

Packing 50 Years Ago

By Jane Fisher

"Ike Livermore did this study more than fifty years ago, and little has changed," mused Bob Tanner when he handed over a faded copy of "The Tourist Packing Business of the High Sierra Region," by former packer and California State Administrator of Resources Norman B. Livermore, Jr.

Tanner should know; he has been in the industry for years and is the force behind Red's Meadow Pack Station, along with other enterprises.

Livermore was Secretary for Resources from 1967 to '74 under Gov. Reagan, and a member, later president, of the State Fish & Game Commission from 1980 to '84. In 1934, with the help of Allie Robinson, one of the first eastside packers, he organized the High Sierra Packers Association and became a major influence in decisions beneficial to the wilderness and packing industry. At one time he owned the largest pack train in California, being a partner of the Mineral King outfit (1929-46) and of Bruce and Charles

Morgan and Tommy Jefferson of Mt. Whitney Pack Trains based in Lone Pine (1946-73)



His report, compiled in 1935, was prompted by an assignment at the Harvard Graduate School of Business, where he was studying. In the autumn of 1934, motorcycling between Tioga and Walker, he interviewed packers on both sides of the Sierra.

At that time, 22 packers operated in Inyo and Mono counties. Thelan covered Kennedy Meadows; Sam Lewis Haiwee Canyon. Going into the Olancha area were Barney Sears, Dan Cook and Dick Burns out of Olancha, and Burkhart & Olivas from Lone Pine. Dow of Jordan Hot Springs went into the headwaters of the Kern, South Fork, from Lone Pine. Wally Wilson and Chrysler & Cook packed into Lone Pine and Carrol creeks.

From Independence, C.H. Hyers' Circle Dot Pack Train, Archie Dean and Allie Robinson took visitors into the back country through Onion Valley. Allie Robinson was the largest outfit, with 170 head of stock, and took trains out through Symmes Creek, Oak Creek, and Taboose as well as Onion Valley. R.H. Logan operated out of Big Pine Creek.

From Bishop, George Brown had the Pine Creek string, Cecil Thorington McGee Creek, Art Schober was listed for Bishop Creek, as was Halliday's Rainbow Pack Outfit at Parcher's Camp. Vance Brown packed out of Hilton Lakes Resort and D.G. McComber's Broken Bar Outfit went into Rock Creek Lakes region. Lloyd Summers' Mammoth Camp Pack Outfit went out from Mammoth, Agnew Meadow and Lake Mary. McGuffin's Lake Mary Pack Outfit also operated out of Lake Mary, while Slim Tatum covered the Silver Lake passes from his June Lake headquarters.

To tell the adventures, history, campfire tales, and relationships of these pioneer packers to families throughout the two counties would take at least a thick volume. George Brown, for instance, was a respected Chief of the local Paiute Tribe; Brown, Tatum, Summers, Thorington, Schober, Olivas - all are familiar names with families firmly tied to the area. At least one campfire tale deals with who shot the coffee pot out of whose hands for harrassing his flock of trippers!

Livermore wrote of a High Sierra packing experience for the 1977 (8th Annual) Mule Days program. He told of feeling mighty lucky to have been assigned one of the 13 strings of mules used by Allie Robinson on a Sierra Club trip in 1938.

"First of all," he wrote, "Hightrippers don't see anything at all of the preparations at Independence or the deadheading to the point where the Club is first met. To the packers, these are in many ways the highlights of the trip."

When "Ike" arrived at Independence, he found the corrals a busy place, with packers arriving from all over the Valley. "Most of them, with a goodly sprinkling of Independence corral-fence sifters, were watching Allie at work in the corrals. Here, with two or three helpers, he was selecting out of more than 150 head the horses and mules that were to go on the Club trip.



"The stock was pretty well shod up, because Pete Buckley had been on hand for several weeks to tend to the exceedingly tough job. And if you don't think I mean tough, just try and shoe a bronc mule some time. This year, there were ten of them on the High Trip. Allie says he wishes Luther Burbank had been a stock breeder. He might have been able to develop a strain of mules that are born with their shoes on!"

Each packer was issued his gear: pack saddles with rigging, pack blankets, snap ropes, a bell and a blind. They furnished their own saddles and equipment, including bedroll (weight not over 75 pounds!). During the four-day deadhead up the Valley, "no one seemed to know or care who the cook was going to be until after the fire was started. There was no grate, no equipment except frypan, coffeepot and stewpot. Dishwashing was a hasty if not painstaking chore, and the drying was mostly done by air (circulating naturally over a used mule pack cover). But everyone got happily and healthily nourished, which after all is the main thing. In the evening we'd sit around the campfire awhile where the favorite occupation was to 'run mustangs,' i.e. to lay dreamy plans for capturing wild Nevada horses. This didn't last far into the night, though, because the regular rising hour was four.

"Hightrippers' opinions of packers seem to range all the way from disdain through indifference up to admiration," Livermore wrote. "Packers, on the other hand, have a rather uniform and understandable if not quite fair opinion of the Club members" . . . "a feeling of

good natured sympathy which is best expressed by the term 'footburner.' Packers, born and raised with stock, never have been able to see how people could derive pleasure from hiking" . . . "they feel genuinely sorry for what they regard as misguided souls burning their feet up. And when it comes to rock climbing, of course, a packer definitely loses all sympathy and comprehension. The whole subject is completely beyond him, and its devotees are living examples of life's endless mysteries."

One of Livermore's proudest accomplishments was to stop the construction of a trans Sierra Minarets Road which would have cut the John Muir Trail in half and greatly depreciated the High Sierra Wilderness. Construction of roads and dams on the westside reduced the need for packers there, and of 48 in 1936, less than a quarter are still in business. Of the 71 pack trains working both sides in 1935, fewer than 50 remain.



Nonetheless, Old West courtesy still prevails, with packers prepared to make every wilderness trip a memorable experience. They will plan and prepare meals; they will chase and tend the animals; you may ride or walk; they will drop you off, stay with you, or drop your gear at your destination and haul it back out when you're ready to leave. They will arrange guided fishing, hunting, and exploring expeditions, or an outdoor college

course. Learn fly-fishing, mountain cooking, painting, photography, flora and fauna, horsemanship. Go alone, with friends, meet new friends, or take the kids. Smell the coffee in the sharp morning air, hear the birds and splashing water, look into vast distances, eat the trout you just caught, feel the quiet.

"We are an old-style profession in a high-tech world," says Danica Berner of Pine Creek Pack Trains. A truly comforting thought.

Excerpt taken from a report by Norman B. Livermore, Jr.