

EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED

By Colonel (Ret.) Craig L. Carlson, USA



Colonel (Ret.) Craig L. Carlson

If you ever decide to take a pack mule trip into the mountains, anywhere, expect the unexpected. With a string of stock things can change in a heartbeat. If you have the right mindset, the challenges can be educational and make the trip better than you ever expected. Sometimes you learn more about yourself and the “sand” you have left than you ever expected.

When I contacted my forty-three-year-old son about this trip, I told him this was my “last hurrah” and I wanted to include him in it. The last twenty years have seen a steady decline in my joint health including a spine injury that required fusing L3-5 plus some specific additional attentions almost two years ago. It seemed this trip was now, or never. Having been an active outdoorsman and soldier all my life, this opportunity could wait no longer.

I had a long-term dream of a trail ride “bucket list” item that needed to be performed before I was too old. I wanted to include my unsuspecting fireman, son, who never rode mules or fly fished. We ended up having a lifetime bonding experience. This trek, despite its challenges, exceeded all my expectations. It was not easy, and it was painful at sixty-six years old, but I would do this again given the

same turn of events.

Many people think taking a pack mule trip in the Bob Marshall Wilderness is a “Disneyland” experience. It is NOT. This was a seventy-mile fly fishing trip along the South Fork of the Flathead River, the Flathead River, and the White River. We forded over twenty-five streams and rivers not counting hundreds of small springs. The trip was on small horse/mule trails through forests, rough terrain, steep slopes, and mountains crossing the Continental Divide. Risks to life and limb must be signed away to make this trek because anything can happen with a string of pack animals and area wildlife that is NOT a petting zoo. You accept all risks personally and cannot hold the outfitters accountable for anything that happens. Anything from wasps, wild animals, to a blown away hat, can cause a reaction from the animals you are riding so you must stay alert. This trip is about potential saddle sores, body aches, and endurance. It is not for the faint of heart or the infirm.

My son and I were lucky to get an 1890s version of the trek because we were just four men with nine horses and mules that Teddy Roosevelt would have approved of. We slept on the ground with our own air mattresses, sleeping

bags in a two-man tent and bathed with wet wipes or in the streams. I requested mules for me and my son to ride before the trip. The outfitter accommodated us, and I was pleased with that decision.

My mule was a 16.2 hands (five foot six at the shoulder) high monster that I had to mount using a stump to reach the stirrup. My own mule is only 14.2 hands so this one was eight inches taller. To add insult to injury, her name was Sissy. She was a comfortable companion for the trek, but I had to slide off her at the end of the day and recover from the ride. It was like sliding down a wall.

The first day was an eighteen-mile trip that was grueling on old bones. You will feel every injury you ever had by the end of that first day, plus, my son, got saddle sores from riding his mule, Ruth, but never complained. Outhouses are constructed in the most primitive ways, but privacy is provided by the distance to the campsite and a small nylon enclosure. Unfortunately, the first night I destroyed the flimsy aluminum “TV tray crapper chair” when I put my almost two hundred forty-pound leverage on the back to push myself up. I ended up taking down the nylon enclosure while toppling over on my back with my boots and pants over my head around my ankles. Luckily, I was not in the hole. To my embarrassment, I had to roll over and get up on my hands and knees to go back and report the damage to the outfitters who began erecting wooden log “crappers” using the saved plastic toilet seat for the rest of

the trip.

The scenery in the Bob Marshall Wilderness is intoxicating. The sound of Timber Wolves howling at night was exhilarating as well as the owls hooting. The mountains and crystal-clear streams and rivers were beautiful and ever changing. The stars at night were more plentiful and bigger than I have ever seen including on cruise ships. We lucked out and had a meteor shower that was breathtaking. Before we called it a night, we counted over twenty-five shooting stars, and one was the best I ever witnessed. You cannot adequately describe the beauty of a night sky in a clear Bob Marshall Wilderness experience. The sky is worth the trip because the stars do not compete with any ambient lighting. You are truly in the wilderness.

The trout fishing was good, mostly catch and release because the limit was two cutthroat trout per angler per day. One afternoon I hit it very lucky and pulled in three keepers in five minutes, one we released due to the limit rules. I think I only made eight casts in that blue hole. The two large cutthroat trout (13 to 14 inches) that I pan fried for the four of us using lemon pepper, butter, and almond slivers were delicious. It was the best tasting trout I ever had perhaps because of the ambience of the mountains, company, and campsite. The outfitters were appreciative of any help we offered but they did not want us to do any heavy lifting, so I cooked a few meals and focused on sharing stories and learning about them. We were a great team



Colonel (Ret.) Craig L. Carlson and his son

from start to finish.

The second night we had a horse go berserk at 3:00 a.m. I honestly thought we might have to put him down due to his self-inflicted damage. We doctored him up, but he ran away the next evening when he was released to graze and was never seen again on our trip. We adjusted our load and one of the outfitters rode another mule for the next three days.

The trail rides were long, scenic, and mostly uneventful, which was a good thing. We saw one grizzly bear at 150-yards, a deer, and a few small furry critters. The wildfires around us caused a haze in the long-range pictures of the mountains and probably caused a lack of wildlife along our trails.

The camaraderie of my son and the outfitters was the best part of the journey. I had brought playing cards in case we needed some diversion from the boredom, but they were never touched. Conversation was good, challenges were few but educational, and the beauty of nature was overwhelming. You felt so close to God.

My son had never ridden mules or fly fished before this adventure. He was smitten by the experience and caught a lot of trout that he had to release. We had a fantastic father-son experience that will live in our memories for the rest of our lives. It was the longest we had spent together alone in our lives, and we found a friendship beyond blood that could never have been possible otherwise. We laughed so much about the circumstances each day and his saddle

sores that it honestly started hurting to laugh.

The last night four of our mules decided to return to the trailhead (home) and abandon us. We made the adjustments without panic when the midnight search failed to turn up the mules, and the last thirteen miles were made with the remaining one horse and three mules. We figured this was just another great addition to a storied trip. The outfitters shared a horse and walked and would not allow us to share that burden. Our remaining food supply was hung in a tree, so the bears did not get a feast. The camp supplies that did not fit on the last mule was left behind for the outfitters to go back and pick up after we were done.

After we got all the stock collected and departed the trailhead, I sat in the front seat of a F250 Ford crew cab and fell asleep within five minutes. It felt like a limousine compared to our previous week. We stopped at the first bar and restaurant along our route and had a well appreciated ice-cold beer and meal in a rustic surrounding filled with Montana locals, elk, deer, and bear trophies. It was a great finish to a spectacular bucket list trip.

I cannot adequately say enough good about our outfitters, the hospitality, or the professionalism we experienced on this journey. K Lazy 3 Outfitters will get our business again on our next trip, maybe next year. Finally, if you have a bucket list experience you intend to make, do not put it off. Life is short and time does not stop.



Colonel (Ret.) Craig L. Carlson, and his son

