

# PACKING WITH THE FOREST SERVICE

by Jo Johnson



This July, I had the opportunity to do some volunteer work with three close friends, one of whom is a Forest Service packer up in Northern California, the other two of whom are hard core packers and Wilderness Riders.

The Forest Service packer we worked with is Ken Graves, whom I met last year at my Wilderness Rider Training. Ken is a Master of Leave No Trace camping, an instructor for the Wilderness Rider's training course, and has been packing for 30 years. The other two folks are serious packers, as well - Ruthie Heuer (also a Master of LNT, and an instructor for the Wilderness Rider's training), and Garry Stauber. The four of us have formed a strong friendship as we all love to pack, and share a very deep and passionate love of the backcountry.



Well, Ruthie, Garry, and I learned from Ken's wife that Ken was working awfully hard and so we offered to help for a few days. On July 18 Ruthie and I loaded up my rig with 4 head of stock, our pack saddles, clothes and camping gear and headed north. After about a seven hour drive we arrived in Red Bluff, where we hooked up with Garry, Ken, and Ken's wife Irene, who joined us for dinner. It didn't take long to see that Irene was right - Ken was working awfully hard. He looked tired and was significantly thinner than when I had last seen him. And we learned the upcoming two weeks were crammed with things for he and his stock to do. Well, we hoped that with the addition of 3 sets of hands, and our extra pack stock, we could get Ken's work done just a little quicker. Garry had volunteered to be our cook for the trip in addition to packing, and so I was fairly certain that with his fabulous Dutch Oven dishes not just Ken, but most likely the rest of us would ALL end up with a few more pounds than we started with. And I hoped that my two young fillies would get some quality packing and riding time.



The first job was packing in a C-crew (California Conservation Corps), who were going in to Lassen National Park to clear trails. We were to pack all their gear, food, and tools in; then return 6 days later and pack it all out again. This was a big crew, and even with 7 head of pack stock it took us 2 trips to get everything in. Things got a little exciting, too, when we realized that there simply was no way we were going to get out before dark.



We ended up riding in the absolute, pitch blackness that happens when you are riding at 10:30 at night, under a canopy of 40' tall trees, and there is complete cloud cover along with a light drizzle of rain. It was so dark that even though my saddle horse and I were very close to the pack mule ahead of us - I could NOT see that mule's rump. Or anything else, for that matter.

If I ever had doubts about a horse's ability to see at night - those doubts are gone forever, now. None of our stock took even a single wrong step - and this was a very rugged trail with lots of stone steps, some over 12" high, plus many twists and turns around trees. I was so grateful I was riding a horse...there simply is no way I could have safely hiked out that trail, not in such total darkness. The horses were amazing. And every now and again Ken would call out to us and make sure we were all OK. It was almost eerie to hear a voice come out of the night, with no idea of exactly where it was coming from. But at least it was comforting to know he was checking on us.



The best part about coming in to camp so very late, was that dinner was ready and waiting for us. (In fact, dinner HAD been ready and waiting....for some time!). We felt half starved by now, and although Garry's incredible fruit- stuffed pork loin went down quickly, we thoroughly enjoyed every bite. However there wasn't as much time for socializing as we might have liked, since we had more work to do early the following day.

Next morning we were up before dawn, loaded our gear and stock, and headed to the USFS corrals in Weaverville. There we were assigned to purchase groceries and resupplies for a Wilderness C-Crew (these folks go deep into the backcountry at the



beginning of summer and often remain there for months, working on trails). Once the supplies were purchased, we packed them into panniers for the trip in. After a slight (but very fun) diversion to deliver supplies for a Sierra Club group that was being packed in by the Shasta-Trinity Unit of BCHC, we were off again.... this time headed north up Hwy 3 to a place called Poison Canyon in the Trinity Alps Wilderness, a few miles from where the Wilderness C-Crew was camped. We saddled and loaded our animals, then headed up the Canyon with clouds rapidly beginning to build above us.

Once we arrived at the C-Crew's camp and unloaded all the supplies, we were treated to a tour. This camp was amazingly sophisticated. It was clear these folks were dug in for the long haul, and we kind of hated to leave as they were snuggling down for the thunderstorm that was fast approaching - while we were facing riding through it to get back to our rigs!

We got back to the trailers before the rain got serious, unsaddled, and loaded the stock into our rigs. We had about an 8-mile trek down a vicious dirt road that required low 4-wheel drive to navigate. Well, we made it almost half way, when suddenly a spring broke on my trailer, instantly shredding my left front trailer tire. The spring was completely sheared off the trailer frame, and the four of us spent almost an hour kicking around ideas about how best to limp off the hill (and out of the rain and thunder).

Finally, the guys decided to load the horses back up, place the spring back where it belonged as best they could, lower the jack and see if the spring would stay in place. Well, amazingly enough it did, and I not only made it the rest of the way down that twisty, bumpy road, I made it the 30+ miles to Weaverville, and to a tire repair shop that sold me a tire and welded the spring back onto the frame.

OK, so now I was back in business again. Just in time to head back across the valley to Lassen National Forest, for the BCHC Wilderness Rider's Refresher Training. I was scheduled to teach 2 classes there the next morning (Saturday), so this was something I really didn't want to miss.

