Hey there, my friends:

I would like to start my message by saying what a great organization Back Country Horsemen of Montana is. As I was receiving information from the chapters for my chairman’s award I was very impressed by the great work all of you are doing. I am humbled to be your state chairman.

I would also like to say thank you for re-electing me to a second term. I appreciate your continued confidence in me to be your leader. I stated after my re-election that even though this position is challenging, I really do appreciate the privilege to be chairman of Back Country Horsemen of Montana. I also appreciate my team, Brad Pollman, vice chairman; Nancy Pollman, secretary; Rich Carl, treasurer; Chuck Miller and John Chepulis, our national directors; Dave Crawford, past national director; Mark Himmel, past state chairman; all of the state directors and committee chairman. As a team, we are working together continuing the long standing tradition to assure Back Country Horsemen of Montana remains an outstanding organization. Your hard work as volunteers is much appreciated by our partner groups.

I want to commend Selway-Pintler Wilderness Back Country Horsemen for putting on an exceptional state convention this year. The convention was unique, fun, entertaining as well as educational. The movie, “To the Town of Downing” was a highlight. This movie, written, filmed and produced by young folk was inspirational and entertaining, with a great plot and I really enjoyed the comical aspects that they instilled throughout the movie. Having folks’ names within BCH, even though twisted a little, greatly added to the entertainment to the movie. Hat’s off to you!

Our national directors, Chuck Miller, Dave Crawford and the new national director, John Chepulis, as well as Mack Long who is on the national executive committee, Mark Himmel, our new national director alternate, and me tagging along, attended the National Board of Directors meeting in Sacramento, CA. I was amazed by all of the folks from across the country who believe in the mission of Back Country Horsemen of America. The passion that was exhibited was very refreshing. I appreciated having the opportunity to meet and get to know the folks who I have been on teleconferences with. There were some challenging

Letter continued on page 2
topics discussed. It was rejuvenating to see that BCH folks across the country really do listen to Montana, as the founders of this organization. Going to this meeting, I have gained a whole new perspective of BCHA. I feel this organization is up for the challenges ahead and that they will represent our equine interests superbly.

At the last state directors’ board meeting in Deer Lodge, we had a request for a new chapter that has formed in the Flathead Valley wishing to become affiliated with BCH of Montana. After dialogue with the representatives of the new chapter to make sure they will follow the constitution of the state and their new chapter has met all of the requirements, their request was approved by the state board. I would like to say welcome to BCH Montana’s 18th chapter, NorthWest Montana Back Country Horsemen.

Summer’s coming and I am sure everyone is getting ready for a busy summer with our equine partners. I wish everyone a safe and fun filled summer season.

I would like to end with a few reminders.

Please do not tie your stock to trees overnight in camp; place your high-lines on a good durable surface 200 feet from any water source. Let’s leave our camps in better shape than when we found them; follow the food storage orders in your area; be courteous to the other users we pass along the trail; pull over and allow vehicles to pass when we are pulling horse trailers down the gravel trail head roads; and please use certified weed seed free feed to help stop the noxious weed problem that is growing in our back country and wilderness areas. These are just a few of the things we can do to show the public that we as horsemen and women really do appreciate and respect our natural resources and the trails that we have the privilege to ride our equine partners on.

Have a safe and happy summer!

Yours on Wilderness trails,

Connie Long, Chairman
Back Country Horsemen of Montana

The 2014 Back Country Horsemen State Convention was hosted by the Selway-Pintler Wilderness Chapter and held near Hamilton. The convention received accolades from participants.

The enthusiastic crowd at the cross cut saw competition is a testament to the event’s success.

Read about it on page 8.
What had started in 2007 as an ordinary trail clearing project has turned into a trail from hell.

Let me explain: Starting in the spring of 2007 we were sent a list of projects from Ian Bardwell, Trails Manager on the Rocky Mountain Ranger District. On that particular list was the Weasel Creek Trail. For those of you that may not be familiar with that particular trail, I will give you a brief description and history of the trail. The Weasel Creek trail (trail #245) connects the Jackie Creek-Smith Creek trails (#215) with the Elk Creek trail (#205) on top of the Dearborn Divide; it was a very popular hunting trail for many years. Unfortunately this trail met its demise with the great fires of 1988.

