

ROUGH AND RUGGED



Mt. Whitney - 14,494'

BUILDING THE MT. WHITNEY TRAIL

by Rebecca Cheuvront

Each year thousands of hikers climb the strenuous trail to the summit of Mt. Whitney, but few realize the vital role the hardy Eastern Sierra packers, and their surefooted mules, played in building the steepest portion of that scenic trail.

Henry Thorne, the acting forest engineer in charge of construction for the Forest Service at that time, said the task couldn't have been done without them.

Mules played an integral role in the building of many trails, as well as maintaining more than 700 miles of trail. But Thorne says none of them were as difficult as the portion of the trail from Consultation Lake to Whitney Pass, which includes the well-known 96 switchbacks.

In order to avoid deep annual snow drifts, it was necessary to re-route part of the Whitney trail to wind back and forth up the side of a sheer granite wall. This task was begun in July of 1947 when the Mt. Whitney Pack Train at Whitney Portal was contracted by the Inyo Forest to both haul heavy equipment to the 12,000-foot trail camp, and then to keep the hard-working crew supplied throughout the summer season.

Drilling cuts as deep as 36 feet into solid rock to make the Whitney trail wide enough was a major job that necessitated the use of an air compressor, which

weighed a hefty 10,000 pounds. This Schramm compressor had to be disassembled, small pieces carefully packed onto mules for the long journey to the new trail site, and then reassembled. Thorne said the heaviest piece was a crankshaft, which weighed some 344 pounds and was carried on one mule.



The disassembled air compressor ready to be packed on mules.

In addition to packing the heavy air compressor up the mountainside to drill into rocks, some 1,500 feet of pipe had to be packed up the trail. Air was then piped up the mountain to operate the compressor.

Packing heavy equipment on mules was no easy task. Thorne said it couldn't be done on regular pack saddles, so a Mexican Aparejo pack saddle had to be used. Using these saddles required technical skills and exper-tise that the early packers had mastered, making them especially valuable in the transport of heavy equipment up the steep slopes.



On the trail, with a load.

Once the air compressor and piping was packed up the mountain, the mules became a vital link to the outside for supplies of all kinds: groceries to feed the hard-working crews, wood to keep their tents warm on cold nights, dynamite powder to blast through the hard rock, and much more



Blasting!

MEN WANTED!

A RANGER MUST BE ABLE TO TAKE CARE OF HIMSELF AND HIS MULES UNDER VERY TRYING CONDITIONS; BUILD TRAILS AND CABINS; RIDE ALL DAY AND ALL NIGHT; PACK, SHOOT, AND FIGHT FIRE WITHOUT LOOSING HIS HEAD

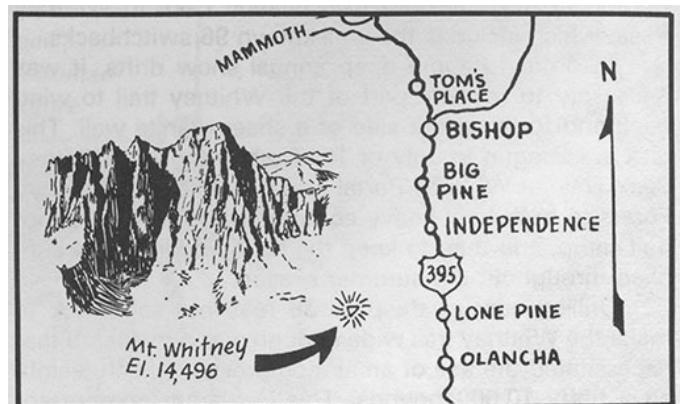
ALL THIS REQUIRES A VERY VIGOROUS CONSTITUTION. IT MEANS THE HARDEST KIND OF PHYSICAL WORK FROM BEGINNING TO END. IT IS NOT A JOB FOR THOSE SEEKING HEALTH OR LIGHT OUTDOOR WORK

INVALIDS NEED NOT APPLY!



U.S. Forest Service recruitment poster. Circa 1909. The line "INVALIDS NEED NOT APPLY," is in total contrast to the present policy of the Forest Service, with affirmative action programs welcoming people from all walks of life.

Thorne recalls that packing the heavy equipment took about four strings of five mules each, and then one string was used to service the camp almost daily.

