

A Trip to the Sierras

By Mark Bedor

It's a scene right out of a Charlie Russell painting - the horseback cowboy leading a string of pack mules through a rugged mountain wilderness. Except this time it's not 1880, but 2007. And the cowboy leading those mules up a steep switchback trail in California's spectacular Sierra Nevada Mountains is me!

It's a thrill to actually get the opportunity to do this. But it is not as easy as those romantic paintings make it look. The two mules I'm leading are long time veterans of the Sierra, and it seems that Orville and Doc can spot a newcomer. They like to set their own pace, which is a bit slower than the one my young and energetic horse Tip prefers. So the lead rope on Orville that I'm struggling to hold on to is often stretched out tight. I have the rope hooked over the front of my saddle horn, as I play that big mule like a 1600 pound trout, being very careful not to get that rope wrapped around my fingers, while trying to rein in Tip at the same time. At times I'm literally at the end of my rope. But then H.J., the rider following me on this narrow mountain trail, puts some pressure on Doc, forcing him and Orville to pick up their pace, which takes the pressure off my line. But when H.J. stops, so do my mules, Tip keeps going and the rope pops out of my hands.

Tip's a quiet horse, as close to perfect as they come, so I don't bother to tie him up, as I walk back to the mules. But as I pick up Orville's lead rope, I turn around and discover Tip is running off!

I chase him up this steep slope at an altitude of about 10,000 feet, in leather soled cowboy boots that are not built for running or hiking. I finally catch up, walk Tip back to my mules, again pick up the lead rope, swing in to the saddle, and we're moving again. But this is the perfect place to make these mistakes. I'm a student on a week-long educational pack trip, jammed with so much information it's worth three credits at the University of California, Davis (UC Davis), which cosponsors this expedition. It's a course titled *Mountain Horsemanship*:



Veterinary Care and Horsepacking in the Wilderness. And you couldn't have a better teacher - Veterinary Doctor Craig London, co-owner of the Rock Creek Pack Station.

"So no matter how quiet the horse... you gotta tie him up," Craig gently advises. "If it's in flat country, you gotta hobble 'em. Cause it could cost you your life if you got stuck out there without a horse."

This real life, hands on and hard earned lesson in leading mules is just a tiny example of the vast amount of material covered during this seven day adventure into the high Sierra. And few people are as qualified to teach this course as Craig London. His 88-year old father Herbert was the Operations Manager for American Airlines when he left the corporate world and bought Rock Creek in 1947. Although he's not on this trip, Herb is still a very active partner in the business. The 52 year old Craig has been horseback so long, he can't remember learning to ride. One of his earliest memories is riding more than seven miles to a wilderness camp on his own horse as a three year old boy! Growing up as a ranch kid, Craig learned the fundamentals of riding horses, packing mules and properly caring for the animals from his dad and many others in the close knit packing business of

the Eastern Sierra. His father knew old timers in the 1940's who'd been packing mules in the high Sierra since the early 1900's. "I've worked with so many great people that my knowledge is the sum of what I learned from them," credits Craig. "And then I've had enough things happen that hopefully you can prevent other people from making the (same) mistake." 4-H Horsemanship training was also a major part of Craig's young life, and when he decided to become a veterinarian, his mentor at UC Davis was none other than Warren Evans, the author of one of the equestrian world's best known books - *The Horse*. In fact, in the 1970's Warren Evans started the course with Rock Creek that became the very trip that I'm on today.

I'm one of 18 students. But because of group size restrictions in the Sierra wilderness, we'll be split into two camps, and ride in separate groups, lead by Craig and his very capable crew of wranglers. The Veterinarian provides both camps with the same instruction, and we'll visit each other in the evening for lectures and discussions around the fire.

