

Are Mules Necessary?

By DAVID R. BROWER

THE 1947 HIGH TRIP was over. The last mule string was in, and with a minimum of skittishness, mules were letting the last slingful of dunnage bags be dropped to the dust of the Pine Creek roadhead, to all but lose themselves among the slings, box and canvas kyacks, pack ropes, stoves and other kitchen paraphernalia, surplus food, fishing rods, trucker cars, milling hoofs and boots. Somewhere from the midst of the thinning group someone would emerge, dressed half for the mountains and half for dinner in Bishop, to claim the last dunnage and to lash it to a fender, to a ski rack, or to stow it in a bulging trunk. Soon the last farewells would have been exchanged, Pete Garner and Ike Livermore would lead the last mules down canyon to the corral, the last car would crunch off in the gravel to disappear down around the turn, and the roadhead dust would settle.

Then the trip would be really over. The last of the one hundred sixty persons who had just spent from two to four weeks traveling the High Sierra wilderness trails through Sierra and Inyo national forests would be safely on their way home. Everyone would be accounted for, and the management could relax for the 300-mile drive home—with a prelude of nonwilderness steak in Bishop.

It was dusk as we headed north. A short time earlier the sun had set behind Mount Humphreys—in about the same way it had set a month before, when we started the trip. I guess we thought the thoughts most people think when an especially pleasant trip is over. There was no ordered procession of happy recollections, but just a vague feeling that something good had ended too soon.

We knew, without a doubt, that the mountains—the wilderness—had done something for us, something to us. Exactly what it had done I can't venture to say yet; perhaps the answer to that question will appear later. But another question had been in the minds of many of us throughout the Trip -- and for some years before the trip. What were we doing to the mountains? The trip was over, yes. But how completely over was it? When would the duff we had ground into dust at the roadhead be replenished? When would the boggy bits of meadow that served, in places, as trail for the mules, none of whom wanted to step in the other's fresh-churned mud—when would these green bits recover from the seventy-five sets of hoofs that had ground them into a wet black ooze? Had the meadows provided more forage than they could afford? Had servinglines, stove and tea-fire and campfire sites, garbage pits, and boudoirs beaten too many gardens beyond recognition? Would hoof-cut waterbreaks on the steep stretches of trail be repaired before erosion set in? Had this same sort of wear and tear on the mountains, repeated year after year by large pack trips, caused an irreparable damage? If so, was the wear inordinate in reference to the number of people who had enjoyed the mountains that were worn because they had enjoyed them? Or, to end the forensic recapitulation with one gloriously ambiguous question, when and where should the mountains be used how and by whom?

That such a series of questions should ever be asked would probably astound John Muir and his contemporaries who, with him, sought to entice more and more men to the Sierra, to make it more accessible, in order that there would be a strong, well-informed group ever ready to protect the best of the Sierra from use that would mar its beauty and its wildness. Muir could hardly have anticipated the day when men—practical men at that—got together and agreed that we should stop building roads into California's high mountains, much less the day when they should begin to worry about traffic on the trails. Yet that day has come. And the Sierra Club's High Trip, being the largest single contribution to wilderness travel today, is the one which many men worry most about.

They worry in part about the large number of people—that has troubled them for years. They'll ask, How can you see the mountains for the people? Most likely, because most of the worriers are anglers, they'll fear that the thundering horde will clean out all the lake and streams, as did the fisherman Dick Leonard passed the time of day with while he was descending south from Glen Pass. "The Sierra Club's been through," the man said, pointing his rod in the general direction of Bullfrog Lake, "and they've cleaned it out." Leonard explained that he was leading the Sierra Club High Trip, was looking for the next campsite, that the members hadn't even seen Bullfrog yet, not to mention fished in it. He could have added later that High Trip fishermen that year were no better than usual, and that the trip as a whole averaged one half trout per man day—hardly enough to clean out any lake in a day's time.

