do so. There are so many parts in your horse or mule’s mind that do not normally add up to “it is a good idea to put my feet into a moving stream of water”.

I do believe that a lot of this has to do with the way they reason things out. I have had a green horse or mule take one look at even a very small stream and very clearly declare, “I am not going one step **onto** that!” Onto, not into, is very likely how this is computing in their mind. They may have never survived the experience of stepping onto/into something moving, thus meaning, they could not be sure of the surface, “is this solid or will I sink out-of-sight? This can’t be safe.” Think back at the first time we ever stepped up and onto an escalator (moving staircase). That didn’t look like a good idea at all! Nevertheless, because we have the memory, that means we survived and the next one was not as great a shock. If you do not have this memory, that means you “beat feet to the closest fixed (standing still) staircase, normally in the fireproof smoke tower”.

This, then, is what we have to over-



Maudie checking out the water crossing at Donahue Creek in the Olympic National Park. I let her look! She does this in any situation she worries about. Her checking it out is my Life Insurance policy payment.

come. Once they are gently convinced to try stepping onto/into a stream, then they get the idea that it is into not onto. I have had to give them time, along with several more water crossings, to understand that into and not onto will persist. They may keep going back to the original picture in their mind and become fearful at the next water crossing again, but time and more experience will change this picture to a guarded one, but a whole lot safer one.

I believe in giving my riding animals a chance to look over anything that may concern them, before they must travel in, over, or through it. This by itself is a training aid, but it is also a whole lot safer for you to have your

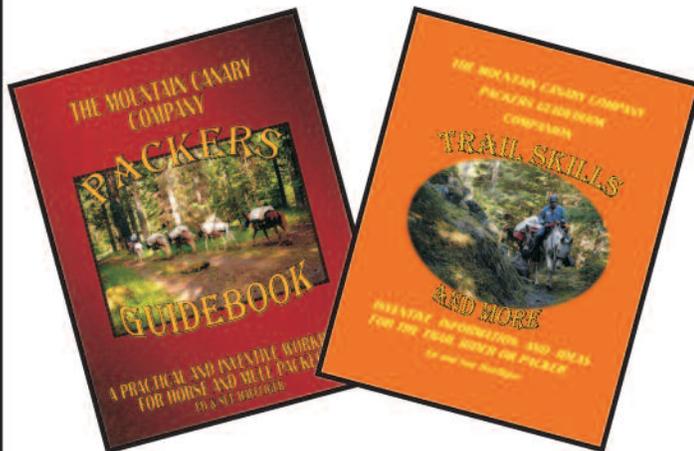
horse or mule secure in their mind, that it is ok to venture where you just asked them to go. I have known some riders that insist their animals never look around or have an opinion. To these folks, I say, “You are riding alone!” I personally prefer to ride with one more set of eyes and an additional mind of which are both set on a safe trip, in my company. I have had a riding mule figure out a dangerous situation long before I could. There is a serious point of reason to be added to this mix and this is, how well trained is this critter you plan on trusting and are you experienced enough to understand what they are concerned with? You are the captain of this hairy ship. When your four legged lookout watch stander warns about danger, you are well advised to take notice and check it out. Following this inspection, you will make the decision on how to deal with it. You are in command.

Many years ago Sue and I rode up the South Fork of the Skokomish Trail, headed for the Church Creek Shelter in The Olympic National Forest, here in Washington State. To get to the shelter, it was necessary to cross the river, just within sight of the shelter. Sue was riding a very experienced Ms. Kitty and I was riding a young eight-year-old Maudie (who had never crossed any water before). “Yes, I knew I had work ahead of me!” The river was running fast and very cold, from the spring runoff of snow just a bit above us. It was not a very deep crossing and not at all that wide. The water was well below Sue’s stirrups as they crossed over on a great gravel bar void of any large rocks. Now it was Maudie’s and my turn. “No way am I going across that river!” “Ok, Maud. Here we go!” Now the training, which I was expecting, began. She danced, she fidgeted,

she moved away from the chosen spot to another spot to make her stand, "oh, happy days!" This move was her undoing. If at all possible, I never allow the reluctant trainee to move out of sight of the spot I need to win on. However, that plan was now out the window! I kept telling her to move forward into the water, at the same time pressing her with my heels and reining her head to look at the object of this pressure, the water. "Ok! Ok! I'm going," and she did. With one giant leap, she propelled herself forward and into the river. Stay with me now! Remember she moved from the original chosen location and with this leap she landed into a hole, not the shallow gravel bar. That icy cold river water not only filled my boots, but in addition, it also gave her one heck of a surprise, as it froze all of her delicate parts. Needless to say, she never jumped into any water crossings like that again. The moral of this story is; we had better always be ready for their response to our request. Remember, this is a fearful adventure for them and to comply with your orders, they may very likely over react. During your compelling efforts, do not put yourself into such a state that you could loosen your seat and get dumped. Oops, that was not in the plan!

When it is necessary to make a water crossing, be very careful to choose the safest possible location. In photo #2: Maudie and I are slipping into a very small and shallow stream crossing at Donahue Creek. However, take a good look at the surrounding landscape. Those big rocks and all of that huge broken timber were brought into the area by the force of the winter and spring runoff. Also in this photo, the high water marks tell a story of a different tone than the crossing we are in. This is not a crossing, though it is reasonably short, to be messed with when it is running high. Be careful when you are picking any crossing, you may miss hidden dangers, such as a hole

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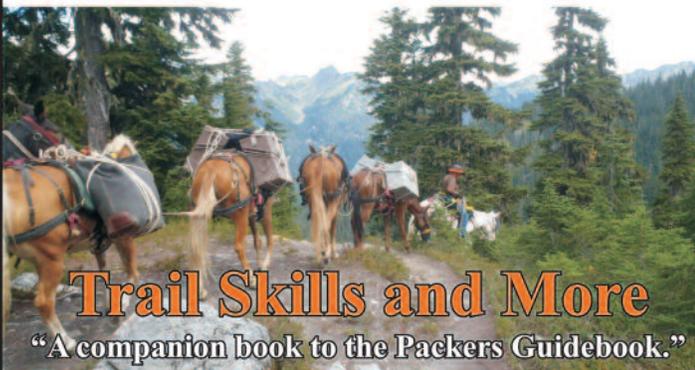


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Crossing Donahue Creek. Check out the volume and size of the debris. Some of this material has blocked this crossing before. This is the last kind of dangerous material you wish to share a high water crossing with!

next to a big rock, covered under a rifle. Pay attention, worry a bit, and do not be in too big of a hurry to jump into a water crossing that you are not convinced is 100% safe. I have called it off before, after sitting down next to a crossing and wondering about its safety. However, once you step into a dicey water crossing, you may not be able to turn around to get out of it, until you hopefully make the other side.

As I sat down and wrote this piece I had so many interesting stories of water crossing adventures, that there was no way to put them all in. There have been some times that I thought it would be wise to wear a life jacket. However that may be like wearing a parachute as you climbed aboard a squirrely critter, maybe a bit of overkill!

Ed Haefliger

“In every case, the goal of intellectual life was to understand in order to teach others, to enable the next generation to learn what you yourself have mastered and to build on it.”(Quote: Unknown author)

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