

Mule Packers and the Sierra Club

By Charles Morgan

The format designed by Wm. E Colby for Sierra Club High Trips exposed as many members of the fledgling club to the beauty of the High Sierra and thus gained their support to preserve the Sierra for posterity. The first trip to Yosemite in 1901 by wagon and coach. The second high trip was to Kings Canyon in 1902 where packers with their horse and mules were the primary movers of camps, dunnage and supplies. The members dined on fine food prepared by excellent chefs and their commissary crew. Most members hiked, but the club allowed individuals to rent stock from the packer if they wished.



Henry Brown's book Mineral King Country gives a good account of the 1903 High Trip to the Kern River which was the first trip where pack stock were vital to the success of the trip. Most members came by rail to Visalia, then by stage coach to Mineral King where they began their hike into the large camp at the junction of Coyote Creek and the Kern River. Pack and saddle stock were provided by Broder & Hopping of Three Rivers. After camping for a number of days on the Kern contingents (forty in one group and one-hundred three in another) of the party continued on to climb Mt. Whitney and returned to Giant Forest by way of Kaweah Gap to camp among the Giant Sequoias.

Some of the later trips lasted as long as eight weeks, with over two hundred guests on any one segment. The packers in the pre-war years were pretty much segregated from the members and were considered a pretty rough lot to be associating with the guests. They were usually fed separately and before the regular members. My understanding is that they kept pretty much to themselves.

Starting in the twenties the legacy of Packers Charlie Robinson and son, Allie, became the prime movers of the high trips. These trips were enormous by today's standards with many as 50 packers and 250 mules required to move camp and members through the High Sierra. Such numbers of stock required a "Night Hawk" to ride herd over the mules during the nights, and provision was written into the contract for his compensation. Early in the morning the stock would be herded into a rope corral (single strand), the packers would form a circle outside the rope. Allie or Charlie would then lasso the individual animals and hand them off to their individual packers.

In order to have enough animals for such a large trip the Robinsons used many bronc mules to fill out the strings. A story is told about the time while camped at Crabtree Meadows around 1932 the packers decided that they would like to take a ride to the top of Mt. Whitney. Robinson agreed with the stipulation that each packer ride one of his bronc mules. Brave fellows that they were with macho reputations to maintain they agreed. What followed must have been a sight to see. Fifty packers mounted on mules made it to the top fairly easy, however when the mules were turned for home they began to run. The ride turned into a stampede, careening around switchbacks, and scattering rocks everywhere. It is said that all made it home in one piece with their reputation intact.



Ike Livermore relates that a revolt or strike of Robinson and the packers almost occurred in 1937 - mostly in protest of the Outing Committee's decision to conduct out-of-state trips. In addition the packers had become rather truculent often taking the best campsite in the area for packers camp and leaving the commissary and the

guests second rate spots. Ike was asked by the committee to take over management of the stock and became a broker between the Robinsons and the Sierra Club. Ike would ride in before the strings of mules arrived and select the campsite for them. He continued in this capacity until entering the service during the Second World War. His duties also included the planning and conducting campfire programs.

During the war, Robinson down sized his operation, selling off most of his stock and setting up operation at Kennedy Meadows near Sonora Pass. Lacking any desire to continue packing the High Trip and no longer having the stock necessary for such a large trip Robinson left a void in regards to a packer for the post-war High Trips. Livermore recognized the need for an outfit with a lot of mules. After investigating several outfits on the west side he settled on an outfit on the east side of the Sierra. During the late thirties Ike had brokered trips using Chrysler and Cook stock and had developed a relationship with Ted Cook. Fresh out of the Army in late 1945 he approached Ted with an offer to purchase his stock and pack stations. He made a deal with Barney Sears for his Sage Flat pack station equipment to the outfit, and with the mules, Mt. Whitney Pack Trains was which added stock and purchase of some Nevada bronc born. A contract was signed with the Sierra Club, Bruce Morgan became a managing partner, and by 1946 the stock for the first High Trip was ready for the trail. 130+ mules and horses had been assembled making the outfit the largest in the Sierra.



In 1947 or 1948 a revolt of when he had a hind quarter of after some rather heated protests Club commissary. Too many "Where's the Beef!" There was a emotions cooled and the trip went

the Ike's packers was avoided beef packed into his packer's camp over the fare offered by the Sierra garbonzo beans! They said, great feast in packer's camp, and on without further incident.

The early packers were recruited from ranches and other pack stations, and for the most part were a pretty roughs lot. Starting after the war, young men and women of high school and college age were used more and more by Mt. Whitney Pack Trains. As a rule they were better educated and socially more amenable. The practice of feeding the packers first was changed to allowing packers to "cut to the front of the line" which itself was also set aside by the mid fifties. The packers, the commissary and the guests socialized extensively. Many friendships developed that have endured over the years. Good memories for all of us!

Quotes Worth Remembering

Chief Seattle in the late 19th century: "Teach your children that the earth is rich with the lives of our kin. Teach your children what we have taught our children; that the earth is our mother. Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons of the earth"

George Catlin stated in the 1830's: "...if future generations are to enjoy this rich heritage, it will be necessary to conserve, not squander and destroy, our natural treasure."

