

A West Side Packer on the High Trip

By Norman (Ike) Livermore

Every packer in the mountains has heard of Allie Robinson and his outfit, but comparatively few have been with him on the Club trip. He has applications from all sorts of packers—real and imagined—good, bad, and indifferent. But Allie for the most part takes only Owens Valley packers, and there isn't much yearly turnover. I therefore considered myself mighty lucky to be assigned one of the 13 strings of mules used on the '38 trip, and I found that realization did not fall short of anticipation. Most club members really don't get much of an idea of a High Trip packer's life, habits, or viewpoint, so I thought a brief article on such things might be of interest.

First of all, 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. This was particularly true for me, a so-called "West Side" packer whose largest previous trip had involved the use of only thirty head of stock.

When I arrived at Independence, I found Allie's corrals a very busy place indeed. Packers were arriving from various points in the Valley. Most of them, with a goodly sprinkling of Independence corral-fence sitters, 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. This is no easy job, and only a person with a lifelong experience of handling and knowing stock is qualified to do it properly.

The stock was pretty well shod up, because Pete Buckley had been on hand for several weeks to tend to this 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!

With the stock pretty well selected, Allie gave each of us our packing equipment which consisted of pack saddles with rigging, pack blankets, snap ropes, a bell and a blind. Packers furnish their own saddle and equipment, including a bedroll (weight not over 75 pounds!).

Our start from Independence was in the cool of dawn, but the rest of the day was plenty hot! Older packers informed me that our four-day deadhead up the Valley was cooler than usual. I didn't say anything, but as I sweltered in the heat, I wished more than once that I was back in Marin County. At midday the heat was terrific.

We never had any lunch, but we made up for this at breakfast and dinner. No one seemed to know or care who the cook was going to be until after the fire was started. There was no grate, and 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.

The packers always look forward with keen anticipation to meeting the Club, and this year was no exception. After our first mingling with the crowds at Agnew Meadow, many were the quips and comments about the various Club members, freshmen and regular.

Hightrippers' opinions of packers seem to range all the way from disdain through indifference up to admiration. Packers, on the other hand, have a rather uniform and understandable if not quite fair opinion of the Club members whose fine love of the Sierra makes the High Trip possible. It might be described as a feeling of good natured sympathy which is perhaps 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. Without analyzing their opinion much, 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 mystery.

The first two weeks of this High Trip were unique for packers because we had literally to live by ourselves, at camps as much as several miles distant from the main Club camp. Francis Farquhar tells the famous story of the George Eastman pack trip where the packers were not allowed to eat with or near the packtrippers. As a result, they set up their own camp, pretended they had lost their stock, and proceeded to play poker for a week. We weren't that bad, but we did have our own camp and had a lot of fun doing it. We were glad at the end of the first two weeks to mingle with our "footburning" friends at meals and campfires, but we had a pretty good time by ourselves those first two weeks. Here is our grub list, made out by Allie; how does it sound to you? I can assure you it is just the fare that packers thrive on:

Grub List—16 Men—10 Days

1 hind quarter beef	1 case eggs
10 lbs. cand. Butter	25 lbs. dry beans, pink
1 sack potatoes	10 cents garlic
12 large cans corn	5 lbs. dry peaches
12 large cans pork & beans	5 lbs. dry apricots
6 1-lb. cans coffee	12 large spaghetti
24 cans milk	1 shaker salt
2 rolls of jack cheese	5 lbs. Crisco
12 large cans tomatoes	10 lbs. rice
2 hams	5 large cans sauerkraut
2 beacons	5 large cans hominy
12 No. 10 cans peaches & pears	1 large can Tea Garden syrup
25 lb. sack flour	1 pkg. tea bags, black
2 med. size cans baking powder	5 pkg. Beeman's gum
50 cents onions, dry	10 lbs. Christmas candy, hard
1 pkg. Arm & Hammer soda	

And as for campfires, it would take a book to recount all the tall tales told there, but here are a few that apply particularly to High Trip packing.

One-eye Fox: A nighthawk of this name was a good hand, but he didn't like to get up in the morning. Often he would unroll his bedding in a conspicuous place in mid-afternoon, only to remove it to some remote spot

after dark, so that Allie couldn't find him early in the morning. Once he even hid his bed under a mass of packsaddles and equipment and slept soundly until breakfast while others had to do the early morning wrangling. But finally his evil deeds caught up with him. In the middle of a cold night at a high camp, Allie chanced to wake up and saw Fox crouching gloomily over the remnants of the evening's campfire. When questioned, he replied dolefully, "I done hid my bed and now I can't find it." After this episode, Fox was the laugh of the camp, and he didn't try bed-hiding again.

Dan Tache: The stories about this famous High Trip cook are legion. Many of them center about the weight and contents of his bedroll. They are doubtless exaggerated, and will become increasingly so in the years to come, but like all such stories, there was an original foundation of truth. At any rate, a half dozen present High Trip packers will swear to the following: It seems that Dan's bedroll was famed for being very heavy and bulky. This condition went on from year to year until finally the commissary packer who loaded heavy stoves with ease could scarcely lift the cook's bedroll. One day when Dan happened to leave camp early, therefore, the bedroll was weighed, and its contents examined. The weight was reported to be well over 100 pounds, and the contents as varied as a mule's moods. Most important item of foreign matter, however, was thirty pounds of assorted hambones!

Air Mattresses: A certain packer had been given an air mattress by an admiring packtripper. After endless blowing, he finally succeeded in inflating his new-fangled creation, and trudged off happily to dinner. When he had left, Allie tarried and let all the air out. After two nights' sleep, the packer didn't notice that the bag was deflated, but he remarked to Allie that he'd be damned if he could notice that the mattress made any difference at all in his sleeping.

Snow Sherbet: On the '36 trip, one of the old time packers was noted for his voracious and everlasting appetite. Along the trail one day some one gave him a can of jam. This he proceeded to mix with snow in the approved manner until he had succeeded in consuming all of it. Not long thereafter, he became sick as a dog, and was in great distress for better than a day. When he recovered enough to voice his sentiments, his only remark was, "They ought to have known when they gave it to me that a whole can of jam would make me sick."

Such is the life of a packer. As the years roll by, packers will come and go. But I hope that the High Trip and Sierra packing will go on forever.

Excerpt taken from the *Sierra Club Bulletin* of 1939