We introduced ourselves at a 10,000 foot trailhead known as Horseshoe Meadows, high above the small Eastern Sierra town of Lone Pine, California. And as we rode out toward our first

night's camp on a perfect Saturday morning in July, it was breathtaking from the start. Riding through a mountain meadow sprinkled with dazzling wildflowers of red, white, yellow and blue, we splashed through a clear mountain stream under a bright blue sky, then headed into a deep forest of towering pine trees. Because of the altitude and the arid conditions, there's very little undergrowth, giving the open forest the look of a manicured park. There is lush vegetation in some spots, especially in a deep canyon that's home to the South Fork of the Kern River. It's little more than a creek where we water our horses. We'll have ridden some three hours before reaching our first night's camp further downstream.

Next morning is our first lesson at what can happen when you let your stock free graze all night in the wilderness, London's preferred method of overnighing his animals. We wake to find that all of the 40-some horses and mules for both camps have disappeared. Craig and his wranglers are gone as well, having ridden off to find the lost herd on the wrangle horses they left tied overnight in camp. By late morning, after a four hour search

that covered some 20 miles, we hear the ringing of the bell mare, as Craig and the crew triumphantly return to camp, herd in tow. "They stayed together, which is good," Craig tells us later, adding that the norm is for the herd to be close to camp in the early morning, anticipating its grain breakfast. He believes that it's very difficult for hard working pack trip horses and mules to get enough to eat if tied to a picket line all night, not to mention the tremendous amount of work to clean up all the manure they'd leave in one place. Letting the horses and mules run loose at night gives them hours to graze on the abundant Sierra meadows. And this will prove to be the only morning of the week where the animals aren't close at hand.

Nutrition is just one of the subjects we'll thoroughly cover this week. Even though the text books say five or six hours of grazing provides an equine's complete energy needs, "My experience tells me they lose weight," states the animal Doctor. "That's what we've found. So we will supplement with grains."

To provide even more fat and energy, Rock Creek adds corn oil to the grain bag.

And there is much detailed instruction and discussion about the merits of corn, cubes, oats, alfalfa, and other feeding issues. There's so much information on this and every other subject we'll cover during the trip that you could literally write a book about it all. But London's already done that, and provides every student with a reference manual of nearly 100 pages, detailing everything we'll cover during the week.

The book's great, and will surely come in handy back home. But what really helps you retain what we're learning in this back country classroom is the hands on experience. And that begins with learning how to tie ropes, and saddle pack mules.

The sawbuck is the pack saddle of choice for Rock Creek, a wooden framed rig that features two sets of diagonal crossbeams that jut out about six inches above the mule's back. They're placed in about the same spot as a saddle horn and cantle in a riding saddle. Cinching up is similar to a riding saddle, but very different at the same time. That's because of all the straps to deal with. There's the back-strap, quarterstrap, hipstrap, and britichin.

“Packing starts with the pack saddle,” instructs Craig. “So the foundation is how we fit our saddles.”

If the saddle doesn’t fit right, it can sore the back of the animal. As the days and miles go by, mules may lose a couple pounds, requiring adjustments in some of those straps. None of it’s “rocket science”, as Craig says. But it is all new. Fortunately, we’ll have a week to practice.

And we’re putting those packsaddles on mules, not horses. The two critters are very different. Craig says mules are easier to train for packing and handle the work better than horses. But mules can require extra caution. “When I approach a young mule, I always come into the shoulder,” Craig demonstrates. “And I stay in close.” Talking to them helps too, especially when you’re tossing the “lash ropes” over and under the mules used to secure loads. “You don’t wanna stick your head under the mule picking that up,” warns Irene Kritz, our expert camp cook and packer who’s been working Sierra pack trips since the early 1960’s. “If your head’s under there and somethin’ scares him... they can kick you in the head and you can be dead real fast.”

Irene gives us that sobering piece of advice as she leads us in a morning practice tying what’s known as the “box hitch”. After the sawbuck saddle is properly mounted, panniers of even weight are hung by rugged straps from the cross beams of the sawbuck on both sides of the

mules. Bedrolls and other gear are carefully mounted on the center of the animal’s back, with the entire load covered with a waterproof tarp. It’s all secured to the mule with that 65 foot “lash rope”, using this box hitch method. It’s an ingenious hitch that while securing the load also lifts it off the side of the mule, so the panniers don’t rub the animal as it walks down the trail.