Our chapter decided that it sounded like a good project to tackle – piece of cake, a nice weekend project. We started out one Friday in late June and headed to the Elk Creek trailhead. We had decided we would camp a little ways from the actual trailhead in a spot that had a nice open meadow with good grass for our stock. When I say nice grass, I am not exaggerating; that grass was up to the shoulders of our horses and they all thought they had died and gone to heaven. We thought, “How good can it get, nice camp spot, wonderful grazing for the stock, and a nice trail clearing project on a beautiful weekend.”

Well, that’s where our piece of cake project ended.

We divided our participants into two groups at the top of Elk Creek pass. One group headed up the Elk Creek trail to the top of the Dearborn Divide. We cut and cut and never even got to Weasel Creek. The other group encountered the same thing on their trail, cutting dead-fall on the trail and never reaching the junction with Weasel Creek. That was on Saturday. On Sunday we decided we would try and get the Elk Creek trail open to the Dearborn Divide, which we did, but we cleared sparsely, only getting rid of the biggest obstacles so the trail could be used.

We decide we would come back on Labor Day Weekend.

On Labor Day weekend our work crew was quite small; only four of us were on hand. With the Forest Service crew finishing the Jackie Creek-Smith Creek trail, we started up Weasel Creek. At first the going was pretty good, as a portion of the lower trail was open meadows on east facing slopes. When we got in a little further, we ran into a draw filled with what used to be some old growth timber. We had two 4 foot diameter trees to deal with using a 14 inch bar chainsaw and a crosscut.

Needless to say, we spent the remainder of that day clearing those large trees. These are the type of trees that we don’t see a lot of on the East side.

2008: We start up Weasel Creek, clearing a few blowdowns that had occurred over the winter. As we proceeded up the trail we got into some pretty good going. Then we reached a small plateau and what we saw were trees lying across the trail that looked like the good Lord had spilled a box of matches. Trees were crisscrossed across the trail as far as the eye could see. Well, needless to say, progress on the trail for this year did not progress as we had hoped.

Trail from Hell continued on page 4.
2009: That was to be the year that we made it to the end of Weasel Creek. With great expectations and a feeling of renewed vigor, we started up our favorite trail. Wrong. It snarled its ugly head and shook us off making it look like we had done absolutely nothing.

Once again we headed home with our tails between our legs. Oh well there is always next year.

2010: We planned another assault on our trail, although, because of some other projects and obligations, the only time slot for going up was on Labor Day weekend. This year there was only three of us. We decided to head up Elk Creek to the Dearborn Divide and see if we could locate the head of Weasel Creek. When we got to where the trail intersects with the Steamboat Mountain Trail, the trail junction sign was down. Locating a suitable dead standing tree we repaired the sign. When we got to the top, with considerable looking, we finally found the Weasel Creek trail. As you can probably guess we only got in approximately one hundred yards.

2011: We did not make it to our favorite trail on this particular year. However, Ian Bardwell was able to send one of the Forest Service crews to tackle Weasel Creek when they had finished all the main line trails. They were able to clear quite a bit of the area where the trees looked like spilled matchsticks. Yahoo for us!

2012: We had planned to take on our most favorite trail once again, but the weekend we had planned to go, it rained quite a bit. Being concerned with the road condition and pulling trailers, we decided to postpone the project and we never made it back that year. Of which did not hurt my feelings one little bit.

2013: It was Memorial Day weekend and we were set to tackle Weasel Creek from the top once again. On the way to the top we had some additional blow down to take care of. As we got close to the top we encountered a rather large snow bank engulfed in a ravine that completely covered the trail and there being no way to go above or below the trail. One of our illustrious crew leaders (Ron) decided that it was just fine to cross, which wasn’t too bad. That being said only three of us dared the crossing. The rest of the crew decided to work their way back towards the pass. As we proceeded up the trail we encountered some more blow down, which we took care of. Did I mention that it was record snow year that winter?

When we get to the top of the Dearborn Divide, where Weasel Creek starts, we encounter an enormous snow bank with no way to cross. We decide to head back down and as we get back to the ravine with the snow bank the remainder of our crew was there waiting for us.

