

By DAVE REESE
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Founders of Backcountry Horsemen Look Back on 30 Years of Wilderness Work

Thirty years ago, in a wall tent in the middle of the Bob Marshall Wilderness, a group of horse packers began to see the writing on the wall.

And that writing said in big bold letters that HORSE PACKING AS WE KNOW IT IS OVER.

And the men were scared. Scared that the form of recreation they loved would end, terrified that only with a permit could you enter the Bob Marshall Wilderness on a horse.

So the men decided that when they returned from the backcountry, they'd rally fellow horse users to form an organization that would preserve wilderness horsepacking.

Now the Backcountry Horsemen of America is a thriving organization with 14,000 members, and chapters in 14 states. The Flathead Valley founders - Roland Cheek, Lloyd Fagerland, Dennis Swift, Ken Ausk and Dulane Fulton - look back on an organization that accomplished what it set out to do.

From the outset, they knew that this organization would have to be different. Rather than throwing barbs at the U.S. Forest Service, the founders of Backcountry Horsemen promised to sit at the table with the land-use planners, and back up their constructive criticism with real, on-the-ground labor.

For decades, horsemen had used the backcountry as if it were their own. And for the most part it was, until backpacking came along in the early '70s with lightweight gear and hordes of people wanting to "get back to nature." Well, the horsemen were already there - and they intended to hold on to their territory. But they had to shed some old habits to coexist with hikers and backpackers.

"We had to clean up our act," Ausk says now, a bit grayer than he was when he helped form the club, but still a horseman by all means. "Horsemen were making a mess of the backcountry."

The "pack it in and leave it" philosophy didn't bode well with burgeoning numbers of backpackers. "

A lot of it (the misuse) was ignorance," Fulton adds. "They didn't know any better, they'd been in the woods for years, and that was the way their fathers did things."

Backcountry Horsemen of America headed off that collision with hikers and backpackers by lending thousands of hours of labor on trail-improvement projects that the Forest Service simply couldn't afford to do itself.

"We felt we didn't have a right to criticize if we didn't offer ideas to help make it better," Cheek says. "We did not criticize the agency unless the criticism benefited the resource. That should be a pilot for other organizations to follow."

An example of this was when the Forest Service proposed removing the aging packer's bridge across the upper South Fork of the Flathead River near Salmon Forks.

"We went to the mat with them on that one," Cheek says.

Removing the bridge would have exposed backcountry users to a dangerous river crossing and would have impacted the land more than the bridge did, says Cheek. So, with the blessing of the Forest Service, the horse group hauled in some 16,000 pounds of

cement and lumber and rebuilt the bridge.

Part of the reason for starting the club was not just to help avoid the collision course between horse users and hikers; the Forest Service had created a management plan for the Bob Marshall wilderness that, among other things, would have required horse packers to have a permit to travel in the wilderness, and would have limited the number of horses a group could have.

"That plan could have done nothing but created opposition," Cheek, an author and outfitter says. "It was darn lucky for them (the Forest Service) that the Backcountry Horsemen took a very positive approach to a pyrotechnic issue."

With a strong local following behind them, the Backcountry Horsemen of America organized in Kalispell on Jan. 17, 1973. Soon to follow was a club in Missoula, a "happy go-lucky breakfast outfit" that Fulton says helped the founders quickly realize they would need some guidelines to keep the group's goals in focus.

The organization grew over the next six years to include nine other chapters around the state. In 1979, the Montana clubs joined with Salmon, Idaho, to create the original Backcountry Horsemen of America. Then, in 1985, it joined with High Sierra Stock Users of California, and Backcountry Horsemen of Washington to become what it is today.

In the 1970s and 80s, the Forest Service had little budget for recreation, let alone building bridges for stock users. In addition, ranger districts were cutting their budgets for stock. Throw in some resentment by hikers, and you have a recipe for eliminating horse packers from the woods, says Ausk.

"A ranger would look pretty good if he saved some money by cutting horses," he says.

Backcountry Horsemen was instrumental in breaking down that resentment toward horse users.

"I don't sense it as much anymore," Cheek says now. "Time, I think, takes care of some of those things. Some of the agency people maybe realize now they'd like to ride a horse back in there."

The founders of the Backcountry Horsemen of America might not spend as much time in the wilderness as they once did, but it's still important to them to know it's there - and accessible.

"I feel more free when I'm in the wilderness," Cheek says. "But freedom can sometimes be a scarce commodity. You have to go back periodically to get an injection of freedom."

Reporter Dave Reese may be reached at 758-4438 or e-mail at dreese@dailyinterlake.com

SIDEBAR

The Flathead Valley chapter of Backcountry Horsemen of America welcomes new members. Some members don't even have horses, but are willing to help with trail projects. When working on some projects they leave the horses at home. There are even members who own llamas, and the club welcomes newcomers to horses. Dues are \$30 a year for families. You can do as much or as little work as you want. "There's no arm twisting to get things done," says president Jack Bradford. Being a member of the club also opens up new contacts in the horse arena. "It's been a good support group for me," says Ed Quigley, a member of the board of directors. Last year the club helped with the "I Care a Ton" program that donated thousands of pounds of hay to fire victims in the Bitterroot Valley. It's not all work, though. They have social rides, packing clinics and events for families. Last summer the club performed trail and trailhead maintenance in

several areas of northwest Montana. Here are some of their projects:
Holland Lake trail-packed gravel for trail repair
Meadow Creek (South Fork) - building and clearing trail
Glacier Park - clear old ranger station trail near Quarter
Circle bridge
Bear Creek Loop - brush out trail
South Lost Creek - trail clearing
Elk Calf Mountain - trail clearing
Logan Cr. (South Fork) - trail clearing
Tuchuck (WF Divide) - trail maintenance
Geifer Cr. - trail maintenance
For information about the Flathead Valley chapter of
Backcountry Horsemen of America, call Jack Bradford at 755-8525.
Meetings are at 7:30 p.m. the second Tuesday of each month at Montana
Fish, Wildlife and Parks building in Kalispell at 490 N. Meridian Rd.

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