

Bad Day on the West Walker

By Rick Edney

“There is a risk every time you saddle up, but a life without risk ain’t much of a life.”

A small stream of salty sweat originated from under my black felt hat, ran down my cheek then fell from my chin. It was hot and had been hot for several days so when Mike suggested we visit the high country for a few days of fishing there was no hesitation on my part. We arrived at the trailhead early and you would think it would be cool at 7,000 feet elevation, but by the time we finished loading Mike’s four mules we were all shedding clothes. Joining us was our mutual friend Jack, 13-year-old Travis, and Snuffy the camp dog. It was July 18th, well into a busy summer and we were all tired of the heat and looked forward to a few days in the mountains.

1997 had been an unusually wet winter depositing snowfall amounts that the old timers always talked about. The West Walker River experienced some flooding and actually tried to change course in a few locations earlier that year. Even now, with summer half over there was still plenty of snow pack up in the higher elevations. That snow pack was melting rapidly and we knew the river crossing would be deep and wide, so before we mounted up we checked in with the Pack Station crew for a little trail Intel. They assured us that they had been using both upper and lower crossings with no trouble. The upper crossing leads you to the steep packers trail while the lower crossing connects you with the much more gradual hikers trail. Since it was already so warm we choose the lower crossing and the easier ascent.

Mike led the way with his string of mules April, May, Auggie, and Tilly; they were followed by Travis then Jack, I brought up the rear riding my big sorrel. A



The same crossing on a much dryer year

short quarter mile into the journey we came to the lower crossing. Snuffy was the first one into the water and although a good swimmer I could see the current would likely take him far down stream before he could reach the opposite bank. I paused on the near bank keeping an eye on him and hoping he wouldn’t lose his determination and try to come back. The rest of our party had already descended the six-foot bank and was well into the crossing. I noticed that the water level was only up to Mike’s stirrups and just under the packs on the mules. Satisfied that Snuffy was going to reach the other side I started down the steep drop off just as Mike was coming out

of the water on the far bank and that’s when all our fun ended.

During the spring runoff the usually calm river that winds through Leavitt Meadows became a torrent, which undermined from its banks a huge dead Jeffrey Pine. When the brittle old giant crashed into the current it shattered into several pieces and was swept away. The stump and a short section of trunk came to rest far down stream. Its large tentacle like roots began gathering all the debris within its reach. First a few large logs then some Willows that had washed out of the eroding bank. The Willows helped stop other small sticks and soon there was so much

debris that it covered the original stump. It looked like a giant beaver dwelling that had been built only a few yards downstream from our river crossing.

All the animals were in single file in front of me but just as Mike reached the far side the third mule, Auggie decided that he would break order and move off to the left. He did this often enough when there wasn't a clear cut trail to keep him in line, I think he just didn't like being behind the often cranky May when he didn't have to be. On this day his bad habit would prove deadly. Hidden from sight due to the murky water was a deep trough in the river bottom just a few feet from where we were crossing. The debris pile caused the current to erode the sand and gravel into a trench several feet deep around its self. The same thing happens when you stand in the retreating surf, the beach sand erodes around your feet.

When Auggie moved out of line he stepped right off into the abyss leading Tilly behind him. Travis was right on her heels and was on his way to disaster when Jack saw what was happening. Jack hollered at Travis to turn his horse up stream then smacked the mare across the butt with the end of his lariat rope sending them both to safety in a hurry. As the two riders moved up stream I could then see what was taking place in front of them. It all seemed like slow motion. Auggie and Tilly were trying to swim but the current became stronger as it coursed around the debris pile. Their combined weight jerked May right off her feet when the lead rope came tight. Now three mules were being swept away pulling the lead mule in with them. Mike was somehow able to get the lead rope dallied and his big gelding Gus did his best to stand his ground. April was pulled into the debris pile and the current seemed to pin her against it, her head and neck stretched upward toward Gus who was locked onto the bank with knees bent but sliding a little backwards in the mud back into the water. Mike didn't dare let go of his dallies for fear of April being sucked into the trench. So there they were, in one hell of a fix.