As we approach the crossing, the horses were very apprehensive about crossing that snow bank again. So once again, our illustrious leader got off to lead his horse. With considerable coaxing Ron got him to step out onto the snow bank where he, the horse, slipped on his slide but was able to catch himself;

He got up and fell in up to his belly. Thank god, he was able to get out, with considerable lunging.

That left two of us with three horses wondering how the hell we were going to get out of this mess. When Debbie
dismounted, her horse, seeing his buddy on the other side, as gingerly as anything I have ever seen, proceeded to tip-toe across that slick glacial pile of snow. We let the other two horses follow. Debbie and I were able to follow in the horses’ foot prints and make it safely to the other side. All I can say is thank the Lord nobody slipped because it might have been a wild slide down to the bottom of that coulee.

2014: Once again we were blessed with a good size crew. We divided into two different groups. The first group would lead the assault; the other crew would bring up the rear. The advance crew headed straight for the bottom of Weasel Creek to the last area that we left off. The other crew worked the trail behind us, also doing the main trail. We were able to make it to the top of the Dearborn Divide to where the trail dissects a small portion of the Scapegoat Wilderness.

Of course. As luck would have it, no chainsaws.

I was able to determine with my GPS that we were within a quarter of a mile or so with the junction on top of the Dearborn Divide. One small problem, it is an old growth area (big trees).

2105: We hope this will be the year we are going to finish Weasel Creek. We have set June 13-14th as the date for the end of this trail saga that has been going on damn near a decade.

Wish us LUCK.

“Your service is amazing. We go through so many shavings and you have always fulfilled our orders. The shavings are always clean and the horses love them.”

Lisa Andeson, Copper Spring Ranch, Bozeman

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ON DECK – OCTOBER DECKER DISPATCH
The following chapters will have the opportunity to submit an article for the October issue of the Decker Dispatch – the newsletter of the Back Country Horsemen of Montana. The editor will provide your chapter notice a month ahead of the due date.

LAST CHANCE CHAPTER

MILE HIGH CHAPTER

MISSION VALLEY CHAPTER

NORTHWEST MONTANA CHAPTER

MISSOULA CHAPTER

SELWAY - PINTLER CHAPTER
Developing a Program to Teach Back Country Packing Skills
by Gallatin Valley Chapter BCHM

We are faced with losing the art, skill, and passion of packing horses and mules into the back country because the younger generations haven't been shown why we appreciate being able to spend time in the back country, to enjoy the beauty and the solitude.

Living in a society in which most people want instant gratification, and lacking the patience to learn the skills it takes to pack an equine animal for a trip into the back country may be some of the reasons there is a lack of interest.

Well, a group of Gallatin Valley Back Country Horsemen have decided to change this situation. We are developing a program that teaches equine safety, how to get the equine in shape for the season, environmental and trail etiquette, proper load balance and weight, selecting good equipment, and food preparation for a safe trip into the back country.

Our guiding motto is, “We haven’t taught our young people why we love and appreciate this country yet.” With this as our focus, we developed our program.

We first developed a plan for how to pay for the program. Next, we got sponsors in the community to help take ownership in this program. Then, we developed a syllabus with the guidance of Dale Moore and Bob Hoverson. They incorporated the program into the 4-H equine program with the help of Todd Kesner, director of the state 4-H organization.

The Gallatin Valley Back Country Horsemen have been hosting the 4-H packing clinic for the past two years and it has developed into a very exciting project... The growth of these clinics has been unbelievable.

The main vision of these clinics was to be able to pass the skills and passion of back country packing on to the younger generation and it is working great. Why? Because we first developed a good plan and then we involved very knowledgeable people to help instruct.

We would like to like to thank all the people who have unselfishly volunteered their time to help make this program successful.
When Mark told me he was going to write an article on the “Game of Logging” techniques, I thought “Another article written by the sawyer….”

Well, there is another side to the “Game of Logging”. In early December Mark told me he was going to a chain saw course, and oh, it’s in Florida. Thank you, Connie Long, you know I’m the one who loves the beach. And Mark... he hates the beach. To him, sand is something you mix with cement. He assured me there was no beach, just forest. Of course it’s still Florida in February, and I’m in Montana.

