

Tails of the Trail

by Rick Meyerhoff

Across the Range of Light

One of the great adventures in the High Sierra is to cross the Sierra Nevada range on horseback. Red's Meadow Pack Station provides the opportunity to do so on one of their scheduled trail trips. They have a pack trip that goes from the east side to the west side on an old historical trail. The route, called the French Trail, begins near Mammoth Lakes on the eastern side of the Sierra.

Originally a game trail, it was used for hundreds of years by packers, suppliers, tradesmen, cattlemen and early explorers as well as the Paiutes and Miwoks who traveled the trail for centuries before the white man.

Although the Sierra stretches the length of California, its width is narrow, and like a rubber band stretched, at its narrowest is only 50 miles wide. All one had to do was find a safe route through the mountains and the French Trail seemed to be the easiest for early travelers to cross John Muir's Range of Light.

Our party of seven met at one of the many pack stations that dot the Sierra on the eastern slope, Red's Meadow Pack Station, owned and operated by Bob Tanner. The old French Trail starts near the Devil's Postpile National Monument, one convenient mile from the pack station.

In the letter confirming our reservations, Bob told us to be at the pack dock at 8 a.m. In the cool, late August morning we brought our dunnage to the pack platform and watched as our two packers weighed, loaded and cajoled our gear onto the backs of our recalcitrant pack animals. Finally, after fishing poles and the cook's camp kitchen were packed, goodbyes were said, and we headed west out into the deep forests and granitic mountains of the John Muir wilderness.

Our party of ten riders and ten pack mules were getting ready to spend nine days in the backcountry. Our destination: Wawona, in the southern region of Yosemite National Park on the west side of the Sierra. The excitement of the journey was upon us all, for it was an adventure that few among us had experienced. Most of our group were weekend warriors, riding only occasionally as time permitted. The chance to cross the Sierra was a once in a lifetime opportunity.

Upon leaving the pack station, we rode through the national monument, crossing over the middle fork and main tributary of the San Joaquin River on a cantilevered wooden bridge, recently built and maintained by the park service. We were on our way to

our first night's destination, 77 Corral, and had a long way to go, five hours in the saddle.

One of the nice things about Red's Meadow is that the pack station is already located in the backcountry. Most of the other pack outfits have to travel over a high mountain pass to get to their backcountry, which means a long day in the saddle. At Red's, you drive over the Minaret Summit, which is their mountain pass and are afforded a lovely panoramic view of the backcountry in which you'll be traveling. As you drive down into the wilderness area the lofty sentinels of the Ritter Range seem to be so close that you could reach out and touch them. The road ends at Red's.

Riding up out of the glacially carved valley of the Devil's Postpile National Monument, we descended into another canyon, Snow Canyon. It was there we picked up the French Trail and crossed King Creek on our way to Summit Meadows. The French Trail isn't used much anymore, so much of the original trail has been lost. Occasionally, as the modern trail paralleled the old route, we would find ourselves on it. Passing through the luxuriant wildflowers and grasses of Summit Meadow we began to get a clearer view of the terrain into which we were traveling, as the country seemed to be gentler, smoother, more heavily wooded and less mountainous. Twenty miles to the west we could see what appeared to be Clover Meadows, the trailhead for travelers heading into the backcountry from the west side. The trail took us behind the Minarets, one of the most scenic and prehistoric mountain ranges of California.

From Summit Meadows the trail wound its way around Iron Mountain, the southernmost peak of the small Ritter Range of which the Minarets are a part. Our pack train looked like bouncing corks tied together on a string as the mules gently rocked their oversized loads from side to side. We rode down the appropriately named Granite Stairway to Stairway Meadows. Crossing Stairway Creek, an idyllic meandering creek in the middle of a serene meadow, we entered thick forests of conifer and pine on our way to Cargyle Meadows and our first night's camp, 77 Corral.

77 Corral is a convenient place to camp on the old French Trail, for it affords a good place to hold stock due to the drift fence corrals that are to be found there. There were some other horse campers who had arrived there before us, so we put our animals in the corrals with theirs. We settled in for the night after dinner and the camaraderie of our campfire. Thick, juicy, charbroiled steaks were the order of the day as they sizzled over the fire, while potatoes and corn on the cob roasted beneath them directly on the coals. Tossed marinated

vegetables over mixed greens with a vinaigrette and toasted garlic bread awaited our hungry eyes.

The next day was a relaxing layover day as we stayed close to camp, taking little side trips with the horses as the mood and our energies demanded. Our packers shod some of the stock and did repair work on their pack gear. Never a dull day or an easy one for them!

Our third day was supposed to be an early start but when our packers tried to catch one of our young mules, the little critter didn't want to get caught and ended up breaking through the drift fence, taking all the animals on a romp through the backcountry. I heard the commotion as I was having an early morning cup of coffee by dawn's first light, and the last I saw of them were shadows through the trees as they hightailed it out of there. It wasn't a pretty sight when an emissary from our camp went over to the camp of the folks from the Bay Area and tried to explain what had happened to their Arabians. Gone, and no one knew where to find them. By mid-day after much effort, all the animals had been caught and the last of our packers followed in our hoofprints.

Our next camp at Sheep Crossing wasn't too far away, and there promised to be a good swimming hole which we wanted to have enough time to enjoy. We left 77 Corral with what gear we could take, knowing that our packers would be along as soon as they could repair the corrals and find some of the vacationing animals. Riding along the high rimrock we finally descended into the canyon of the north fork of the San Joaquin River a couple of hours later. It had been overcast for the past hour or so, and the darkening clouds and boom of thunder reverberating off canyon walls foreshadowed the lightning that was now underway. I was glad to see the safety of camp and the promised comfort of a warm fire that would ward off the chill of the rain that was beginning to fall.