Enroute up Hwy 44 to Lassen, Ken found a place where people could rent cabins for the summer. But what was important to us is, they had a public shower. Well now, you have to realize we had not had a shower, or even anything close to it, in the last four days. So for \$3 apiece to use the facilities, this was a little piece of Heaven on earth as far as we were concerned!

Forty-five minutes later we are all showered, shampooed, and shaved... and headed up the mountain once more. We arrived at the Refresher Training location around 10 PM, just in time to set up our tents, have a nightcap with everyone else who had beaten us there (by several hours), and watch yet another spectacular lightning storm approach. It poured rain on us most of the night but as far as I know, everyone managed to stay dry. Thankfully, my tent had been waterproofed and so I was snug as a bug.

We left the training course location around mid-morning Sunday. Pete Kriger joined us, since he knew our next job was to clear a trail up in the Shasta Trinity National Forest. Pete had two head of stock with him, and he'd offered to help with the trail clearing on his way back home. So we scampered up Hwy 3 one more time.

We arrived at what seemed like the Top of the World - better known as the Parks Creek Trailhead on the Pacific Crest Trail. We were going up past Deadfalls Lakes to Eddy Peak, clearing the trail for an upcoming fish drop. This is truly some of the most spectacularly beautiful country I have ever seen - it is rugged, yet softened with displays of wildflowers everywhere. Crystal clear lakes lie over almost every rise. Tiny waterfalls tinkle down the mountain every now and again, the sky is bluer than I have ever seen it, and it feels as though you can reach up and touch the clouds billowing above. Ummmm - wait a second....clouds - AGAIN?

We finished our work and started back down to the Trailhead. Meanwhile, sure enough, we could see a storm brewing over the Trinity Alps to the west. Once back at our rigs, the rocky ridge where we were parked offered perfect seating for viewing the lightning display while we ate our dinner. Of course, it meant more work would be forthcoming for Ken, since he would probably be diverted from his other jobs to pack in resupplies to the fire crews. But in the meantime, we sat and enjoyed the show. What a terrific way to spend an evening - dining on Garry's fabulous Dutch Oven food, oohing and ahing at the light display in front of us, and counting the seconds in between flash and boom.



Well...before too long Ken calmly pointed out that what HAD been a back-row seat, was rapidly becoming a center row seat - and that since we were completely exposed on the ridge where we'd had to park our rigs, we might want to start thinking about getting down off the mountain and out of harm's way. We halted our revelry long enough to notice the storm was, indeed, now headed straight up the canyon toward our little "dining room". So, reluctantly, we slowly began to stow our gear and prepare to drive down the mountain to a safer spot.

It wasn't 10 minutes before what Ken had predicted came true - thunder cracked right overhead, and lightning threatened all around. Now we shifted into high gear. We had SO wanted to stay there - but now it was absolutely clear that we needed to get the heck off the mountain....fast.

Which is what we did. We loaded up in record time and barreled down the mountain - by now the drizzle had become a torrential rain and the lightning was so frequent we hardly needed our headlights. But ....it washed our trucks clean!

We made it to the junction of Hwy 3, and due to the heavy rain and thunder spent a noisy night, parked in a turnout there. We left all the stock in the trailers - it just didn't seem safe to unload them in the storm - the lightning was so intense. Next day dawned bright and clear though - except for the smoke from all the fires burning to the west of us. Pete, Ruthie, and I ate a hasty breakfast of leftovers from the previous night's dinner, fed and watered the stock, and I took a quick (and cold) morning swim in the nearby creek. Then the three of us headed off on a side trip to visit friends.

Ken and Garry though - not surprisingly - ended up being diverted from what was supposed to be a day of completing paperwork for the Forest Service. Instead, they were reassigned to packing in supplies for the many fire crews that were already out working, thanks to the previous night's lightning storms.

The two of them worked hard that day - and have their own very exciting story to tell about the storm they had to ride through while packing gear for the fire crews. Listening to them talk about it the next morning, the hair raised on the back of my neck - it is amazing neither of them was hurt in the intensity of this storm. On the one hand I wished I had been with them.....on the other hand, quien sabe? ...things happen for a reason and who knows what might have been different, had Ruthie, Pete, and I been there, too. But, because we had elected to spend the day in Scott Valley, we missed participating in all their "fun".

Next day we all met up again at Lassen National Park. It was time to saddle up the stock and bring out the C-crew's goodies that we had packed in, several days before. So off we went, hitting the trail with empty panniers. We arrived at the C-crew's camp and were met, as usual, with a wonderfully happy and welcoming group. It was amazing to me that this crew, who had been working so very, very hard for almost a week, could manage to be as upbeat as these folks were. And the neatest thing? The Park Service employee we had been dealing with, Joe, told us we had made history during these trips. Turns out the Park had not allowed stock in there for decades - something we had not been aware of.

Well, what we did know is that we made 28 loads, and had packed 2 1/2 tons of gear in and out. It was good ....for the Park, for the C-crew, for the animals, for us...and it was hugely fun. It's pretty hard to beat that.

Next day, we all had to go our separate ways. It was awfully hard to say goodbye to Ken and Garry, and I can hardly wait to work with them again. For anyone who loves the backcountry - I just don't know how you can have any more fun than this had been.

Ruthie and I stayed one more night in Lassen, then headed home before dawn the following morning. It had been a wonderful, fulfilling, and rewarding 10 days which I will never forget.