During the week he was in Florida there were daily pics of guys cutting trees and bucking horrible messes they created with their directional falling. There was sand but, as he said, they were in the forest not on a beach.

When he got back, all he talked about was new techniques he learned and how the instructors played mind games with them to judge their decision making process.

On our first work project of the year, Mark informed the work party that he was going to change things up a little with “Game of Logging” techniques. He assured us that it would be very interesting and that all work party members would be involved.

Approaching the first mess of tangled trees, we were asked to look for hazards (widow makers) in the trees or on the ground. Mark next stated his plan on how he would cut each segment and what saw cut he intended to use on the downed tree. As volunteers on work projects, but not sawyers, several of us never saw this side.

Side tension, up or down compression, end to end compression, and roll over were discussed before cutting. I never even heard of this stuff before. Each sawyer would state his plan before starting to cut. As observers we watched the sawyers to see if they chose the correct cut; or if not, the blade might pinch and require a second saw to get them out of trouble. I could also see when things didn’t go as planned. The cutter would stop and restate his plan because the things he saw happening were not what he anticipated on the first evaluation. In the past none of this was vocalized to the rest of the group.

All of this kept the whole work party knowing what was going on and time passed by quickly. We all knew where a tree was going to fall. Before “Game of Logging,” a tree came crashing down. I’m not sure if it landed where the Sawyer planned; I had no idea what to expect.

A person does not have to cut to be involved on the decision process. I was especially impressed with the last tree fall of the day – a nasty leaner, lowered down with a controlled cut and a slow and easy fall. Maybe the thrill of a crashing tree and scattering people is something best left for the movies.

All in all a fun day and now I know what a widow maker is – and if I find out there was a beach in Florida, there’s one more widow maker he better look out for.
The 2015 MT Back Country Horsemen State Convention was hosted by the Selway-Pintler Wilderness BCH in Hamilton, MT on March 27th-29th at the Bitterroot River Inn. The SPWBCH is one of the two youngest chapters in the state, having formed in September 2006. This was their first time hosting. The theme they chose this year was “Horses & Mules…Saddles & Saws”, focusing on the common bonds that all Back Country Horsemen share. The challenge was a big one, but after accepting to host the convention they hit the ground running with a hard-working, dedicated team.

Hosting the state convention in a small town is not such an easy task, but the hard-working, creative members decided to brainstorm some new ideas and directions and hoped to put on a convention that would “entertain with a slice of education”! The hotel did not have a kitchen and they hoped to put on a convention that would “enter with a slice of education”. The hotel did not have a kitchen, therefore there were not any of the usual supplies. The SPWBCH, having very limited funds, began a 2 year plan of yard sale-ing and borrowing in order to provide the needed convention supplies from drinking glasses, salt and pepper shakers to water pitchers, etc. With a venue too small to accommodate vendors and workshops, the SPWBCH looked beyond the hotel to the park next door. That is how the unique idea of “Boomtown” was created.

Boomtown was a display of thirty four heated wall tents, a vision one might have seen back in the 1800’s. The canvas wall tents were various sizes and heated with wood stoves. Over 25 vendors and seven partner organizations “set up shop” in the wall tents and offered the convention attendees a chance to shop and engage in some “trail talk”. The SPWBCH also had raffles and games located in Boomtown. Boomtown visitors could buy a chance at winning prizes in a “Camp Raffle”, a “Packin’ Raffle” or the “Jasper” mule raffle. For fun they could play one or all of the three games—“Scats and Tracks” (matching back country wildlife to their molded and lifelike scats and tracks), a Packer Pellet guessing game (how many pellets were in the 3” tall canning jar) and a Dart Game (where winners could choose from an assortment of prizes if they could hit the circles on a deer archery target). All proceeds from the Dart game went to Outdoor Youth Education.