The toughest section of the trail lay ahead and had been talked about with apprehension by the packers the night before. Taking the animals across the north fork of the San Joaquin River on a noisy swinging steel suspension bridge that connected the east side of the canyon with the west side was met with flaring nostrils and wide-eyed looks from our four-footed friends. We got across with the horses okay, but when the packers arrived a couple of hours later, that's when trouble started brewing. The young mule that had broken through the fence earlier got scared, wouldn't cross and ended up pulling down the animal in front of him when he hit the brakes. When the animal in front went down his hind leg got caught under a steel girder, so for awhile it was touch and go, but we were able to free him. He got cut up pretty bad and looked like he'd need a couple of days rest before we'd be able to use him again.

Unfortunately we didn't have that luxury, so we knew that we'd have to pack him light and hope that he could tough it out the next day.



Our camp was by the suspension bridge at Sheep Crossing. While the packers herded our animals upstream to Stevenson Meadow, the day warmed, the sun came out, and we swam and frolicked in the cool water of the deep pools beneath the falls. Some of the more adventurous among us even slid off the smooth rocks of the falls into the waters below, about a 20-25 foot waterslide. What fun!

Gathering our stock the next day was an easy task, for they were all at the gate that held them in to Stevenson Meadows, waiting to get out. Packing up camp, we headed up and out of the steep-walled canyon where we had spent the night. At the top, the trail split, and we left the old French Trail for the last time as it headed to Clover Meadows, a few miles away. We turned north, riding toward Detachment Meadows and Knoblock Cabin, traveling past old avalanches of downed trees as we headed up the east fork of Granite Creek. After a few hours, we made it to our evening's camp by Sadler Lake at the base of Isberg Pass, the southern boundary of Yosemite National Park.

Next morning, to awaken the guests and get the day off to a good start, the aroma of breakfast hung over camp like a thick tule fog. Sleepy eyes peered out of one and two-man tents while the scent of bacon and eggs, potatoes O'Brien, hot homemade biscuits with honey and cinnamon dripping over them and assorted fruits of strawberries, cantaloupes and other melons were on the morning's bill of fare.

Later, as we got going one of the packers got the lead rope of his pack string under the tail of his mare and had a rodeo. He got bucked off to everybody's delight! Excitement like that sets the tone for the day, and we were all in high spirits as we crossed Isberg Pass and entered into Yosemite National Park for the first time. We were descending into the Merced River drainage which eventually empties into Yosemite Valley that lay

north of us, but instead of heading down the Merced River we turned south and headed down the Post Creek Trail. Above and just to the west of us was Post Peak Pass. Our next camp was to be in the vicinity of Fernandez Lakes, and we were getting a little concerned.

Up to this point water and grazing hadn't been a problem for our stock, but we knew that we were heading into the dry part of the park, and after five years of unseasonable drought in California, it could be a problem. Also, we were beginning to see smoke from forest fires and as yet didn't realize how close we were to them. Lightning from the storms of a few days ago had started fires in the tinder-dry country. Little did we know that these fires had grown in size to proportions that Yosemite hadn't seen in years.

We found a good spot to camp at Fernandez Lakes, just below Fernandez Pass with plenty of grazing and lots of water for our stock in a meadow not too far away from where we were camped. A group of hungry, tired travelers was ready for the evening's meal of freshly caught brook trout, barbecued chicken with the cook's salad. The image of our cook with sleeves rolled up, remains with me to this day, as he fretted and muttered to himself, worried that his masterpiece wouldn't turn out just right in the Dutch oven. As he lifted the lid, the delicious aroma of Dutch apple pie filled the air. We couldn't wait for the ice cream to be ladled on in generous portions on top of the dessert and knew that we'd find room somewhere as we unhitched our belts a couple more notches. Next morning, after a sleepless night doing battle with a couple of hapless and hungry bears who were no doubt looking for the apple pie, we rounded up the stock, packed up and headed over Fernandez Pass to our next destination, Buck Meadows, an easy ride and only a couple of hours away.

Buck Meadows was another good camp in the backcountry, for there are corrals and water to hold the stock. There is also an old ranger's cabin where a ranger is sometimes stationed. We were lucky that there was, for he told us of the areas to watch out for and the trouble spots of the burning fires to stay away from. It was our last night out in the backcountry, and a group of happy, tired campers shared in the festive mood of the traditional 'end of the voyage' stew. It was a cowboy stew with chunks of beef, potatoes, carrots, onions and spicy Polish sausage with corn bread. Smothered in whipped cream, dessert was a peach cobbler from the mysteries of the cook's Dutch oven.

We knew that we had a long journey our last day to Wawona, so we got to bed early. The packers seemed inured to their lifestyle and stayed up late in the evening, sharing stories of their adventurous life with whomever among us that stayed up to listen in the waning light of our last campfire.

Our final day in the backcountry promised to be the toughest of all, for it seemed to be the longest distance to be traveled. We were able to get off to an early start and, because of the ranger's advice, avoided any potential trouble from the fires. There was a lot of smoke in the air as the orange orb of the sun colored the landscape with an eerie red and yellow hue. We made it to the government stables in Wawona after what seemed like hours of riding. Amidst the unusual setting of a confusion of firetrucks and the umbilical cords of firehoses stretching in all directions, we sauntered in to the twentieth century and the welcome of Bob Tanner and his crew. Saying our goodbyes and heading back to our lives in the city, we knew that we had had an adventure that none of us had counted on and that we would never forget, crossing the Sierra on horseback.