Observers who are more cautious than the fisherman in their conclusions are less concerned about trout—which can be planted in proportion to the number of effective fishermen—than they are about the meadows, critical I as the grasslands are in the ecology of the High Sierra traveler. They point out that those meadows along the main trails that are within a day's travel from roadheads are called upon for more grass than they can grow, either from trip to trip or from year to year. They compare the deterioration of overgrazed or overtrampled meadows with the luxuriance of High Sierra gardens that have never felt a mule's tooth or hoof. They recall that knapsackers eat no grass, that the charges of burro chasers eat little more, that the stock used by spot campers enjoy no more than a snack from an overburdened meadow before the animals are turned around and headed back to the hay of their roadhead corral. Some of the observers see no harm in a series of huts or camps an easy day's walk apart, such as those in the Yosemite High Sierra, supplied by stock that round-trip it in a day from road to camp to road. Others have no objection to stock as long as the strings are few and their visits to a given meadow are infrequent. Still others like neither to see mules in meadows nor to be reminded that mules have been along their trail. Finally, there has been a cry for a ceiling on a given trip's mule count and man count.

Where, then, does the big trip, inaugurated by the Sierra Club in 1901 and carried on today, in approximate ascending order of size by the Contra Costa Hills Club, the California Alpine Club, the Trail Riders of the Wilderness, and the Sierra Club—where does the big traveling trip stand? Should it go on, or should it just go?

I am not sure that a person who has participated in the management of six big trips, with a seventh coming up, can be considered disinterested enough to attempt to answer objectively such multi-ramified questions. True, I did learn how the other half lives by knapsacking quite a bit, but that was a few years back. The problem trees of High Trip details are very clearly framing, if not obscuring, my vista of the mountain-use forest. Nevertheless, these various questions are being asked so insistently by men in such high places, and the answering of them can affect so many people, that it seems important that a person who has been in the midst of management problems of a big trip, and at the same time has been able to see what the trip has meant to those who have taken it, should at least submit his conclusions for whatever they are worth, and then perhaps abstain from voting.

Herewith, then, in behalf of those who since 1901 have enjoyed High Trips, as well as for those who in years to come should perhaps be permitted similar enjoyment, there are presented forty-three exhibits. The first forty-two High Trips, from 1901 to 1946, almost all of them duly recorded in the pages of the Sierra Club Bulletin. The forty-third exhibit, the 1947 trip, is described in some detail. Perhaps a few of the eight questions raised will find their answers in the description. That, at least, is **my** intention. . . .

Agnew Meadows—rather more forest than meadow—served as the High Trip rendezvous point, and from midmorning until after dark the members assembled at the end of one of the poorest roads in the Sierra—a road almost too narrow to permit the driver of a modern low-slung car to maneuver enough to avoid the alarming crunch of oil pan against rock.

The packstock had already been trucked in from Lone Pine and was now happily dispersed in the meadows, except for those being shod or otherwise worked over in the corral improvised with rope in a small, out-of-the-way opening in the lodgepole forest. There were some seventy-five head in all, watched over by Ike Livermore and his contingent, as pleasant a group as ever gave a string of mules a bad time or a good time, depending upon the need of the moment. Pete Garner, whose ancestors were in this country when the *Mayflower* arrived, was second in command to Ike, and a veteran packer who handled with equal ease and serenity the heaviest loads—the stoves—and the mules that carried them. Bud Steele, another veteran, was one of the men—if you would believe him—who helped the devil pack in and set up the Devils Postpile. If he didn't look old enough for that role, at least he was talented enough. Tommy Jefferson, a fullblooded Mono, had a tireless smile that let you know you were welcome to the land of his fathers. During the day he charmed one of the strings of mules that carried commissary impedimenta; and in the evening, we knew from last year, he could charm both a guitar and those who listened to his repertoire of songs. Among the others who handled a horse and a string of five mules per man were old-time packers from Owens Valley and college students who wanted to learn something about livestock in its least prosaic environment. Ed Thistlethwaite, Owens Valley artist with a broad accent that was anything but indigenous, was our night hawk. It was to be his job, when the camp should be heavy with sleep on a moving day—and that is earlier than would sound reasonable in print—to get up and watch the dawn in the high and relatively inaccessible pasture lands to which the stock had been pushed, then to round them up and bring them down to work. A lad from Yale watched over the saddle horses, a few of which had been brought along for persons who either already knew they weren't in condition for a hard day on the trail or who would find out before the day ended. Ike Livermore thought that his wife, who came along to take care of the man who was taking care of the packing operation, should have some title; and so Dina Livermore was the Assistant Saddle Horse Boy.