Again, not rocket science. But learning to tie the box hitch requires some practice. We each take turns under Irene’s expert guidance. I’m paying attention, and get my chance to give it a try. As our guinea pig mule Doc quietly endures my fumbling first effort, and with some pointers from Irene, I finally get it done. “It’s not as easy as I made it look,” I joke. And everyone laughs.

The fact is, we’re all getting to be very good friends as the days go by. And it’s a very diverse bunch of people. There’s a stock broker, a battalion fire chief, a college professor, and 13 year old Indigo, here with her mom Sandy, the CEO of her own food company. “Indy”, as we call her, seems to catch on quicker than most of us. And you couldn’t ask for a nicer young cowgirl. Horseback trips don’t bond any better than this one did. “This is an interesting group,” observes my fellow student Elaine Fetterman around the camp fire one night. “What an interesting cross section of America.”

What we all have in common of course, is our love for horses. There’s also some-

thing about long days on the trail and enduring the elements together that helps to seal that bond. Afternoon temperatures got hot enough to swim in a mountain stream, but cold enough overnight to leave the water bucket frozen in the morning. Packing mules is hard work, and it gets dirty. But there were no whiners in this group. Everybody cowboy’d up and got ‘er done.

And it wasn’t like we were working and studying every waking moment of the day. Craig also included plenty of time in the schedule for R&R. There were several lay over days where we didn’t pack the mules and move camp. And London lead us on some spectacular scenic day rides, like the unforgettable trek to Kern Peak, which tops out above the timber line at 11,510 feet. Along the way, Craig showed us how to check our horse’s respiration rate, comparing it with other animals in the group, and making sure we weren’t exhausting our mounts. While the animals did most of the work, a few of us riders hiked the last few hundred feet in the thin air to the summit. I slept good that night.

Caring for this wilderness is an admitted obsession of London. “It’s an obsession for campsite management with livestock,” he says. “I have a vested interest in the land. It’s like the tree thing.”

The “tree thing” is a hard and fast rule to never tie horses to small trees. The lead rope on a restless horse can cut into and damage the tree. When picket lines were used, they were tied to big trunks, using what’s called a “tree saver” band to prevent any injury to the bark.

We went to great lengths at every campsite to “leave no trace”. That included some very hard work in burying or scattering horse manure. It’s not the glamorous side of a pack trip, but a very important one, especially in an age when some extremists are trying to ban horses and outfitters like London from the back country.

And yet it’s clear that if it wasn’t for outfits like Rock Creek, for most people there’d be no horseback access to the back country. Craig explained it can take a week for horses to get acclimated to high altitude, let alone the rigors of high country trails. Not to mention the time and cost to transport private horses. Rock Creek horses spend their lives in this environment. My horse Tip was amazingly fit. I was truly astonished to



pull off his saddle at the end of the day and find his back was bone dry.

Dealing with high altitude. Tying the diamond hitch. Snake bite. Hoof problems. Colic. Tying up. Dental care. What to bring in an equine first aid kit. How to give a shot. Identifying poisonous plants. Proper use of a tie line. London covered all that and more, with lectures, discussions, one on one chats and in field, on the trail, practical demonstrations. "He's such a common sense vet, cause he actually rides the animal in the situations," praises Elaine. "And everything that he's talked about would apply to just the backyard horseman"

"So this is like a dream come true!", exclaims Denise Gilseth. "To be able to ride in beautiful country and learn how to treat my animal?! Yea!!!" It was a dream come true. To learn what it really takes to be that man in the Charlie Russell painting, leading that string through the high country. And the best part is, you really can learn how to do this! Craig's goal is to give you that confidence. "I just enjoy being in the mountains," he quietly shares around the campfire. "The wilderness is one of the few places we have in America where you can go out and test yourself. You gotta find your way. You gotta deal with the livestock. It's a great, incredible opportunity" And so is his class.

FYI:

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