

Packtrains ... 1930

By Rena Elizabeth Roop-Moore

In 1942 I was asked if I ever rode with the packtrains during my early years – meaning after I married Fred Moore. I answered, “Yes,” on several occasions, but I preferred walking. That conversation revives many memories, especially one, approximately in 1930 when I led an eight-mule packtrain into the Sierra wilderness alone. It was my idea, and it was a nine-hour nightmare!

I was at Carroll Creek’s, Mt. Whitney Pack Station, when I was awakened by Frank Chrysler, one of the owners, pounding on my cabin door. He said, “Hurry and get up; I have a ‘mission’ for you. It’s an emergency.” The mission turned out to be a trip up to Golden Trout Camp [*located on Cottonwood Creek*] with some supplies. I had to take them as I was the only one there [*at the pack station*] beside himself, and he could not leave. I asked, “But how can I do that?” and he answered, “Easy, they are ready to go. So, grab a bite of breakfast, and take off.” I looked toward the corral and saw eight frisky mules all packed and ready for the trail, and one big horse, saddled and ready for me? He said, “Yep, hurry now.” I tried in vain to tell him I wasn’t even good at riding a horse and I was afraid of mules.



Mt. Whitney Pack Trains Carroll Creek Pack Station

So, I ate a little breakfast and climbed onto the saddle. Frank said, “If the mules start to act up and fall off the side of the trail, let them go.” And I said, “What else?” and took the lead rope. He said, “Don’t tie that to your saddle horn because if the mules go over, they will take you over with them.” So, I wrapped it around my gloved hand loosely and turned the horse towards the trail, Frank gave the horse

a hard slap on the rump, and we were off. The mules pulled back and kicked at each other, but Frank gave them a few slaps too and called out, “Don’t forget, you have the right-of-way going uphill.” I was shaking in my boots and wished I had stayed in Lone Pine.



MWPT Carroll Creek Pack Station corrals.

The trail switched-backed up the mountain, with no shade, but it wasn’t hot yet. Frank had said just to follow the main trail, so I did, or the horse did, he seemed to know where he was going and I hoped he was right.

It was a narrow trail, so if I was to meet someone they would have to get off the trail somehow, and let me pass, as I had the “right of way” going up. Luckily I didn’t meet anyone. I topped the ridge and found better going with room to pass anywhere across the stretch of flat country. Here and there were scattered trees and bunch-grass, scattered brush, and a good trail.

About mid-morning, I met three fishermen on horseback, one of them leading a pack-mule. Evidently they knew the rules, as they moved off the trail so I could pass. I said, “Thank you,” and went on. They nodded and stared at me and the eight mules, like they couldn’t believe it. I am sure I did not look like a cowboy or a packer, or feel like one either!



Packing up at Mt. Whitney Pack Trains Carroll Creek Pack Station

I tried to relax and ride easy, but the least bit of friction of the mules behind me was terrifying, and I would tense up again. It was a miserable morning in spite of the good trail.

Why I took my comb from my pocket [*I’ll never know*]? – to comb thru my hair, but I dropped it. I didn’t dare to dismount to pick it up, nor did I dismount to eat lunch. I new I could not get back on this big horse without help.

All afternoon I rode on, relaxing and tensing up, watching ahead for anything that might unseat me or scare the horse or mules. The afternoon was endless. I

thought the next rise or turn might show signs of my destination. It couldn’t be much further, but the hours dragged by and I was feeling numb and sick.

How could men enjoy this kind of work? As so many seemed to. I wanted my feet on the earth, then I could go anywhere, and enjoy it, and never tire of it. I was a walker and that was for sure. The scenery was beautiful, but I couldn’t look at it, as I had to watch the trail and worry.

The sun went down. It would soon be dark. The thought was a shock, I tried to get the horse to go faster, but he had a mind of his own. He was really taking this packtrain in, not me.

So, we went on, slowly in places and a little faster occasionally, and I hung on.

It was getting darker, and I almost panicked. But then, I suddenly saw a light thru the tree. Was it Golden Trout Camp? Or just some fisherman’s camp? I held my breath, and gave the horse his head. I could no longer see the trail. I could only stare at the light, hoping it would not disappear. The horse quickened his stride and went down to the corral fence, and there was Billy Horning, waiting. I was never so glad to see anyone. Two other men appeared and I was overcome with relief. I could only say, shakily, “I’m here! I can’t believe it!” Billy helped me down, but I couldn’t stand up. He helped me to the corral fence, he said, “Take it easy for a few minutes.” The other men took charge of the horse and mules. I was stiff and numb, and it was a while before I could walk to the tent they had ready for me, with a cheerful fire and a teakettle of hot water steaming away, on top.

Billy said, “I’ll tell Mrs. Cowan you are here and phone Frank. He’s been calling now and then and is worried about you.” He started away and asked, “Can you make it to the cook-tent alright? Mrs. Cowan has been keeping your supper warm.” I assured him I could. Then stretching out on the cot for a

just a few minutes, this was heavenly. I heard Billy ringing the number of rings to get Carroll Creek on the outside phone, and his quick report. Then I almost went to sleep, but remembered that supper was waiting in the cook-tent, and smelled of good food and coffee.

I don't remember what I ate that night except it was super delicious, and in no time at all, I was feeling wonderful. Afterwards we all joined the dozen or so fishermen, newspaper men and hikers around the big camp fire, plus some old-timers who told a few fantastic stories of their past experiences. [*They were*] great to listen to, true or not. Finally I was [*off to*] sleep, and with a whisper to Mrs. Cowan, I slipped off away to my tent before the gathering was over. Soon I was cozy and warm on my comfortable cot and drifting off to slumber-land. About daylight, I was up early and anxious to be off down the trail, on foot, after a hot breakfast. I helped Mrs. Cowan's aunt hang out the wash, which she had taken care of in a nice modern washing machine, hooked up some way to a gasoline motor.

Then, with my lovely lunch in a shoulder-pack, and after the goodbyes all around, and with a note from Billy to his Mother (a good friend of mine) which I would mail in Lone Pine, [*I was off down the trail*].

I thoroughly enjoyed my walk down the trail, and this time, seeing all the scenery, all the way.

By Rena Moore – taken place at age 30.



Golden Trout Camp

NOTE: Items in italics are the webmaster's clarifications.