The commissary group was less glamorous, but hardly less important Ted Grubb, the assistant leader, and now chairman of the San Francisco Bay Chapter, had been on many High Trips, and was so industrious, we knew, that he would several times have to be driven out of camp to relax and look at the mountains. He was to be last man out of camp, and principal landscape architect. Jim Harkins, chef, and member-at-large of the club membership committee, was the only man in High Trip history to combine the talents that would enable him to cook breakfast, lead a party up Mount Ritter, and return fast enough and fresh enough to cook dinner. His name was on more Sierra peaks than he could count without sitting down with a map for a long time. Charlotte Mauk, co-cook and a director of the club, was planner-in-chief of menus, and had spent many a winter and spring evening computing the relative amounts of each item that should be on hand in order to turn the daily quarter ton of food into three well-balanced meals—and she was versatile enough as well to know how those meals could best be balanced on a mule and which course should be on which mule in order to reach the next camp in time to be ready for dinner. These were the veteran veterans; but several others—Bill Blair, Bob Breckenfeld, Toni Bristow, Eleonore Ginno, Pat Goldsworthy, Jack Heyneman, Howard Parker, Helen Smith, Nance Wale, Joe Wampler— had been on High Trips before and well knew the traditions of the trip; the rest of the group, new to the game, were Clark Aaronson, Anne grower, Joan Clark, Jane Goldsworthy, and Stephen Jory. Their collective effort was in the main a labor of love—a love for the type of trip and a high regard for the mountains it took them into. The leader's main job was to see that the traditions were kept alive and the mechanism kept rolling that had been so extraordinarily well built up through the decades by William E. Colby, Francis Tappaan, and Dick Leonard. The machine had merely to be adapted to the situation and the terrain.

All but inseparable from commissary proper were those old-time high trippers who had paid to go on the trip year after year, for whom no really good designation has yet been coined. Take Bob Lipman, for example. Years ago he himself was in commissary and never has forgotten how welcome was the helping hand. Always one of the first into camp, he was also one of the first to grab an ax and start splitting wood for the stoves. Cedric Wright, who has probably been on more High Trips than anyone, always manages to arrive just ahead of

the first raindrop if there is a tarpaulin to be pitched, and he is as versatile a tarp hanger—and no two can ever be hung the same way—as he is a photographer. Then there are the main body of high trippers, the guests who are not guests because, although they are the people for whom the trip is run, still it is their trip, and they all lend a hand.

The important thing about the guests (shall we call them that for the sake of brevity, and have done with it?) is their diversity. There is some significance in the variety of physical ability, taste, and temperament that this trip successfully brings together for enjoyment of the Sierra. In 1947 we had no octogenarians along, but some have made the trip in the past; we had to be satisfied with an age range that included several in their sixties and one who had just hit ten—David Armstrong. Grandparents to grandchildren, professional people and wage slaves, teachers and the taught or the learning—these were the main categories. They had in common, aside from a liking for mountains, a certain affluence, for the trip did cost nearly five dollars a day for three meals, for half a mule per man to transport everything, and for a chance to sleep on pine needles (a sad commentary on what inflation has done to the original cost of less than a dollar a day!). But here they were happily together, exploring and enjoying mountains in their own individual way. For those who took to the peaks there were others who took to the streams or the high lake basins or the meadows or the sunny granite benches. Most of the younger members had the physical condition to take off on their own cross-country knapsack trips, and with a little more experience could probably do this on their own in future years, quite independent of the High Trip. Others, not necessarily older, might be forever incapable of penetrating wild country on their own: perhaps they preferred their solitude diluted a little; or they might have neither the physique to forsake the mule and shoulder all their own loads, nor the knack of getting along with mule or burro should they not wish to forsake them; they might have an equal horror of depending either upon their own cooking or upon their ability to tell one mountain from another and keep on a trail. I myself, having in 1939 conquered my fear of so large a crowd, learned that same year that it was pleasant indeed to travel with a group the variety of which could match the variety of the mountains. It strikes me today as reasonable and true that given both varieties, one is less apt to be bored with either.