Boomtown was open to the public, and created a venue where BCH attendees a chance to shop and engage in some “trail talk”. The program listed the event as “Remem-bering a Legend of Country” and kept the famous artist a secret until the performance. Bitterroot valley performers, Amber Lynch and Wil Wilkins, wove a blend of story-telling, poetry and country singing in honor of the famous Miss Patsy Cline. Wil had grown up with Patsy (Virginia) and knew her personally. Amber had performed at the Hamilton Players in a one woman show about Patsy Cline. The Back Country Horsemen were honored by Wil in a custom written poem about BCH. Sunday morning “Back Country Church” was held in the Selway- Outpost, a heated 16X30 canvas wall tent loaned to the SPWBCH by the Gallatin Valley Back Country Horsemen, and erected on the hotel lawn. To the west was the view of the majestic, snow-capped peaks of the Bitterroot Mountains and a quiet, peaceful little spring pond. Church goers were inspired by the singing and musical accompaniment of guitars and a beautiful sermon by best-selling author and retired Bob Marshall wrangler and wilderness ranger, Rebecca Ondov.

With no resolutions this year, the convention general session was a mix of the usual annual business and speakers whose presentations centered on the convention theme. The business portions of the convention enabled some important conversations regarding our efforts as Back Country Horsemen, while speakers gave talks on the history of mules, Decker pack saddle history and cross-cut/saddle saws.

There was a big change this year. In lieu of the chapter boards, a BCHM DVD Musical Slideshow created by Trish Foster featured projects and events from all the chapters around the state. A complimentary copy was given to each chapter/State Director so that members from around the state, unable to attend convention, would have the chance to see it.

There was also a DVD Musical Slideshow honoring and paying tribute to horses and mules, our partners on the trail. National Chairman, Jim McGarvey, and his wife Cindy, joined in the fun and Jim was a keynote speaker on Saturday morning during the general session. The Flathead chapter created a beautiful memorial display in honor of Ken Ausk to make sure that Ken was with us in spirit. Joni Packard and the Region 1 Forest Service presented awards to those BCHM members who volunteered for the “Untrammeled” film project during the Wilderness 50th Anniversary.

BCHMT Chairman, Connie Long, presented what she hoped would be an annual award, called the...
Chairman’s Award. The 2015 recipient was past Chairman, Mark Himmel. Connie also presented awards to individual chapter recipients who had been chosen and nominated by their respective chapters.

From the crafted handmade candy cans, vintage western horsemen placemats, tables accentuated with large red bandana table cloths and flowering spring sprays of forsythia, yellow willow, red twig dogwood and pussy willow, and a 9X12 painted stage mural by Terry Reed depicting “Horses & Mules...Saddles & Saws”, to the life-size paper mache mule and horse (Molly and Dolly), Saddle Bag lunch, grilled Chuck wagon buffet dinner served “camp style” on aluminum pie plates and miniature back country wall tent banquet centerpieces, it is the hope of the SPWBCH membership that the 2015 MT BCH State Convention was a fun, unique and memorable convention for all that attended!

A big thanks to our supporters and we send our gratitude to those chapters who helped us make this convention a success. Thanks to the Mission Valley BCH for the use of their tent, the fire pit for Boomtown and to Scott Kiser and Connie Plaisay for keeping the sound system up and running. Thanks to Dan Marsh for being the “tech” guy and making sure all the slideshows/presentations were up and going on the “big screen”. Thanks to the Wild Horse Plains chapter and Flathead chapter for their sponsorships for Western Youth night and the Dutch oven desserts. And finally, thanks to the Gallatin Valley BCH and Henry Glenn, who was the very first to offer us the use of their wall tent and became the inspiration for the Selway Outpost and Boomtown! We couldn’t have done it without you!

Sincerely,

The members of the Selway-Pintler Wilderness Back Country Horsemen
The Judith Basin Chapter of Back Country Horsemen of Montana in partnership with the Lewistown Field Office of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) produced their 3rd Annual “Sharing Trails Day,” on Friday, April 24th, at the Sale Ring and Riding Pavilion on the Fergus County Fairgrounds.

“Sharing Trails” is a hands-on, interactive learning experience engaging over 120 local 6th graders every spring. Sixth grade students from Lewistown, surrounding county and Hutterite schools and home schooled students are invited to participate. Students arrive by bus and van between 8:30 and 9:00 a.m. with a sack lunch, ready to experience the day!

The day begins with a skit demonstrating safety and etiquette guidelines when meeting other back trail users in the wilderness, (i.e., horsemen meeting ATVs). The importance of communicating, being safe and respecting other trail users is emphasized.