I jabbed heels into my horse and he jumped off the bank into water about the moment May got jerked off her feet. I drew my knife as we made giant leaps across the river and I was able to ride right up next to the string of mules but already all three were completely submerged except for their ears and the very tops of their packs. Only April, stuck sideways on the log pile, had her head out of the water but she was being strangled by the weight of the three floaters tied around her neck.

Strangely the water was only up to my knees but the three mules next to me were totally under. It wasn't until I leaned over with my knife and started fishing for the lead ropes that I realized what was going on. While the mules were in the trench unable to touch bottom my horse was standing right on the edge of it. Just as I found the rope with the knife the trench bank gave way. To my horror I watched my horse disappear under the surface taking me with him. I had already figured that these mules were probably goners and now I thought as I sunk out of sight that my own horse would be joining them in the happy hunting grounds.

As soon as Jack and Travis reached the top of the River bank, Jack jumped from his horse tossing his reins to Travis. He was able to hurl himself onto the debris pile and make his way to the edge directly above April. Jack reached down with his knife and barely touched Mays lead rope and it sprung like a guitar string allowing April to gasp for air then struggle to shore with the help of Gus.

This water had been snow just shortly before reaching this point and when my horse and I went under the shock from the cold was incredible. For just a few seconds everything went silent then my feet hit the bottom and I pushed upward coming to the surface still clutching the knife. The first thing I saw was my hat floating at an arm's length away. I don't know why I cared, perhaps my senses were just numbed from the shock of the freezing water, but the first thing I did was to grab that hat and stick it back on my head. The second thing I saw was my horse lunging out of the

trench making his way to shore, thank God. Spinning around I found the mules were on the move, Jack had cut Mays lead rope to save April and that released the other three into the current. Tilly and Auggie had already washed by me but I was able to get a hand on Mays halter and away we went. The packs were buoyant enough to keep them in an upright position but still my long legs could not find bottom.

Mike drug April up the far bank, tossed his dallies and let her go. Turning he saw the mules and myself floating down stream in single file, me being the only one with his head out of the water. He kicked his horse into a fast trot along the shore past the log pile then jumped off the bank in an attempt to head us off. Unfortunately there was a deep hole there also. Gus stumbled and went down with a splash tossing Mike into the icy water. Gus scrambled to his feet and climbed back up the bank wanting no part of this pool party. Mike got his legs under him finding himself in waist deep water gasping for breath, his face as white as a sheet.

I pulled myself closer to May as we floated past the debris pile and then I felt my feet touch bottom. With the River floor raising I could finally get enough leverage to pull her head out of the water. I placed her chin on my shoulder and tried to keep my feet under me pushing off the bottom every time I touched down. We would both go under and come back up several times before this nightmare is over. After a lifetime of being around livestock and hunting wildlife I've learned to recognize death. These mules have been under water for several minutes. May was limp, just floating along, but now with her head on my shoulder I was looking her right in the eye, and there was life in those eyes. The mules are strung together using long lead ropes. The lead ropes are tied loosely around the neck of the next mule in front using a bowline knot so as to keep it from becoming a noose. Perhaps the dead weight of the two mules behind May has put so much pressure on the rope that it has shut off her airway saving her lungs from filling with water. But she still can't

breathe and I still can't find the lead rope under water to cut it loose. The frigid water starts to take its toll on my muscle coordination and I finally drop my knife.

Mike was walking in waste deep water trying to intercept us and as he got close his emotions over took him. "Look what I've done!" he almost cried to no one in particular. "Don't start that," I scolded him, "It's not your fault and this ones still alive". He kept trying to come closer but the freezing water had already drained his strength and it was all he could do to fallow parallel to us in the shallower water. The main channel was getting shallower and when May's feet touch the bottom she came back to life and started thrashing, striking me a couple of times with her front hooves. We were into the bend of the river now and it looked like a good chance to push everything out of the main current and into the shallower water but I couldn't do it and still keep May's head up. You figure three mules and three water-logged packs probably weighed about 5,000 pounds; no way were Mike and I going to stop this mess.

