

Seen From A Saddle

By Ardath Dietrich

If you've always wanted a horse of your own, but for one reason or another have never had one, the saddle trip is the next best thing. For the duration of the trip you own a horse. You don't have to feed him, or brush him down, or saddle him, or see that he has shoes on his feet. You just say when you want him and he is there, waiting to take you on a thrilling ride. And if he is a good, sure-footed trail horse, as was my "Babe," and has brought you safely over tortuous Kearsarge Pass, you learn to trust him, even when he is bringing you down that breathtaking precipice that drops sheer from Foresters Pass, where at every hairpin turn his head and neck are standing out over empty space and his feet are inches from the edge of nowhere.

There were nineteen of us on the trip, a group of people of diverse professions—an orthopedic surgeon, a general physician of a hospital, the chairman of the home economics department of a university, an accountant, an author of technical books, a dress shop owner, a university student, and so on, whose extra-professional skills included photography, mountain climbing, folk dancing, horsemanship, music, and fishing. The battery of cameras was very imposing; we had evidence of the mountain climbing; and proof of the fishing was in those long, delicious golden and rainbow trout frying on the stove every evening about dinner time.

When we left Onion Valley on Wednesday morning we were, for the most part, strangers, and as we zigzagged, single file, across the mountain sides, climbing ever higher toward Kearsarge Pass, there was not much opportunity for getting acquainted. Sometimes we looked up or down at those riding above or below us, and smiled and made some comment, but generally we were silent. Most of us, I think, were seeing the Sierra for the first time, and perhaps the majesty, and the immensity, and the utter peace of our surroundings left us a little hushed.

It was probably our first wilderness evening meal that really brought us together, for what can create a more friendly atmosphere than ravenous appetites, good food to satisfy them, and a warm stove to huddle around? Or the mutual ownership of faces red, hot, and dusty, of knees giving off a creaking sound, and of spots of disconcerting tenderness?

That night at campfire we discovered our string boys and packers. They were an exceptional lot—young, handsome, clever, and talented. We loved them. They could sing, and play musical instruments, and make speeches, and give readings, and be just generally witty and entertaining. And the hips on those boys. The little, tiny hips! I am resolved to do more horseback riding.

We had camped near Center Basin, a lovely spot of sunlight and shade, beautiful views, a cold clear tumbling stream, green grass, and stately pines. The sunsets in this region were particularly beautiful. The rays of light slanted across the rocky faces of the mountains, making interesting shadow patterns that changed and moved and grew deeper in tone while the upper peaks still glowed with sunlight. It was just the spot for a lazy day. Some rode or walked the four or so miles back to Base Camp (which we had passed the afternoon before) to accept an invitation to afternoon tea, some fished, read, hiked a little, took pictures, or sat or lay around and talked.

No matter what we did on any day, there was always our evening meal to look forward to. Doris Steele was our chef de luxe, and a better, more cheerful provider of delicious, wholesome and plentiful food never lived. For instance, we had—believe it or not—fresh corn on the cob; thick, juicy steaks; a big mouth-watering ham baked in our own camp oven; date cake; light, fluffy biscuits stirred up by our leader, Bud Steele; and always a fresh, green salad.

It was a beautiful morning when we left Center Basin. (In fact, all of our mornings were beautiful, as well as our noons and our nights. Not a drop of rain fell.) Everything looked fresh and clean. The grass was still wet with dew, the bare mountains gleamed in the morning sun, the sky was deep blue. The creek, running across the meadow near the trail, foamed over the rocks and stirred the shrubs and grasses along its banks with the current of air it created. The horses stepped along as if they, too, were glad to be alive and going somewhere. I heard someone behind me say, "Gee, this is beautiful. I'm glad I came. I'm sure glad I came." I think he expressed the feelings of all of us.

Almost immediately we began to climb, circling and winding among the mountains, looking down on deep, clear lakes set in treeless rocky slopes, crossing boulder-strewn flats, stopping now and then to let out horses drink from some little stream.

Presently we were looking at a sign which said "Foresters Pass. Elev 13,285 feet." Whew! 13,285 feet! But wait. Figures are meaningless. Seeing is believing. Babe took a few steps forward and passed through narrow opening. For a second my heart stood still. There was a perceptible gasp for breath. Suddenly we had come to the edge of a precipice. The world lay below—far, far below—a magnificent world of mountains and valleys, forests, lakes, plains and rivers.

We started down, human mites inching back and forth across a vertical plane. Never, all my life long, shall I forget the descent from Foresters Pass. No matter how safe you feel on your own two feet, there is some thing about being astride a horse in so high and steep a place that gives you the terrifying feeling of being atop an unstable steeple. When I am ill and nightmares plague my sleep I know I shall dream that Babe set down her foot just three inches too far out, and, I with her, went pitching over the side, turning over and over as she fell through space. And I shall wake up screaming, but then I shall remember that Babe never once miscalculated her distance, that she was a wonder at picking the best spots, and that she never put the weight on one of her dainty feet until she had made sure that what lay beneath was solid clear to China. Bless her!