Students circulate on cue among a variety of information/presentation stations that include hands-on activities: using GPS units, map reading, day packs, survival, weed identification and eradication, horse education, snowmobile education, ATV & motorcycle education, biking tips and public stewardship.

All stations focus on the importance of knowing and practicing back country trail etiquette and safety.


Each of the presenters create hands-on interactive learning experiences for the students. Adding to the excitement are a trail horse, a packing dummy, ATVs, snowmobiles, motorcycles, hiking and survival gear and GPS units to try. “Leave No Trace” and “Bear Aware” are touched on as well.

Each student received a goodie-bag at the conclusion of the day containing a “Sharing Trails” T-shirt and a variety of literature and mini gifts.

In addition to reaching local 6th grade students with hands-on learning experiences and back country trails safety and etiquette information, those participating as presenters in “Sharing Trails” over the last three years have developed a sincere respect and empathy for each other.

Open communication and the realization that EVERYONE wants to get out into the back country and enjoy our incredible wilderness has fostered friendship and trust among diverse back trail stake-holders.

If any other chapters of Montana Back Country Horsemen would like to replicate this successful and fun event, please contact Kelly McGill, Outdoor Recreation Planner, BLM, 406-538-1905, kmcgill@blm.gov or Bill Kuhlmann, Judith Basin Back Country Horsemen, kbkuhlmann@midrivers.com, 406-538-4575.
Bound to the north by the Canadian border, to the east by Glacier National Park, and to the south by the communities of Whitefish and Columbia Falls, the Whitefish Range is one of the special places in Montana. Trails constructed for foot and stock lead to ridgelines and mountaintops, and thanks to the work of the Backcountry Horsemen one can pitch their tent at the campground along Trail Creek.

The area is much loved by landowners who live along the North Fork of the Flathead River, local businesses, visitors, conservationists, and is enjoyed by a range of outdoor enthusiasts in the Flathead Valley.

In September 2012, the Whitefish Range Partnership (WRP) formed. The WRP is a group of 30 diverse citizens who came together to craft a package of management recommendations to present to the Flathead National Forest for consideration in their forest plan revision process.

In our early meetings, we developed a group vision and completed a charter document to guide our process and discussions. At that time, the WRP decided to strive for one hundred percent consensus. Meaning, everyone had to vote positively for each component of the agreement and then the package as a whole. This is clearly no easy task.

We tackled ten topics from Wild and Scenic Rivers to weeds and from motorized recreation to Wilderness. Before a self-selecting committee was formed to address each topic, we invited experts to present relevant information to the group. This proved extremely helpful. We used this information to guide our discussions and wanted to make sure our recommendations were reasonable and could be implemented by the Forest Service.

I never sugar coat the reality that collaboration is hard. The largest challenge for us as a group, was agreeing on recommended Wilderness in the Northern Whitefish Range. In the end, coming to agreement for us was about building relationships and trust, honoring all interests, working so each interest got a little more than they had before, and swallowing hard to compromise. We also had a wonderful leader and chairman, Bob Brown, who kept us on track.

Motorized and mountain biking are certainly the top two recreational uses on the land that are not compatible with Wilderness. Mountain biking was a specific challenge for our group. Even though there are currently very few mountain bike users in the northern Whitefish Range, bikers currently have the option of riding as much of the area as they would like. So for bikers, agreeing to recommended Wilderness meant having to give up many miles of trails. We worked together for months discussing priorities and testing solutions. In the end, we adjusted boundaries so bikers could maintain some of the long-distance north-south ridge riding opportunities and agreed to an interconnected expansion of trails in the southern Whitefish Range that included more loop opportunities connected to the trail system in town. Moreover, we will continue to help our partners implement the agreement and complete some of the trail work.
I’m pleased to report that after working hard for 13 months, we successfully reached 100% consensus on our package of recommendations. In that package included 83,000 acres of recommended Wilderness. Further, the Flathead National Forest recently released their draft forest plan and our WRP agreement was largely adopted.

If you have an opportunity to be involved in a collaborative in your local community, I encourage you to step forward. There is no recipe for success, but this is the toughest, most rewarding, work you’ll ever love.

