

Seriously Enough

By Jane Fisher

I once had a packing experience too. Peggy Gray, artist and instructor for the University of California at Riverside, invited me on one of her Watercolor in the Wilderness trips.

"We spend a week traveling and painting in the High Sierra wilderness and Mammoth Lakes Pack Outfit does all the work. All you have to do is sit on the horse and enjoy the scenery."

"Horse?" I said. "Hmmm."

The wilderness is where things growl, howl, screech in the night, sting, bite, and blister, and it's all uphill with no place to sit that isn't hard or wet. But when offered a chance to get back there, I become demented; all I can remember is that things bloom, whistle, sing, glow, and feel, smell and taste better than anywhere else on earth, and no one cares if you skinny dip in an icy lake, eat too much, or keep your flashlight going all night.

Thus it was that I found myself at Sierra Meadows one sunny Sunday evening in August, listening to a short orientation. Lou Roeser, our host, spoke to us about getting along with our horses, with the concomitant (in my case, erroneous) conclusion that we would be better riders by the end of the week.

"Horse?" I said. "Oh, don't bother about a horse for me. I'll walk."

"You wouldn't be able to keep up."

"How about run?" I offered.

"Do you gallop?"

It appeared that, barring the onset of common sense, I would be riding a live horse into the backcountry. We were persuaded that all pack horses are descendants of The Great Mountain Goat and have suction cups on their feet, leaving nothing to chance. Or to some greenhorn who imagines she is in control of a steed that could run all the way home in the dark, and has been known to do so if the drift fence wasn't closed.

Monday morning found us at the pack station waiting to be matched to our chargers, having delivered our luggage to the loading dock with the standard airline prayer that it would arrive at the same camp we did.

With mine, it couldn't matter much. We had been given a personal checklist, but when I got to "mirror," I quit. I remembered, from backpacking trips, that being confronted by a mirror on the third day in the mountains was the origin of the Sasquatch rumor.

Being an old hand at backpacking, I stuffed my duffle bag with books, flashlight, batteries and bulbs in lieu of street lights. I laid out all the other luxuries we were allowed and decided if I couldn't carry all that stuff, no mule should have to, either. You can see that I was not yet oriented to traveling to the backcountry in style. In the end, the duffle

bag was so small I threw back everything but a change of basics, my sweats and a sample of every kind of medicine, pest repellent and first aid support I could find in the house.

I togged myself out in a sort of combination backpacker-jogger middle aged eccentric get up and jammed on a hat of dubious ancestry. Everyone else, of course, wore fashionable variations of western, with a change for each day. We were assured a daily bath would be available. It was, in fact - running right through the meadow below camp.

"You might as well sit down while you're waiting for your horses," advised Peggy, "because tomorrow you will prefer to stand up." We soon mounted - or climbed, were pushed, tugged, coaxed, maneuvered, boosted and airlifted into the saddles and set out for Duck Pass.

Leah, the gentle horse assigned to me, eyed me with disgust but forgave me and dozed most of the way, except uphill, when she decided I weighed three hundred pounds.

"Listen horse," I said, "you are driving and I am the tourist, so I'll watch the scenery and you watch your feet." This worked out rather well, but Leah took advantage of my ignorance. She affected extreme near sightedness, unable to do a proper job of watching her step unless her nose was right down there level with the sweet grass beside the trail. Or the mouthful of daisies, or anything else she could grab to munch. Whenever we reached a high green meadow, Leah thought she was in an equine ice cream parlor. Probably that's why she grew wider as the sun went west.

We crossed the pass easily to Duck Lake, where the trail suddenly became two and a half inches wide and three thousand feet straight down. "Okay horse, it's suction cup time," I pleaded. Everyone else was exclaiming over the ultramarine and cobalt blue lake, the alizarine crimson, thalo blue and cadmium yellow wildflowers, the groves of pine, fir and hemlock. If I'd had any hemlock right then, I'd have swallowed it to put myself out of my miserable terror of heights.

"Look at this gorgeous scenery, Jane," admonished Peggy. Darned if I know how, riding behind me, she could tell I had my eyes squinched shut. Nonetheless, being on the trail is like being on the escalator: once launched there is no turning back and we soon reached the outlet, a fine grassy place with a waterfall, splashing stream and shade.

During lunch break I tried to hide, hoping Leah would fake a limp and I could walk. "Get back on your horse, Jane. We're halfway to Happy Hour and the rest of the ride is a piece of cake. You're gonna love it," said Peggy.

She was right. I loved it so much, it took two wranglers to pry my hands loose from the saddle horn so I could fall off Leah when we reached camp.

Camp - that used to be the place where I only knew I had arrived if I couldn't drag one foot after another, but this kind of camping was a whole new world. I found myself sifting in a lounge chair beside an evening fire, coddled with an anti-groan specific in one hand, snacks in the other, sniffing the aromatic steam from vats of marinated beef and cowboy coffee.

Careful testing proved that all parts that should move did, and those that shouldn't bend no longer bent. Smelling delightfully of smoke, pitch and wild onion, I slid into a warm sleeping bag to watch the pines silhouetted by alpine afterglow in the gathering dark. This was camping?

Excerpt taken from The Album: Times & Tales of Inyo-Mono, July 1990

