



# The History of Sierra Nevada Packing

By Bob Tanner

*This year, Bishop Mule Days is honoring its legacy by christening 2010 "The Year of the Packer," recognizing the men and women of the local packing industry. Following is a brief history of the folks who not only take visitors into our fantastic backcountry, but who also started Mule Days.*

Packing and pack trips started by necessity.

The early explorers, gold and silver prospectors and government survey mapping parties needed their gear and equipment hauled to their destinations. The armies of the Indian wars had perfected packing on mules as the most convenient and direct way of fighting their war.

Following the explorers, the migration of people westward to California continued for more than 100 years. Map making, property rights and subdivision, grazing rights and farming rights all needed to be established. To do this all types of pack trips occurred out of necessity. Horseback travel became the most desired form of transportation before railroads and wagon roads came into existence. Saddle horses and pack animals did not have to wait for roads to be built or railroad tracks to be constructed, besides, neither roads nor railroad tracks could be constructed in much of the Sierra. Their trail use continues to the present time.

Animal-based transportation became common, falling into the categories of necessary, flexible and simple.

The initial trail system in the Sierra has been the result of Indians traveling by foot for trading routes, searching for food and hunting grounds. The Indians may have already determined the easiest routes. These

trails went from point A to point B in the most direct route, more or less straight up or straight down. They had no beasts of burden to be concerned about and had to carry everything on their own backs. Many of the routes were on the south face of the mountain slopes. Miners were among the first non-Indians to use these routes, but they left the routes to explore anticipated mining opportunities.

The switchbacks on trails were a late development of government-constructed trails, which was necessary for extensive packing over steep routes.

By 1870 more people were settling in the foothills and valleys. A few practiced fish planting in reasonably nearby locations. About this time the California Department of Fish and Game was created and continued this work.

The tourist business for pack trips began to increase. People wanted the adventure of seeing up close the beauty of the mountains, valleys, lakes and streams in the Sierra. As time went by, the early fish planting by locals and the DFG proved a success and lakes and streams were producing remarkably sized fish.

The users of the mountains wanted more than the John Muir-type trip with two blankets and a few pieces of jerky. Camping gear and various luxuries of the time could be packed on the pack animal and clothing and

equipment continued to improve. (The only thing that may have remained the same was the whiskey).

The largest single trip was the annual Sierra Club outing, which started each summer at Tuolumne Meadows in Yosemite and traveled down the Sierra to Mt. Whitney outside Lone Pine. Guests could join the trip at various trailheads at about two-week intervals, allowing the entire route to be covered in segments. These trips had more than 100 guests and staff and as many as 200 head of stock. The primary stock contractor was Allie Robinson from Independence, California. Most young men in the Owens Valley had some experience working on these trips.

These trips resulted in membership to the Sierra Club. The primary purpose of the Sierra Club was to prevent roads being built across the Sierra or else-where within the mountain range. The preservation of the beauty of the Sierra has always been the foundation of its membership.

One of the early packers in the Allie Robinson Sierra Club trips was Ike Livermore, who later owned Mt. Whitney and Mineral King pack stations on each side of the Sierra. He personally fought the battle to preserve the Sierra by preventing at least three roads from crossing the Sierra range. His contribution as an environmentalist and his influence of the governor of California, Ronald Reagan, in efforts to get President Richard Nixon concerned about the environment are as significant as John Muir's notoriety.

In the late 1800s extensive reservoir and dam construction began on the major rivers in the Sierra. The development of agriculture and the uncontrollable spring runoff were the catalysts for development of some of the most elaborate water distribution systems. Electrical power demands in California were increasing rapidly and power generation was readily available. Exploration and construction was occurring with mules and men actively transporting and constructing the new facilities. Obviously, helicopters were unknown and many roads had yet to be built.

The construction of pack station sites came with the increased tourist demand for sightseeing, fishing and hunting. The typical investment consisted of a structure with a kitchen and sleeping space. Additional space was needed for storing saddles and pack gear with nearby corrals and hitch rails. Only a few pack stations included a resort development with accommodations, food service and stores.

Development also occurred in a few small resorts in the backcountry and were serviced by nearby pack stations. On the eastern slope, Glacier Lodge in the Big Pine drainage, Hilton Lake in the Hilton Lakes area, Gem Lake, in the Rush Creek drainage and, in the southern

Sierra, Jordan Hot Springs, all existed until the Forest Service cancelled permits in the mid 1960s and 1970s. Supplying hiker's food, firewood, linens, etc., provided a good income for the adjacent pack station.

In Yosemite National Park tent camps were developed by the Park concessionaire and allowed to remain even after the new Wilderness Bill passed through Congress. Yosemite's stock program grew to 400 animals, which were busy with remote camps and day service, especially in Yosemite Valley.

Many fascinating people came to the various pack stations. It is quite surprising the cross-section of America that have made pack trips with the operators and many returned for more trips. Over the past 50 years, I have had the opportunity to know many of the pack station owners and have tried to learn a little something from each of them. I'm sure these people could entertain people for hours with unbelievable stories of events with horses, mules and packers of days gone by.

In addition, many Regional Foresters made trips during their terms in office in California, and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara made an annual pack trip in the Sierra for many years with friends. Sierra Club officials such as Judge Sherman, Edgar Wayburn and numerous outing leaders took backcountry trips, and the DFG was well represented by Charlie Fullerton and Phil Pister.

To all of those who come to visit the Sierra, I hope you return often. We continue to offer wonderful trips and good times.