The 4 Amigos: Members of the Whitefish Range Partnership. Frank Vitale took everyone to the top of Mt Thompson-Seton in the Whitefish Range on mules (and some hiked). From left: John Frederick, North Fork Landowner; Larry Wilson, North Fork Landowner; Frank Vitale; Bob Brown, former republican secretary of state and the chair of our group.

TRAPPED BY WILDFIRE
SAVING OUR HORSES AND OURSELVES IN MONTANA’S ANACONDA-PINTLAR WILDERNESS
by June Burgau, Flathead Chapter BCHM

The backcountry trip in 2000 teamed friends Edd and Janet Blackler from Bigfork, MT, with me and my husband, Don Burgau, of Kalispell, MT. Edd and Janet love wilderness camping and Tennessee Walkers are their means to travel the roadless areas. Don is a wonderful horse trainer, fisherman, and big game hunter. As for me, I love packhorses; nothing pleases me more than to see a Decker packsaddle centered on a lineback horse. Our saddle and pack animals are Quarter Horses.

Weeks in advance, the four of us had looked at maps, tossing around ideas about where we could set up a base camp and make day rides. We decided to visit the Anaconda Pintlar Wilderness at Johnson Lake via the Middle Fork of the Rock Creek Trailhead, south of Philipsburg, MT. We could ride from the base camp through the scenic, rugged, rocky, mountainous terrain the Pintlar’s are famous for and fly-fish the high-country lakes.

July 29: The day to leave home in the Flathead Valley arrived. Although we knew of the wildfires raging, we thought we’d be safe where we were going. We pulled loaded horse trailers and campers toward the trailhead.

Near Moose Lake, the US Forest Service had set up a helicopter landing site and a firefighter crew camp. We stopped to see if any further regulations had been issued in addition to the “no open fires” which we were already aware of. Conditions were extremely dry. We learned about the Cougar Creek and Frog Pond fires which were still contained. But after looking at maps, we were assured that they were too far away to be dangerous to us. We camped overnight at the trailhead.

July 30: The next morning we loaded the packhorses and headed for the wilderness basecamp site we had chosen. An old outfitter’s camp, the site has a tiny lake with a cascading waterfall, a grassy meadow, and a nice stand of large firs where a camp can be set up in the shade.

July 31: Monday was a lazy day spent hiking and exploring the immediate area – just rest and relaxation. That evening a lightning storm blew through the area. Little did we know that we were now in harm’s way. After the short storm exhausted its fury, the evening was cool with a clear, star-filled sky. A herd of elk grazed the meadow a stone’s throw from our tents, mewing and barking their pipe-like tones as they communicated with each other, which was a real thrill.

August 1: The first day of August dawned with all the splendor nature can provide. As we ate our breakfast, we watched more elk and a dozen mountain goats graze the rocky cliffs high above, and then bed down on the remnants of snowbanks. The horses had been belled and hobbled and turned out to graze before breakfast. Today we planned to saddle up, take lunch, and head for Lake Oreamnos to fish. Rainbow trout was the catch of the day – enough for breakfast tomorrow.

On our way back to camp, about 2:30 in the afternoon, before crossing back over Pintlar Pass, we heard fire-retardant bombers flying. There was a forest fire somewhere nearby!

When we topped the pass at 8,738 feet in elevation, a smoke column became visible to the north, the direction...
was about 8,000 feet, the temperature dropped. It got cold! I smoke from our lungs. which we would use to cover our faces and filter the choking ing water. The spring would also serve to wet neckerchiefs, pump, found a small spring nearby, so we had safe drink Edd, who had remembered to bring the water-purifier the timber-free northern slope of East Pintlar Peak.

In the middle of the evening meal, there was a distant noise. Was the drone possibly an airplane on fire patrol? Minutes later we all realized that this sound, now like a hot-air balloon being filled, was the sound of fire coming down off the mountainside toward our camp. Johnson Lake lay between our camp and the fire – a plus. The prevailing wind was pushing the fire up a canyon to the east, toward Martin Lake and Rainbow Lake. As visibility worsened, we couldn't tell what was happening with the fire. Were we about to perish in a wilderness wildfire?

Half-eaten dinners were left on blue tin plates as we grabbed water bottles, lunch items, coats, flashlights, and a first-aid kit. We swiftly saddled all the horses, putting the supplies in a set of gypsy bags on Hoot, one of the packhorses. Our horses and we four fled across the meadow and up toward the rock cliff, where we had seen the mountain goats that morning.