Much more should be said about the people, but let's leave most of it for next year—except for one more word about ten-year-old David Armstrong. Ordinarily a High Trip can't accommodate young children, but Dave was strictly the outdoorsman, the friend of all (but not spoiled by them) and the envy, in his rugged independence, of many. I'd say that it is most desirable to have a youngster along on a trip, so long as there is enough family along to get him washed behind his ears once every week or so. For through his eyes you rekindle your interest in the things that tend to become commonplace; watch him, and you awake each morning to a strange and wonderful world of streams and rocks and of living things that have no names and that you have to find out all about before the day gets too old—perhaps even before breakfast. I'd watch little Dave, a tiny figure in blue jeans and a broad straw hat, far out in a broad green meadow with the shine of glacier-polished granite above it, now running along the stream, now bending over with his legs apart and hands on his knees in deep study—of a frog, no doubt—then off again to look for a log crossing, with no one near him and no helping hand to be tolerated—the Minarets that already towered above him gaining in stature a thousand feet for every foot he had not yet grown. And I'd find myself much more philosophical about the problem of the missing climbing ropes that someone at my right elbow had broken into my reverie with.

Yes, we were under the Minarets now, camped in a scattered grove of graceful hemlocks above Lake Ediza, an easy day from Agnew, camped up on a bench closer to the peaks—and as Ike Livermore looked at it nearer the rocks and farther from grass—than a High Trip had camped before. The standing operating procedure for High Trips had governed the setting up of camp, and its consideration of the terrain bears a little looking into. First we considered the mules. Could they reach the site in an easy day and make a back-tracking round trip next day for the balance of the supplies? Was feed for them near enough? Where in the general area were there enough bedsites for- the five categories of sleepers, men, women, married, commissary, packers (not in order of

importance; to this I refuse to commit myself), and was there room enough between sleepers for the mules to run to and fro when they tired of eating and sought amusement? Then commissary. Was there water, a level spot for the stoves, trees about it for tarps if needed, disintegrated granite or duff for main lines of traffic that would otherwise wear down the meadows, shade for the perishable foods and a pool or snowbank for the frailest perishables, near-by bedsites for the early-rising commissary people, diggable ground for fire and garbage pits and—preferably not too awfully far away—for the sanitary facilities? Were there two or three dead lodgepoles ' handy for Joe Wampler and his volunteers to fell and split? Of no mean importance, could the mules reach this site to unload and was there room for the unloading of several strings at once? Where could the women's mules unload, and the men's? And not too near the exact center of women's camp, could packers set up their rope corral in which to feed grain and saddle up? My principal problem was that of sprinting along the trail fast enough to reach camp and make all the decisions before those who had been breathing hot on my neck wanted the answers. Then I'd collapse and worry about details—and catch glimpses of Dave out there in the meadow.

In the end it is always the mules who determine the itinerary of a High Trip. Once the optimum requirements of a campsite have been determined, it is then necessary only to find a series of optimum campsites that are so spaced as to allow the strings to move dunnage and a few meals' food to them on one day, and to move the balance of supplies to them on the next one or two days, with an occasional day's rest for mules and packers. If the campsites are the most scenic in the area, that's fortunate. If the most scenic of the sites are those where the trip must lay over longest while the mules shuttle, that's amazing. And if one of those scenic spots should be hit at the same time by the High Trip and by any other large party, that's impossible—and is now precluded in pre-trip discussions.

