

The First High Horse Trip

By Anita Day Hubbard

Twenty-nine of us stood there in the early morning clarity at Division Creek, while Allie Robinson passed judgment upon us. Young and old, fat and thin, male and female, he matched us each to a horse. My steed's name was Bud. He was strong and slow and sure-footed, and utterly calm in the face of anything except a bunch of red-topped meadow grass. I think he had not only budded, but bloomed and even a little gone to seed before I met him!

The night before, we had met Ike Livermore at that first, makeshift campfire, with the over-bright electric lights of the power house, and the over-generous warmth of the huge bonfire, about us. Ike's tall, competent, young appearance was reassuring, although he apologized because the prospectus of the trip might have made us expect a veteran in years as well as experience.

We had met the packers and the horse wranglers there too. Later we got to know them individually—Pete Buckley, with his prideful grey mule string; "Big," called that simply because it was his outstanding characteristic' and unmistakable; Roy Alvin, Austin Amick, Pete Garner and Russ Hatfield, and young Tommy Scott. There, by that first campfire, they looked us over, as stock men might have viewed the cattle they were to drive over a long trail, sizing up those that might be troublesome. They had the sharp eyes, quiet voices, and accurate, slow agility of all able horsemen.

Barbara Norris, versatile in all mountain lore, from making sandwiches to introducing the constellations intimately at a campfire, made her bow in the flickering firelight. Put Livermore and Craw Greene, youthful but assured, stood at Ike's shoulder. Martin Brady, the cook, carried the authentic poise of true genius about him. I had steeled myself to the idea of a diet of beans and dried apricots. Martin produced fresh salads and Parker House rolls, and, believe it or not, lemon chiffon pies with meringues!

We other members of the party had been eyeing each other with the critical wistfulness that all travelers set for a long journey together are apt to feel. Finally, Ike had sent us to bed. Thoughtfully unrolling my brand new sleeping bag in the darkness, I had tried to sleep. The morning soon came, and then the judgment at the corral. We mounted, were herded in companies of ten by our individual wranglers. Our carefully weighed dunnage was laden on the aristocratic mules, and off we went into the Sierra, seventy head of stock, Ike and his eleven lieutenants, and twenty-nine assorted "dudes"—the largest all-mounted party ever to go in.

At first, when the trail seemed perilous, I'd try to choose for Bud the way he should go. But each time he'd ignore me, look first at one possible way up an impossible boulder, and then at another, cast one look backward at me to warn me to mind my own business, and then calmly march up a tiny crack without losing a swing of his gait. He came down by the simple expedient of bracing his forefeet, sitting down and sliding. Sometimes, when Bud would come to the sharp point of a switchback, and look out over several thousand feet of drop, I'd repeat my grandmother's admonition for tight places, "What man has done, man can do!," but that was all. Ike had said the trails were not impassable. Others had gone before me. After that first day I let Bud worry about both our necks, and turned my mind to enjoy the new, exciting beauties of the High Sierra.

Very imposing we looked, strung out over the hot sandy plain at the foot of the sharply rising red peaks, as the morning sun led us up and up, through the dust and sagebrush. Then, almost suddenly, we were in a new and sparkling world, of clean granite, with noisy cascades of crystal water, blue gentian meadows, with brilliant yellow borders of mimulus, of delicate aspens, of great twisted trees, of huge tumbled boulders and ice polished slopes that shone like glittering mirrors.

Sawmill Pass, being the first, was spectacular to my lowland eyes. The rock gardens of rosy primrose, golden mimulus and all the rest against their grey granite frame were very exciting.

That first camp at Woods Creek, is a hazy memory of cramped muscles, good food miraculously ready, stars closing down over us as night fell, and sleep coming so swiftly and deeply that the night passed between the closing and the lifting of an eyelid, with blue Vega in the purple darkness giving way to the morning sun and Ike's roaring and beating on the dishpan that it was "Time to get up, get up, get u-u-up!"

The second night, we camped on lovely Rae Lake, under a lowering sky, with a placid sunset in a frame of mountains coming like a benediction. We made camp for two nights, and began to evaluate the shortcomings of our luggage, and the individual charms of our traveling companions. Sunburn lotion, fishing tackle and advice changed hands. Muscles unlimbered. The ardent fishermen caught fish in great numbers, and Martin made magic with them on his amazing range. The campfire became a social treat, with Ike and his accordion the focal point. Little groups of boon companions drifted together as leaves in a pool.

Glen Pass will forever be to me the original setting of Wagner's "Gotterdammerung." Up the rugged reaches the whole string of riders and pack animals could be seen at once, tiny against the huge rock faces, with new peaks rising at every turn, and strange, bleak little lakes of melted snow emerald against the grey.

That night Ike told us we would go over Foresters Pass the next day. Because of his admonitions for care, we felt a new thrill. Apprehension, somewhat about for the first days, was entirely gone. Possibility of danger was a new delight.