To reach the safety of the rockslide chute, we had to cross a creek and boggy area. Next, the horses had to climb over log downfall and then pick their way through steep, jagged, rock inclines. The packhorses stayed strung together and on their feet. This is how experienced mountain trail horses win their blue ribbons.

In no time, we reached a small rockslide plateau that we deemed the best place to stay should we get caught in the middle of the raging fires. We would spend the night here on the timber-free northern slope of East Pintlar Peak.

Edd, who had remembered to bring the water-purifier pump, found a small spring nearby, so we had safe drinking water. The spring would also serve to wet neckerchiefs, which we would use to cover our faces and filter the choking smoke from our lungs.

We spent the night on a rock slab. Because the elevation was about 8,000 feet, the temperature dropped. It got cold! I made a sick joke about starting a fire to get warm. All night the sky glowed red. Often new spot-fires burst into flames and crowned in the tinder-dry evergreen trees, sending tall pillars of red-orange fireworks shooting high into the night sky. Through the night, we faced a wall of fire. We heard the shotgun-like sounds of pitch trees exploding and timber falling.

**August 2:** Morning came. The fire had stayed on the far side of Johnson Lake and had not reached our camp. The fire was approximately half a mile away, and the wind was calm. We decided to feed and water the horses since some of them had gone 24 hours without either. We needed to eat something as well with the long day ahead.

We decided to pack up camp and watch for any break in the smoke which might reveal a safe escape route. Earlier we had placed a bright orange tarp in the open meadow, hoping the Forest Service would see it and provide information to help us. It worked.

At 9:00 am, a helicopter swooped down and landed in the meadow. Mark Giacolotto, fire management officer on the Pintlar Ranger District, and Jim Harrington, assistant fire management officer, were on board making a fire reconnaissance flight. The crew knew from information on the trailhead registration card that we should be at Johnson Lake. However, they missed seeing our camp when they flew over the previous afternoon because our tents were camel color and under the cover of large trees.

As incident commander for the Falls Fork–Johnson Lake Fire, Harrington’s first concern was for our lives. He said it was best to fly us to safety. Our concern: leaving our horses behind in the multitude of fires the crew pointed out on the map. No choice at this time was good. At this point, Giacolotto made the decision to provide us a Forest Service radio. If we departed immediately, he said, we could try getting the horses out over the pass at Phyllis Lake. A retardant bomber and a helicopter water-dipper bucket would fly to give us a little extra time, since the fires were heating up again.

However, the smoke became too thick and the bomber was unable to make the slurry drop. The helicopter, flying low, supercharged the horses. They sensed the danger of the fire, our tension, and all the unusual activity as we fled the campsite.

It was a seven-mile ride up and over the 8,000-foot pass to save our horses’ lives. We didn’t know if the entire trail had been cleared of downfall. We hadn’t gone far before we knew there would be logs across the trail. We had a bow saw in our gypsy bags, but lucked out and were able to get around all the fallen logs. The rocky switchbacks were clear of obstacles. It helped that the packhorse weren’t loaded. We had been forced to leave all our gear in a pile in the meadow near our camp, hoping it would be safe from the fire.

*Trapped by Wildfire continued on page 15*
Who can say how much of Nature can be destroyed without consequence? Who can say how much land can be used for extractive purposes until it is rendered barren forever? And who can say what the human spirit will be crying out for one hundred years from now? Two hundred years from now? A few weeks ago, Yosemite National Park had to close their gates and not allow any more visitors entry. The park was overcrowded. Last week, Yellowstone reported traffic gridlocks in the Lamar Valley, carloads of families with the wish of seeing a wolf. Did our country’s lawmakers who held the vision of national parks in the nineteenth century dream of this kind of hunger?

…Without a philosophy of wildness and the recognition of its inherent spiritual value, we will, as E.O. Wilson reminds us, “descend farther from heaven’s air if we forget how much the natural world means to us.”

excerpted from Wild Earth, Winter 2000/2001
Montana Back Country Horsemen State Chapters

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If you would like to join, please contact a chapter in your area.