

## ***Favorite Backcountry Cook***

# **Kathy Bancroft**

*By David B. Reynolds-*

2014 Favorite Backcountry Cook Kathy Bancroft has a long family history of exploring the Eastern Sierra, much of it while riding on mules.

The Lone Pine native, who traces her Native American ancestry to the local Mono, Shoshone and Paiute tribes, grew up around mules and backcountry trips. Her family was in the packing business so her summers were spent in the high country.

Mom Barbara Jefferson and uncle Charles Morgan helped Kathy learn to cook while away from the modern conveniences of stoves, running water and electric power. Instead of propane and electric ovens, Kathy cooked under the sun and stars.

"I helped my mother cook from the time I was very young. I cooked for family, the pack station and in the backcountry," she said. "The first time I ever had to cook in the backcountry by myself was when I was 15 years old and my mother passed away in June of that year. With a season already scheduled, it was left up to me to do the cooking on the trips. I've been doing it ever since."

When asked what attracted her to cooking in the crystal clear High Sierra air, she said simply, "I was attracted to this way of life because it's what my family did for a living. My grandparents owned Mt. Whitney Pack Trains and then my parents took it over. Other pack outfit owners were family friends and my babysitters. My brother owns Bishop Pack Outfitters."

Bancroft explained that her grandmother's children attended boarding school near Yosemite. Her grandmother would visit them twice a year, riding from Lone Pine with nothing but a horse and pack animal.

"I guess you could say it's in my blood," she explained. Cooking outdoors, especially in the fresh mountain air, just seems normal to me. It's perfect because everything tastes better, so you don't even have to really be a good cook. Everyone is hungry, just make lots!"

Dad Tom Jefferson taught Kathy how to pack mules while being the granddaughter of Bruce and Grace Morgan and Harmey and Annie Jefferson meant she was steeped in local lore at an early age.

Bancroft also learned even more about mules and the Sierra while working at times for Frontier Pack Train, Sequoia-Kings Pak Train, Rainbow pack Train and

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Bancroft's cooking experiences became invaluable as a young adult. After attending Cerro Coso Community College, she headed north into another set of mountains: the Rockies. She attended Ft. Lewis College in Durango, Colorado and Montana State University in Bozeman where she studied organic chemistry. "I came home to go on a backcountry trip with Ralph Cutter one year," Bancroft explained. "It turned out that every other person on the trip was a scientist of one sort or another. When they found out that I was in grad school, one man commented on how organic chemists are hard to come by." Ken Mitchell immediately replied, "So are camp cooks."

Now as the mother of sons Franco and Harmey, Bancroft continues to travel the back trails of the Sierra. She estimates she has gone from Kennedy Meadows to Sonora Pass at one time or another. Still camp cooking, Bancroft said her boys have become great cooks themselves after starting out as her helpers.

While best known for her homemade tortillas and beans, Bancroft said she especially likes trying new things and constantly experiments with new recipes. One trip with lifelong friends the Norman B. Livermore family saw her prepare a full-blown turkey dinner with all the fixin's while miles away from "civilization."

"I almost always cook over a wood fire," she said. "I only use a propane stove to get the coffee going in the morning while the fire is getting ready to cook on. With fire regulations in many place now days, this isn't always possible, so I have learned to use propane stoves."

Lots of practice has taught her the importance of organization before setting foot on a trail. Eliminating waste and allowing plenty of time to cook are keys to successful backcountry cooking.

The backcountry is in Bancroft's blood and she uses her intimate knowledge of it to help preserve tribal cultural resources. "I serve as both the Tribal Historic Preservation Officer (THPO) and the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) Representative," she explained, while adding, and "I still organize and cook for tribal trips in the Sierra."

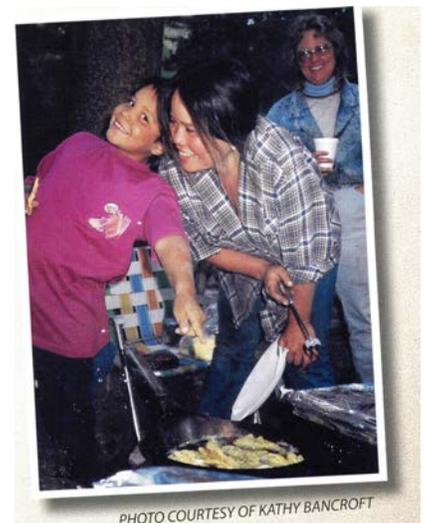


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