At last we were down. Good old flat earth! Good old solid, sun-baked boulders! We sat on that good flat earth and on those solid boulders and ate our lunch and craned our necks up at the rock wall before us, marveling that anything without suction-cup feet could possibly have descended it. We wondered how this trail had been blasted out of solid rock, and about the men who had done it.

Since my return from the saddle trip, a friend has shown me a note, written in the days when this trail was being scouted out, and left at Foresters Pass by a Forest Supervisor for a Park Official. It may be of interest to those who know Foresters Pass.

PARK OFFICIAL

7/14/30

This is Forester Pass.

We will run our trail almost north and follow ridge down and crossing to east between the big lake and the little one, then follow the creek down. Figured your side to go west around cliff until you strike bottom.

Took another look at pass above East Lake and it is much worse than this and snow conditions are worse.

We are camped 1/2 mile below timber line in Center Basin. Will go out on 16th.

Junction Pass not open. Horse killed and man hurt three days ago trying to cross.

Cunningham Forest Supervisor.

As we sat gazing upward at Foresters, someone said, "Here comes the first string." High up in the pass there were a few dark moving specks. It was a long time before they started down, and one of the boys said they were untying the mules so that if one fell it would not drag the whole string with it. Breathlessly, for we had been there, we watched those dark specks move back and forth across the wall, becoming larger and larger as they descended, until they finally became a packer on his horse and four or five well-packed mules. The packers are very proud of their strings, and justly so. To pack mules so their loads will "ride," and to bring the whole string down safely, single-handed, from Foresters Pass is no little achievement. Just to have come down that near-2,000-foot precipice on horseback was to me a feat worthy of honor. My pride in it has been somewhat squelched, however, by those who have called me a fool.

This was a strenuous day. Long before reaching camp we were tired, stiff-legged, numb-footed. The horses plodded along wearily, almost too worn out to put one foot before the other, stumbling a little now and then, too tired to be careful. Every valley we came to we thought was it, our camp, but we rode on and on. It was a welcome relief when, finally, late in the afternoon, after a seventeen-mile ride, we turned the brow of a hill and saw below us horses and mules grazing in the meadow beside Wright Creek; and smoke rising from the pipe of our camp cook stove.

We were to spend four nights and three days at this camp. There were trips by horse to Wallace and South America lakes, and there were blazing camp fires every night. We needed them. The nights were always cold and there was ice every morning.

Throughout the trip there were times, I suppose, when each of us wondered why he had come—times when we were dead tired, when our legs ached and our feet were numb from inactivity, when we were cold to the bone, when the dust on the trail was so thick we gasped for breath, when our hands ached with cold after washing in the creek early in the morning, when our sunburn was painful, when we were dirty and had, no place to bathe, when our sleeping bags crawled with ants but the memory of all those things recedes and even becomes pleasant in distant retrospect, while the things that made the trip an adventure in living: will stay bright in our memories. Though I may never again see the High Sierra, I shall always remember the incredible blue of the sky by day, the clean brilliance of the stars by night; the good taste of water from a cold, running stream; the wonderfully refreshing feeling of dangling my bare feet in the creek after a hot hike or ride; the odor of steaks broiling or ham baking when I was starved; waking early enough in the morning to lie there awhile, warm, comfortable, and content, looking at the sunlit pines against the blue sky. I shall never forget waking in the night to the sound of a horse cropping grass close to my head, and lying there motionless, holding my breath, wondering if he would step on me, hearing his cropping get farther and farther away, and then looking out to

see his dark shape still outlined against the starry sky, and finally to hear him clomp, clomp away, his hoofs striking against the stones and rocks. Nor can I ever forget the far-away shouts of the boys wrangling the horses, the cloud of dust appearing down the canyon, the neighing of the horses, the thunder of their hoofs and the mad scattering of rocks and pebbles as they came tearing out of the dust, the wranglers swinging their ropes in the air, half standing in their stirrups, shouting above the din. I'll remember Bud Steele, or one of the boys, coming crashing down the mountainside on his horse, dragging a big log for the campfire; the cry of a far-away coyote; little deer, racing across the clearing, bounding in and out among the rocks; Tommy Jefferson, playing his guitar and singing "She Never Said a Solitary Word"; waking in the night to see the camp fire, whipped by a high wind, sending long roaring sheets of flame across the clearing; the excitement of mounting and getting away in the morning. And I'll remember more than any of these other things, the beauty and majesty of the mountains, throughout the days and nights; the peaceful meadows; the deep, clear lakes; the tumbling streams.

On Tuesday morning we left our "home" on Wright Creek. For most of that day we rode through a beautiful pine forest. It was like another world. Contrasted with the blinding brilliance outside, the forest was pervaded with a subdued radiance, like light coming through high, stainedglass windows. Here and there the sun sent down a golden shaft, spot, lighting a bed of ferns, a cluster of cones, a copper tree trunk. It was very still. High up, the tips of the pines swayed a little against the sky, but the lower branches and the ferns beneath were motionless. To have seen a deer moving through that sunlight and shadow, or to have heard a bird singing some sweet melancholy song would have been—but nothing happened to disturb the hush. The quiet was so deep and abiding that even the passage of our horses seemed not to affect it. Their feet fell upon the soft earth with gentle thuds and even their whinnies and snortings were here somehow subdued, as if they, too, felt the spell. It was as though nature had sound-proofed this place and set it apart from the mad world—a High Sierra sanctuary.