As usual, the mules determined the 1947 itinerary, which connected a series of place names meaningful to those who know the places and meaningless to those who either haven't been to them or don't distinguish one name from another place or vice versa. From Lake Ediza we moved to Reds Meadow and its unavoidable road, then hurried on in a long, warm, dry day to Purple Lake for a layover. A spot near Lake of the Lone Indian—but not nearly so near as advertised—came next, followed by a long, cool, refreshing day that saw us over Silver Pass and part way up Mono Creek, opposite Second Recess. Mono Pass served as the trade route for two-weekers, who went out and came in via the Little Lakes Valley road. For the mules who made the round trip over the pass from Second Recess, the sight of the meadow expanses of upper Mono Creek proved too much. At their first unfettered opportunity they returned to their greener pastures, not to be rounded up in time the next moving day for dinner to be punctual at Bear Creek camp. For some ninety of the high trippers, that wait for dinner was especially long, for they allowed themselves to be talked into a cross-country deviation from the John Muir Trail that took them from Second Recess camp on a beeline (if the ups and downs be disregarded) right through First Recess to the Bear Creek site. The Hilgard Branch of Bear Creek, close under Lake Italy and untouched by previous High Trips, came next. Then it was over Selden Pass to Sally Keyes Lake, where Ollo Baldauf discovered two mountaineering rattlesnakes far beyond their recorded altitudinal range. One more move remained before we should leave the mountains, and this was to be Contour Day.

We were camped, on Sally Keyes Lake, at an elevation of 10,100 feet. Our next camp, in French Canyon, was to be at the same elevation. The trail was most thoughtlessly laid out to drop into a hole—the Piute Creek

Canyon—about 3,000 feet, and then climb back out. What, then, could be more logical, for persons who didn't fancy so much drop and climb, than that they should follow the 10,100-foot contour to the next camp with as few compromises as possible? This, in gist, was the proposal I made at campfire, quickly following it with additional remarks that were indeed more logical. The trail was better for those who had doubts of their cross-country technique, and was a beautiful if arduous trip for those who hadn't seen it already. The "contour" route would involve only slightly less ascending and descending, and although it would be some six miles shorter and

would afford splendid vistas that would be lost to the canyon plodders, those six miles would cost in difficulty of steps every bit of what they saved in number. Routes that seemed good on the map were actually seldom what they seemed. We ended up in four major groups. The trail travelers took off early in groups of two or three at their own good pace. Dr. Stewart Kimball led a second group of slightly-less-than-trail travelers, who explored a trail that was still shown on the map, but rarely appeared on the ground. Lewis Clark took a small party back over Selden Pass, up under Seven Gables to the headwaters of the East Fork of Bear Creek, and crossed a knapsack pass into the French Canyon watershed. The route that struck my fancy, and apparently that of nineteen others, traded the 3,000-foot drop for three knapsack passes, only one of which I had ever previously seen both sides of. One I had never before seen either side of turned out to be badly mapped: a broad, almost-gentle, nivated slope that showed on the map became a chute that afforded a bit of rock scrambling. But the entire party, right on down to Dave Armstrong, were game and made the whole trip well. Dave did, it should be recorded, consent to be expedited for the last mile, trading tired horses for fresh ones every few hundred yards and arriving in camp fully as pert as his pick-aback steeds.

Already we were in our last camp. For days on end—but never enough—we had enjoyed the High Sierra wilderness just as the members of previous High Trips had. There were close-ups of sand and granite, grass and wildflowers, distant vistas of peaks and, at long last, of clouds; there were strange and familiar friendly sounds and smells, by day and by night; there were stops, long and short, to talk about things that were important and things that needn't be; there was a growing sense of being fully alive, fit, vital, of being a collection of cells that were at last acting as one surging directed, homogeneous entity—we were awake, fully awake to our world. And what was a blister or two or a pine needle in the soup?

It would be overenthusiastic to maintain that the vitality we found in the wilderness could be found nowhere else. A skier's spirits may soar when he descends a crowded slope, a composer's when he stumbles upon and tries to hold a series of chords whose relation is all too evanescent, an editor's when from nowhere he picks up the word his author just missed—to each his own heady drink, one man's stimulus no doubt being the other man's sedative. Here in the Sierra wildland, men found or renewed vitalness that didn't come to them in any other context, whether in 1947 or in 1901.

Then came the first final campfire for some, the final final campfire, perhaps, for others. The auld-lang-syne feeling ran high—who would object?—and the embers burned themselves out.

