

Oh! For the Life of a Packer!

By NORMAN B. ("IKE") LIVERMORE, JR.

DEAR MR. PACKER: I have heard you know something about mules. Several of us college fellows want to get away after final exams. Can you recommend a good outfit for us? We figure six of us can get along with one pack mule or horse. We have budgeted ten dollars for the trip. Do you think that is too much? Your advice would be appreciated.

DEAR PACKER: I have a friend coming out from the East who doesn't believe how big the Sierra fish can get. Please advise a top fishing spot a short ride from some road where we will not be disturbed for two weeks. We want to get really far away.

DEAR SPIKE LIVERMORE: I have a seventeen year old son who getting to be quite a problem. Could you take him off my hands a while this summer and make a packer out of him?

DEAR MR. PACK TRAIN: I hereby apply for a job as a packer. I have had some experience with stock; I've camped a lot in the mountains, am a hard worker, will be available for several summers. I can't shoe, but am willing to learn. Please let me know on post card. P.S. I can dig pits etc. if necessary.

These abbreviated epistles may give an inkling of the variety that fills a packer's life beginning, he hopes, in early spring, and lasting well through deer season. Any similarities to letter writers or addressees, alive or deceased, are strictly disavowed; the passages are merely an attempt to illustrate that a packer's life doesn't lack variety in the field of letters.

As for the life itself, perhaps last year's High Trip will dwell a bit longer than any in this packer's mind—variety in incidents in the trip itself, among the packers, the mules, the Clubbers, but, of particular interest and satisfaction to me, a variation in the type of packer that seems to be evolving.

For several years prior to the war, I had upon many occasions suggested that college men were a natural for summer packing jobs because of their availability during summer vacations. The old salts among packers always disagreed with me, and I doubt not that most of them still do, but that's only because they have not seen the teamwork between college, or stub, packers and the more experienced professional packers, as demonstrated on recent High Trips.

Whether the trend toward using more college men will continue, it is not possible to forecast accurately any more than we can predict what the he Sierra Wilderness will be ten years from now. But one thing is sure: the really experienced old-timer type of packer, born and raised handling stock, is becoming a thing of the past. Increased urbanization, fewer large ranches, fewer horses used to handle cattle, rapid mechanization of farms and ranches everywhere—all these mean fewer experienced stockmen coming along. What some one said as a joke is really more than half true --"all old time packers are either dead drunk or dead, period."

As a concrete illustration of the scarcity of practical experience in handling livestock I can cite the statement made to me three years ago by a faculty member in the Department of Forestry, University of California. At that time, he said, there was not a single student in Forestry who had not been raised in a city. No wonder none of them warmed up to the idea of hazing mules over Sierra trails as fledgling packers!

In spite of the basic trend, however, there still seem to be plenty of young and eager college and high school men who are lured by high trails and the fascination of learning to handle a string of not-so-gentle mules.

As for mules themselves, who can see any change? Not I, for one, nor do I expect to see any in my lifetime, unless some superambitious packer succeeds in breeding mules for docile demeanor as well as plodding power. But who wants a change in Sierra mules, when they are already perfect? Well, that is, nearly perfect. What I mean is, on second thought, perhaps not nearly perfect, but at least chock-full of character and interest. If you don't believe me, take a look at some of the '48 High Trip mules (and their bosses).

First of all there was *Red*, oldest mule in the outfit but still young and tough in action. I have it on good authority he was a jerk-line leader on a borax team in the early 1900s. Murt Stewart, who packed him, will be first to acknowledge that *Red* was far from old in action and disposition.

Doris was as young and impetuous as *Red* was old and wise. She it was whose short legs and nervous pull-back wrecked Ben York's string on the fatal day over Colby Pass. Black and shiny, hard to catch, pretty enough to win a ribbon in the mule beauty contest, she was the sauciest number in the corral.

A "pack" but not a mule was Pete Garner's *Buck*, a big, clumsy, dumb, awkward, and obstinate horse who tried Pete's patience many times by specializing in splintering his pack boxes on all available trees and rocks. This was the horse's first High Trip. As far as Pete is concerned it is probably his last.

Speaking of horses, Jack Heyneman packed a problem named *Hoot*. She was a mother who left a weaner colt at home in the Owens Valley and was pretty unhappy at all times thinking about him. So much so, in fact, that we had to rope her the first day leaving Owens Valley on the deadhead to keep her from running home. Heyneman, I am sure, wished she really had gone home.

Big and awkward-looking, but strong as steel and distant in demeanor, was Charlie Gilmore's *Coso*. He distinguished himself when I first imported him from the plains of Nevada in 1946 by promptly high-tailing it to the sagebrush country south of Olancha. We did not find him for almost a year. After many false rumors and wild chases, he was run down near a wide spot in the road called Coso Junction; hence his name. *Coso* is one of the two or three mules in the outfit who doesn't like barley, if you can believe it.

