

# *Cowboys Have Always Been Heroes*

*And they still are today*

*By Lynn Clay*

*My hero was my Uncle Lee Summers, a cowboy, a packer, a gambler, a drinker and - as my parents said in hushed tones - a "ladies' man." In other words, a rogue. You can understand my parents' reluctance when he invited me to accompany him on a four-day pack trip.*

*I was just 14 and Uncle Lee was working as a packer for the Forest Service out of Reds Meadows, packing in supplies to the wilderness rangers on the John Muir Trail and carrying out trash, etc.*

*My grandfather, my father (Verne) and Uncle Lee had packed into the Mammoth Lakes backcountry for years. My grandfather and grandmother, Lloyd and Sybil McGee Summers, owned and operated the first pack station in Mono County, the Mammoth Lakes Pack Station, now owned by Lou and Marye Roeser.*

*Hesitant, but knowing the special bond between Uncle Lee and me, Mom and Dad gave their permission. YaHoo! I got to go!! So began my adventure with Uncle Lee and four mules.*

*We saddled up early one morning and off we rode. When I saw him roll a Bull Durham cigarette one handed in the wind and strike a match on his saddle to light it, I thought I would fall off my horse right there. "What a cowboy thing to do!"*

*We rode for five hours; I was saddle sore in two. When we stopped to set up camp, I was dirty, horse-smelly, and exhausted. Far too tired to eat and way too sore to sit down. Lee pitched the tent, laid out my sleeping bag, and laughing a little at my discomfort, said, "Drink this," I did. My first cocktail, a shot of whiskey with a splash of water: "Yuck!" But I woke up ten hours later ready for a hearty breakfast.*

*Mules packed and horses ready, we experienced a beautiful, but uneventful day, camping that night at Purple Lake with wilderness ranger, now Judge of the Justice Court, Patrick Canfield.*

*Heading off the next morning, we found the country breathtaking. By now I was feeling somewhat horse-i-fied. We hit some steep switchbacks going down to a lovely meadow area called Tully Hole, Uncle Lee in front, the four mules and I trailing. I'm not sure, but I think my horse must have been stung by a bee. She jumped up and above the last mule in line, causing him to spook too. The mule lost its footing and in seconds began to slide down the steep shale-covered mountainside. Because the mules were roped together, the third mule started to slide as well. I held my horse fast and looked at Lee. He quickly yanked the lead rope around his saddle horn, spurred his horse with all he had, and pulled the two sliding mules back onto the trail.*

*It wasn't until we were on steady ground that I noticed the pocket knife in his hand. When I asked him about it, he said calmly, "I would have cut them loose." I was stunned and shaken but amazed at the calm reflexes of this man who knew exactly what to do, and I couldn't help but speculate on how it could have turned out so differently.*

*The following day Uncle Lee showed me where Dad had shot his first deer when he was 12 years old. From up on a bluff, he pointed out two small lakes, one named Lee Lake after him, the other Cecil Lake after an old friend of the family, Cecil Thorington, Sheriff of Mono County. In between the two lakes was a small meadow that Uncle Lee thought was unnamed. He said when we returned, he would register it with the Forest Service as Lynn Meadow, for me.*

*When we arrived at Lake Mary Pack Station, Lee told me that my little horse had never been on a trail ride before, and that she liked to buck! "But," he said, "what you didn't know didn't hurt you."*

*As for Lynn Meadow, I don't believe he ever did register it, but that doesn't really matter. Uncle Lee was still alive when I had my daughter, Coral. I am certain he took pride in knowing that her middle name is Lee. Thus: Coral Lee was my meadow-name in his honor.*

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