That last Saturday morning Ted Grubb, chief landscaper, laid the embers to rest, just as they had been laid to rest in the other camps. Cans were smashed—cans that preceded us to the camp as well as our own papers, cans, bottles, and those indestructible embers were gathered by willing hands and tossed into the garbage pit. Old cartons were consigned to the top and burned, a little lime was sprinkled on top to complete the deodorizing so that later fur-bearing passers-by would not undispose of our disposals. Distinterred rocks, sand, soil, and the carefully saved sod were in turn placed over the pit. The leftover firewood from split up trees was piled where it could serve later travelers who would not be equipped to use full-sized dead trees. The most prominent tracks—they were almost trails—around commissary were given a scattering of needles. The stoves and pots and the small surplus of food were loaded on the mules to follow the outgoing high trippers and dunnage strings over Pine Creek Pass. Then French Canyon was quiet again. For a few days there it hadn't been what you could call pure wilderness. After all, pure wilderness can't exist so long as there's so much as a yodel in the air, not to mention an early-morning wake-up call and several dozen discordant, off-key echoes. Pure, unadulterated wilderness could hardly survive human contamination of any sort, and we must arrive at some criteria of use that will allow me men who feel the need for inspiration—to overwork the word—to take much of it as they need from the wilderness with as little damage as possible to its source.

The criterion of use realized in the High Trip turns out to be this, that the men who come, and the things they need, come by trail and leave the way they came....

Maybe a few of the answers to our questions - questions that were intended to be complicated and searching—are implicit in these notes on a High Trip. Perhaps more of the answers are missing. I would not presume that they aren't. But a few simple conclusions are indicated: Although some damage to the mountains occurred, it would seem to be less per man-day of enjoyment than it is in other trips. Compared to other pack trips, the High Trip uses far fewer head of stock per man, and these are grazed for the most part in meadows not ordinarily accessible to smaller parties, that cannot easily detour too far from their planned route. Compared to unorganized trips of any kind, the High Trip leaves the mountains cleaner; signs of human activity and metabolism are so concentrated that they may be properly disposed of instead of being scattered from sagebrush to timberline. The comparison with other types of organized wilderness trips is difficult to make. There would seem to be a reasonably fair measure of the relative need for the variety in the Sierra Club list of outings—the Saddle Trip, the Base Camp, the Burro and Knapsack trips, and the High Trip. Each of these has been conducted over a long enough period of years to demonstrate how many persons it will attract from what groups. Each fills a need and fulfills a demand. The termination of any one of them would force people who like it best into the other trips, and some of them might well be happy about the change; substitutes, however, are customarily accepted only with reluctance.

So it would seem that the big traveling trips through the wilderness such as initiated by the Sierra Club in that first Annual Outing, should be continued, by whatever organizations may be qualified to conduct them. The argument that John Muir presented remains essentially valid. If we want mountain wilderness—the spacious scenic wilderness that means something—we must make it known to the men who, knowing it will protect it. Those who like best the most Spartan of wilderness trips— cross-country backpacking—must make haste slowly in any attempts to impose such trips upon others, or there may be too few men in the wilderness to protect it. On the other hand, an overemphasis on spot camps, which can be successfully conducted within a few hundred yards of chalet development, may well leave us only those protectors of mountains who feel that a Yosemite Valley is wild enough. Doubtless there are few who would not wish to maintain the present, nearly ideal zoning of mountain recreational areas, which now properly or improperly accommodate all manner of tastes, whether in the clubs and motor courts at Tahoe, in the hotels, campgrounds, and High Sierra Camps in Yosemite and Sequoia, in the packers' end anglers' spot camps one day in from roadheads on the east and west slopes of the Sierra, or in the wide undeveloped spaces of the High Sierra Wilderness Area and the back country of Yosemite, Kings Canyon, and Sequoia national parks. All but the last of these tastes—the taste for wilderness—can be expected to fare well without our being concerned. To hold the wilderness, however, we need defenders of all ages who have at some time in their lives traveled the wilderness trails. We need so many of them that we must, as the pressure for all types of mountain -- recreation grows, get as many of these defenders out on those trails as we can with the least possible damage per man per visit.

Accomplish this and we can be certain, when the embers of another final campfire in French Canyon burn themselves out, that they have not gone out forever. We shall know that another year will bring new faces into the campfire circle. Whether ours are there or not is not of great matter. But there must be faces, there must be firewood to be gathered, and all around the trees that flickeringly hold the night back from the campfire there must be wilderness.

Excerpt from the March 1948 Sierra Club *Bulletin*.