The morning dawned with threatening thunder clouds rolling over us. Up we went, and up and up. The top of the pass was touched with mist, and the tumbled talus bleak and long to traverse. Suddenly, as though one walked through a door into space, the sheer face of the drop was under our feet. Over we went, and miraculously, there was a trail, and a good one, zigzagging down the precipice for three thousand feet into the Kern River basin. As we reached the bottom, the storm broke. Lunch was served under a billowing tarpaulin, which deluged anyone who touched the fabric. The fire was long in lighting for the tea, and we were soaked and cold and a long way from camp, but what of it? The rain stopped after a while. No one had grouched or looked glum. We dried out on the way in. There wasn't a sneeze in the lot of us! When we got into camp, Ike was chopping down an enormous tree. Martin had a cauldron of his amazing soup steaming in welcome. We didn't know how they managed. We just accepted the miracle with seemly gratitude.

Milestone reared its sheer pinnacle before us, and that night a party of rock-climbers, lithe, lightly accoutered, and I think slightly pitying us for using horses instead of our own shanks to carry us about in the crags, stopped over with us. Norman Clyde, fabulous figure of the mountains, showed up with his pack that weighed eighty-five pounds, striding along as lightly as a woman with a new fur stole. He told us stories that made our little de luxe adventuring with the saddle horses and pack mules, along known and well marked trails, seem little more than a canter through the park. They sang for us, and did justice to Martin's art. Claire Rutledge accepted an invitation to climb Milestone and vindicated the prowess of the High Horsemen by keeping up with the best of them. We heard about it that next campfire.

Three nights in one camp gave us a sense of permanent residence, after sleeping every night before that under a different tree. One or two of the women changed from jeans to shorts. The men washed their socks. A Sabbath calm overcame us for the one whole day that we neither rode nor struck camp. The fishermen came in laden with golden trout. The photographers discussed their takes. Some of the tireless ones explored Milestone Basin and the South America lake basin. Packers and wranglers looked to their animals' feet. Granite boulders have their way even with iron and steel. The horses and mules just rested.

Mount Whitney came into the conversation. We rode south the next day, by way of the north rim of Kern River Canyon, across Tyndall, Wright, and Wallace creeks, and made camp on the generous reaches of Crabtree Meadow, where the ranger and his wife joined us for dinner and campfire.

In the morning we set out for Mount Whitney, a seasoned, tanned and eager lot. The day was perfect, clear as crystal, and constantly the terrain changed magically at every level. A huge brown marmot, calm and not at all man-shy, came from around his rock and watched us passing. The trail was easy, after what we had covered. Only at the very top, where we passed the "windows," with eight thousand feet of sheer drop under our stirrups, did the way seem perilous. The mountain top actually seemed clubby, with other trippers afoot and ahorse there before us, the rock shelter house, the cairn, the record book for prideful signatures.

But when one looked away from the immediate foreground and into the wilderness, the proportion changed. With no sides and no top to one's view, a clear sky, and only one's eyes to limit the vision, here was the top of the world, indeed, the very pinnacle we had sought in our long journeying.

A last lovely camp at Rock Creek, and next morning we started home, with Army Pass before us. The horses went more swiftly. After days of slow walking we actually cantered here and there. We suddenly realized we had been two weeks away from civilization, with never a newspaper nor a radio to tell us what new insanity humanity had got itself into.

Finally, we came over the rim of the mountains, and down to Carroll Creek, where our journey's end waited us. The perfume of alpine grass and flowers changed to sage and dust. Martin provided a last feast on his mule-back range, perched on the edge of the stock corral, with sage for fuel. We unrolled our beds on hot sand, with a sage brush for shelter. Night fell.

Here was the final gathering, the summing up. More for comfort of the spirit than need of warmth, the sage brush fire lighted our travel-worn faces and our grimy jeans. Everyone relaxed. Ike was like a captain of a ship with a touchy cargo, when his craft is safely tied to the dock and his papers in order. The wranglers and the packers began yarning, now that the trek was over and their dudes safe in the home port. We realized what it had meant to take seventy animals and forty-one humans to the top of the world and back again, where every particle of food and equipment had to go along. There was never a casualty the whole way, of beast or human. There hadn't been a single unpleasant incident, either of the body or the spirit. We who had been willing and trusting followers slipped back into our own responsible selves, and marveled at the amazing wisdom and prescience of the quiet young man who had thought it all out before it happened.

We sat staring at the purple black of the Inyo Mountains, over the hot gold of the fire, and the final miracle happened. The Aurora Borealis, flaming with green and red, shot up into the sky over the hot desert mountains to the east and north! Our cup was filled to overflowing. The first High Horse trip was finished, and with what a curtain!

Excerpt taken from the *Sierra Club Bulletin* of 1940