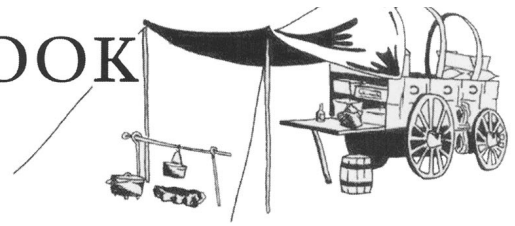


THE BACKCOUNTRY COOK

Vernon "Tongs" Chinn

Story by Jim Chinn



You might say I do not have just one best horse packer story as compared to a series of stories over a decade of adventures in the High Sierra's backcountry. The best place to start is the beginning, because this story has no ending. Around 1911, in the Central Valley of California, in a tiny farming town of Lemoore, Vernon Chinn was born. His father, Green Bedford Chinn, (GB to every-one) supported his wife Lena and Vernon's brother Alton with a variety of professions, including being an owner of a large herd of working mules. GE's mules were employed around the 1920s to turn the horse trail/cart path to Edison and Florence Lake in the Western Sierra into a road. Vernon and Alton as youngsters learned early the art of mule play.

Vernon's love, the great outdoors, carried him from winter to summer year in and year out. His greatest loves, beside his wife, children, and horse, were skiing at Mammoth and mule skinning in the Sierra. He often said there are only two seasons: winter for skiing and summer for packing. Vernon tried not to let his ranching career get in the way of these loves. Vernon packed out of Mineral King for many years as a special emergency back-up packer. He was the "go-to-guy" when the young packers did not show. If someone got ill, or forgot to "show up" (a little

A tribute to "Tongs" by Patricia Chinn Schlichting

Out of the entire Chinn children participating in the summer family pack trips, my brother Jim has packed the most often with Vernon. The fact that Vernon would let him use his "tongs" speaks to that partnership. There have been so many stores over the years and for those in the family that could not go on a trip, they could vicariously experience the ventures through the endless stories told at family reunions.

"Tongs Chinn" is the ultimate mule skinner. It is his passion. Over the years he has not only taken every trail in the Sierra, but he has been politically involved in backcountry us on the western side of the Sierra. He belonged to the Back Country Horsemen.

Vernon's prowess as a chef is what gives a pack trip the ultimate experience. He is the "Dutch Oven King" and can cook anything, especially his favorite, Upside Down



Vernon tending to the fire.

hung over), Vernon was the man to the rescue. Packing out instantly was his specialty.

Vernon has never been a verbose communicator, but he is always friendly, always pleasant, and never one to scold. On trips with City Slickers out of LA, such as myself, who are always in a hurry, always on the time line, we would ask "how long 'til we're there?" Always the same response from Vernon: "45 minutes." It seemed to Vernon that this length of time would satisfy most people for a while, so that they would settle into the ride. Many times the 45 minutes would come and go and we would ask, "What happened to the 45 minutes?!"

Pineapple Cake. He knows exactly how many coals it takes on the bottom and top of his Dutch oven. This knowledge has come from many years of experience. Also, after trips, riders ask him for his recipes.

My favorite story is the "Mule Wreck" at Pine Creek. Riding home on one of our family trips, we had to cross a treacherous shale slide on a narrow mountain trail. My father, Alton, and mother, Barbara, were behind me when a bee bit my mom's mule. He bucked; causing my dad's to do likewise. My dad hung onto the saddle as it slid around the mule's belly. There he was, upside down in the saddle. Vernon, in the lead, yells "mule wreck, everyone hold up" as he dismounts. My dad started laughing so hard he finally let go and ended up on the trail. It was in such a narrow section of the trail that Vernon had to carefully lead each mule off the shale. Vernon, the master of cool, knew just what to do in the face of danger.

The answer was just another response of "45 minutes" from Vernon. Only after several trips and many 45 minutes did I get the big picture: just relax, enjoy the ride, enjoy the environment, enjoy the Sierra, and enjoy your time in the mountains.

Around the camp and the campfire, Vernon had a variety of stoves, Coleman burners, and Dutch ovens. He had instruments in a wide variety to mess around with all these fires and they were all tongs. He had long ones, short ones, and lots of them. He would fiddle around with fire and everything else with these tongs. It got to a point where he always had tongs in his hands. That's how he got his nickname of "Tongs Chinn."

Once I left one of his long wooden-handled tongs too close to the fire and I burnt them. I was banned from handling the other tongs until the next year, when he returned with those same burnt tongs, the wooden handles replaced with half cut-inch PVC plastic piping taped onto those

burned up tongs. He loves his tongs. On a trip out of Mineral King into the area around Rocket Meadows, we encountered heavy rains that flooded our campfire pit and wet most of the dry cut wood. I tried numerous tricks to fire up this wood, and even stooped to the lighter fluid drenching method, but to no avail. Vernon, the ever-patient, never tell you, just-let-me-show-you guy, start-ed with a little tiny dry twig and a little bark, and built the fire so very slowly.

Over many years the mules had their “mule wrecks.” These accidents are funny and dangerous. I always get a big kick out of one mule going this way and another mule going that way until all hell breaks loose. Vernon never raised his voice, never raised a foot or a hand, and just later raised a cigar and glass of JD. A mule name Boomer out of Miner King was one of Vernon’s favorite challenges. Boomer could untie any knot thrown around a hitching post. He was a world-class untying mule. For years he would pick the knot loose and walk off. He would not walk far, just enough to show you he's the boss. One night Vernon and another packer put Boomer in a harness around his head and tied and double tied the rope around the hitching post and left him



Vernon packing up.

to sleep the night away. I still remember the next morning and walking out to the hitching post to see, from a distance, no Boomer. I thought that’s impossible, someone during the night untied him. When I got closer I found the rope still double tied to the hitching post with the harness still intact laying on the ground. That mule had spent the whole night wiggling out of his harness. What mule!

Today Vernon at age 93 still has a “Boomer” in his life. This Boomer is a miniature white fluffy Poodle who serves as Vernon’s helpful eyes and ears and companion. This Boomer does as he pleases, too. What a dog!