We made our last camp at Timberline Lake, in a valley sheltered on both sides by high rock walls and towered over at the upper end by Mount Whitney and its companion peaks. Measuring it in feet, we had been closer to heaven at other times on this trip, if heaven is up; but for beauty of line, color and arrangement, we had seen nothing so near to paradise as this. Elsewhere, too, there had been lakes shimmering in the sunlight, or lofty peaks, or streams tumbling over rocks, half hidden by overhanging shrubbery, or green meadows, or rocks and windswept pines, but it was the way all these were put together here that filled us with wonder that any place on earth could be so perfect.

From the moment of our arrival there seemed to be an undercurrent of excitement, a feeling of expectancy, as on the eve of a holiday. Tomorrow was the day, the climax of our trip. Mount Whitney loomed above us, challenging, yet, sphinxlike, revealing none of its secrets.

And so to bed. Tomorrow was to be a big day. Up Whitney, down Whitney, and on to Whitney Portal—twenty-three miles in all.

Did we sleep well that night? In the shadow of Whitney? With the ranger's words ringing in our ears?

What *can* I say of Whitney? We climbed it. Rather, our horses climbed) it, panting and struggling, and beating their hearts out to carry us up. The ranger had not exaggerated. There were places where the trail was dangerously narrow, most of it having slid off into space. The rest was on the verge of following, and at every touch of a hoof more sand and pebbles went rattling downward. At the switchbacks there was scarcely room for a horse to turn and the footing was so insecure, being only loose, sloping sand and gravel, that Babe sometimes slid back a foot, two feet, almost to the very edge.

Near the top we crossed a long, narrow ledge. Here it seemed that anyone that reckless could have stretched out his left arm and dropped something, straight down, unimpeded, thousands of feet below, or flung out his right arm and touched a perpendicular rock wall. But the tendency was not to stretch or fling out one's arms, rather it was to sit tight, unmoving, every nerve and muscle taut, drawing the body into a hard knot. Sometimes the wall opened into a window and then we had no solid thing on either side to give us comfort.

There were places where the horses had to step down a foot and a half, or two feet, with nothing to step upon but a jumble of loose, uneven rocks and stones. One such place was on that narrow rock ledge, and here the ledge curved inward. One false move on Babe's part would have sent us plunging into space, and she knew it. She stood motionless for a long time, looking at it, studying it, while my heart stood still and the world spun below. She put one foot out, lowered it carefully, testing the solidity beneath. Then the other foot went down, and there was a sickening drop of the forepart of her body. Now the hind legs must come down too—a maneuver she accomplished with a kind of scrambling motion. So painfully slow and wary is movement on a pin point on top of the world! We moved along the trail again, but any elation I might have felt was crushed by the thought that we were not yet up, and that we would have to come down. Behind me, as someone else reached the same spot, I heard a girl, in the most awe-stricken voice I have ever heard, say, "Oh, my God!"

Mount Whitney is flat on top and covered with huge boulders, and I am convinced without measuring that it is the highest point in the United States. We signed the register, ate our lunch—which Cognac, our pretty little prize-winning mule, had so kindly brought up for us and made ourselves dizzy walking around the edge and looking down. There was no fog, cloud, or haze, and we had an unobstructed view of the "great, wide, beautiful, wonderful world."

I walked down Whitney, and I was not alone. When the man who had ridden up behind me told me that once Babe had put out a hind foot and found nothing to put it on, and had stood there for a while waving it around in space, still finding nothing, that was the last straw. I enjoyed the hike down. It was good to be on foot, and I am sure Babe was glad to be without me. The view, seen with safety, was infinitely more magnificent, the open windows held no terrors, the switchbacks were something to be romped around, and there were beautiful flowers not seen at all on the way up.

At the base of Whitney the others went on, but I sat down in the shade of a big boulder to wait for Babe. I had blisters under both heels.

There I waited an hour in the most tranquil, the most soothing, the most dreamy quiet I have ever known. I was absolutely alone in the world. Once, I think, a bird did fly across the sky, not flapping its wings vigorously, but sailing dreamily, effortlessly. There was no other movement and no sound at all. This, too, was like another world but unlike the forest; here the sun bore down with its full vigor upon the barren slopes and the myriad rocks and boulders which nearly covered the gravelly earth. No green thing was in sight—not a tree, nor a blade of grass.

All the rest of the day we went down, down, down. Every lake, every stream, every meadow was different, yet all were beautiful.

When, late in the day, we rounded a turn at the top of a canyon, and voices from far below floated up to us, and Babe began to prick up her ears and look down and step livelier, I knew that we were getting close to Whitney Portal.

And when we were there and they took off Babe's saddle and put her in the corral, she lay down on the ground and rolled over and over in glee to be free of me. I wished that I could do something for her. She had done so much for me!

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