And then there was *Cognac*, famed among the packers as the mule who acts innocent but plays rough. He appears to be the gentlest of mules. It was only natural, then, that when it was suggested to Murt Stewart that he ride him bareback one pleasant layover day, Murt answered, "I believe I will." Murt's belief was short-lived because *Cognac's* docility did not extend to bareback riders. Two jumps and Murt hit dirt.

Another old-timer was Hal Pflueger's *Dearborn*. This stout gray was regarded as an old mule when we packed him on a trip I took with Ted Cook in 1937. On this trip we cracked a lady rider's rib, broke a fisherman's back, completely lost our stock for a day, encountered hailstones the size of marbles on Foresters Pass, but it did not faze *Dearborn*. Nor was he any more fazed or less efficient 11 years later, in '48. In fact, he is still a youngster, at least when it comes to the ladies; his steady crush on Marge, Dr. Heller's seductive sorrel mare, was acute.

Then there was *Brownie*, one of Bud Steele's stalwart string, who was a distinguished renegade in 1946 because he continually eluded wrangling. In fact, on that trip when we reached Charlotte Lake, he and his sidekick, *Snake*, simply shoved off and went home. Always something to worry about in the wrangling department!

These are but a few of our horses and mules. The printed word is a painfully poor portrayor of their idiosyncracies and charm, traits of endearing (or damning as the case may be) character that mainly packers will understand and appreciate but which all who follow High Trip trails should come to know and enjoy.

Enough for characters; how about some of the '48 packing incidents, a few of the many that occur over the years?

Packers, you know, sometimes get lost. This happened to one of our best on our first moving day. In spite of instructions, he took off from Zumwalt and shortly thereafter headed up Copper Creek. He was practically to Tent Meadow before he saw his fellow packers stringing out up the canyon far below him. No handy tethering spot for his string that night; the other packers were all unsaddled when he got to camp.

While a lost packer is a rarity, such is not the case with mules. One of Whitney Pack Trains' most lovable characters is a big black gent named *Jed*. He was named for that peerless pioneer Jedediah Smith, and well is he named, because he is always pioneering off by himself, usually in some tasty bit of bunchgrass that keeps him too busy munching to check on the whereabouts of his fellow mules.

At Bench Lake, Jed several times distinguished himself by making a solo run through women's camp, trying to get his bearings. But he really outdid himself on the day we moved to Marion Lake when he was not located until 2 P.M.—sunning himself on a strictly rock-climbers' ledge, peering at his fellows threading their way down the grassy South Fork basin 2,000 feet straight below. It was Jed's getting lost that caused several of the boys and me to take the precipitous trail directly down into the South Fork, trying to make up for lost time. If you want a real thrill of a horse trail, try that one some time.

Who will forget Bud Steele's granite tumble on the north side of that never-again pass, Cartridge, when he cartwheeled over mule-sized boulders to keep from being mashed by a teetering string of packs, including those so-and-so stoves? . . . Bud's miraculous escape was a morale booster for all. That is, all except those who needed important items of the animals' equipment, the shoes. Such a shedding of these as occurred between Marion Lake and the Middle Fork I have never seen. This started a trend of barefootedness that we never did catch up with; in spite of heavy stocking of shoes in the middle of the trip, we ran out at Milestone, and I had to send Dick Troeger out early just for shoes and nails, a most discouraging situation.

Our two days' packing over Colby I shall never forget—that patch of snow so short and narrow and yet so maddeningly deep and rottenboggy, the loose-rock hazard, the endless pauses for wind on the way up, and finally the quick tragedy of the rolled mules, a fatality for one of Ben York's string, and very close calls for Garner and Troeger.

And so the four weeks quickly passed: lots of hard work, some casualties, plenty of tough wrangling, too much night cache relaying, plenty of snow, and far too many rocks. But with it all, days of delicious layovers, good fishing, just enough rain, plenty of grub, excellent campfires, and good team spirit. Another milestone in the long and distinguished High Trip history passed; a unanimous vote of commendation, appreciation, respect and affection to our leader Dave from packers, mules, and all the rest of us.

An overnight stay at Kings Canyon road end, an all too fleeting goodbye to friends among the Clubbers and commissary, and we hit the Bubbs Creek trail back to Owens Valley. So ended the forty-third High Trip for this particular bunch of men and mules. Who knows how many will repeat in '49? But repeat or not, as the years come and go, let's hope our High Country remains unspoiled. Let there be other mules, other packers, other memories of campfire and trail; but may the meadows, lakes, and passes, and the trails that link them, remain as unchanged a part of the mountain scene as the sky that lights it!

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