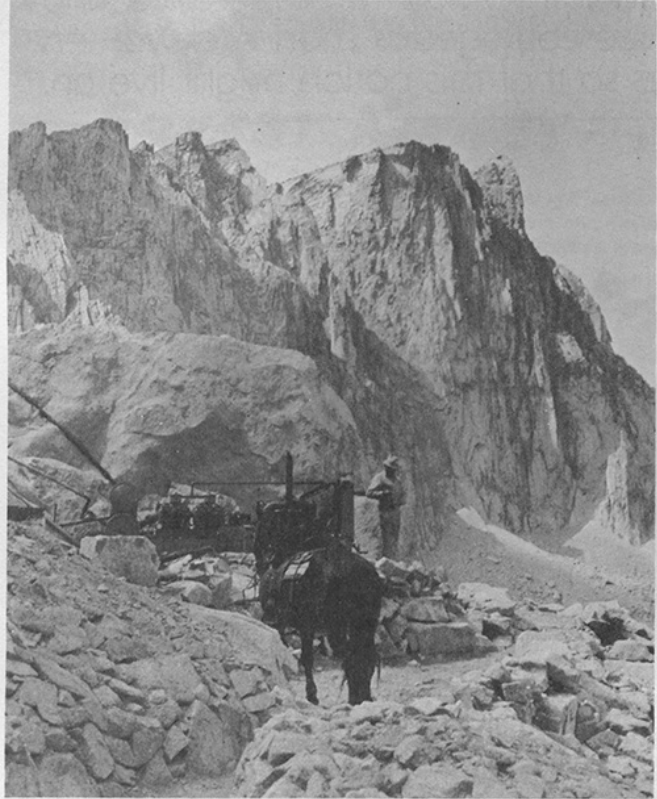


"If it hadn't been for mules, the whole job couldn't have been done at all," said Thorne. "This country never would have made it without them old mules. That's for sure.

"And I don't think anybody could ever find a better bunch of people to work with than the packers on the

Eastern Sierra because they were always cooperative, they always helped," he added. "They wanted the work done, and they'd go all out to help you."

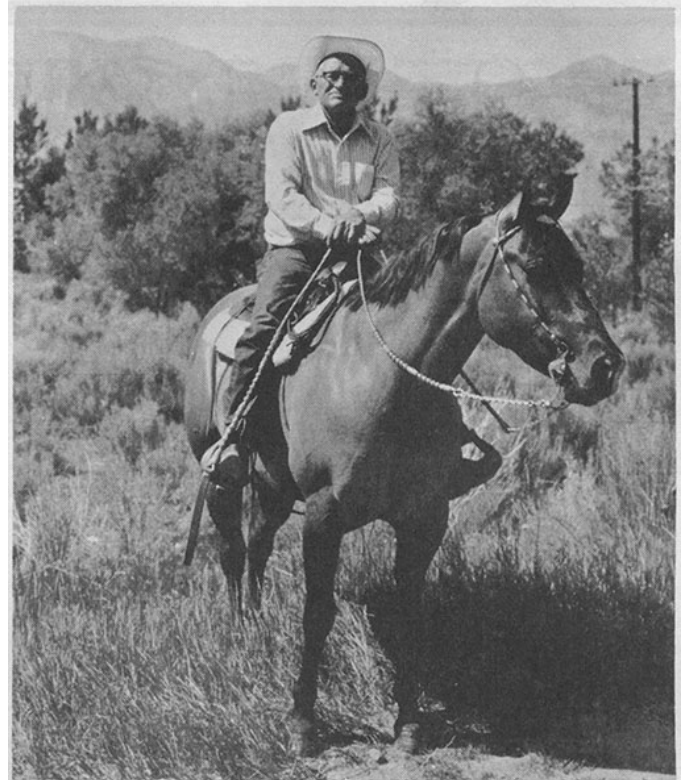
The packers were also extremely helpful to Thorne, who worked for the Forest Service for more than 30 years before retiring in 1963. "I'd worked lots of mules in the Mid-West," he said. "But they always had the load behind them - not on their back. So I had to learn a lot when I came here. The packers were helpful in teaching me. What I know, I owe to them."



The air compressor at work at about the 13,000 foot level.

The 12-man trail crew was a hard-working, hardy bunch who were supervised by Relles Carrasco. Equally important was Carrasco's wife Lizzie, the famed cook. "They were a great crew to work with," Thorne recalled. "They never asked about the pay. They asked if Lizzie was cooking. Lizzie was an awful good cook."

The job took two seasons to complete, and it was oftentimes a hazardous task. The men, while drilling on the side of the steep bluff, were held by ropes for safety.



Henry Thorne

But in spite of the extreme danger, the only serious injury during the heavy construction was a broken leg suffered by one of the men due to a rock slide.

In July of 1948 the final phase of the Whitney job was begun and on September 8, the first group to use the completed trail was the Wilderness Riders of America accompanied by Forest Service personnel and members of the Mt. Whitney Pack Train. Thirty-five people with their pack and riding stock used the trail this first day.

Before the completion of the new trail, about 200 people used it over a busy weekend. In recent years a quota system was enacted to protect the environment from overuse, and now 75 people are allowed up the trail each day to climb Mt. Whitney, the highest mountain in the continental United States.



Bruce Morgan with his string of mules on the summit of Mt. Whitney.