After Jack cut April loose and made sure Mike and Gus were able to pull her to safety he turned his attention to the four of us still in the water. I'm sure he thought about jumping in from the debris pile and trying to help but then better sense stopped him. He then watched as Mike was thrown into the ice water and for a second he thought he might have to jump in and rescue him. Seeing Mike was all right he ran to collect his horse and told Travis "Catch April and then don't move." He then loped his horse along the bank until he found a safe place to enter, and then splashed through the knee-deep water close to the bank catching up to us around the bend of the river.

I was starting to weaken, my strength leaving me along with my body heat, and May striking the top of my kneecap didn't help ether. I began to think I would lose this fight and then the thought occurred to me that I might not be able to save myself. I could become that lifeguard that gets drowned by the victim he's trying to save.

May is now in survival mode and might easily drive me to the bottom of the river of no return. I couldn't leave my wife alone to raise two teenage boys by herself. I told myself, "you better start thinking about letting go," and then Mike and Jack were there. They each grabbed a tail and the three of us were able to push and pull the whole string into shallower water and finally get it stopped. Immediately Mike cut May loose and she scrambled to her feet. She stood there on shaking knees, her muscles quivering as Mike and Jack hurried to unload the water soaked pack that must have weighed hundreds of pounds. My rest was short lived as the current began to pull on the two dead mules again. I knew if I let go I would never catch up to them so I let myself get drug along with them. The channel split around a gravel bar island and it was there, with the help of Jack that we finally landed for good. Confident the mules were done traveling I crawled onto the gravel bar and soaked in the warmth of the sun, sand, and rocks. Jack let me lay there for a minute then stuck out his hand to help me up. "You better go get your son," he said, "The last thing he saw was you being washed around this bend in the river and he don't know if you're alive or dead."

I found Travis right where Jack left him, a look of relief on his face. "Is it bad?" he asked. I nodded my head yes, unable to form the words. Travis had to grow up in a hurry, we had loose stock to gather, and then figure out how to get all this gear and two dead mules out of the middle of the river. We needed him to be a full-grown man for the rest of the day.

With the animals secured we started trying to unload the dead mules, which proved to be a challenging task in itself. Every time we untied or cut something loose the current wanted to claim it. A water-logged bedroll now weighed nearly a hundred pounds, a sack of grain was unbelievably heavy, these items we wrestled from the water and deposited on the sand bar island along with the panniers and packsaddles. The mules again tried to leave us in the current so we pushed and

pulled then rolled them higher onto the island. Now it was Travis's turn to get wet. We lifted each item and laid it across Travis's saddle in front of him. This way he could hold onto it while he ferried it across the river, up the muddy bank then dropped it with a splat into the meadow. It took him about ten trips to get everything off the island and by then he was fairly drenched from the chest down. Now just the mules were left to recover from the river. Jack and I mounted our horses and loosened our lariat ropes, placed one around each hind foot of the thousand pound mules, then drug them across and up the bank to the meadow one at a time.

By driving through the Pack Stations feedlot then crashing through some willows Mike was able to get his truck into the meadow. We then loaded all our wet gear and attached a chain to the hind legs of both mules then drug them back to the parking lot. Using a tailgate from an old stock truck as a ramp then running the chain through my trailer, and out the emergency door we pulled the mules inside for their last ride. With the six live animals in Mike's trailer we headed home. Later that afternoon after burying the mules on Mike's property Jack tried to make us all feel better about this day's events. "Yes it was a bad day, we lost two mules," he said, "But let's not forget that we saved two mules and we're all still here to tell the story." Yes his words did make me feel better; this day could have ended a lot worse.

I cringe at the thought of the young packers leading pack strings followed by dudes on horseback across that same river forge unaware of the danger hidden below the murky water. They'll know now what disaster has been waiting for them to make a wrong step.

As I prepared my aching body for bed that night my emotions finally caught up to me and I ended the day the same way it started, with a small salty stream running down my cheek. But it wasn't sweat this time.