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My Friend—The Packer

FRANK KOWSKI, '33

As Patrick Henry took up his quill to write in defense of Liberty, I now take up my pen to write in defense of Uncle Sam's lowliest creature—the packer. Verily, I say he is not lowly.

To me there has never occurred a greater misrepresentation of a man's qualities and sterling ambitions as in the popular conception of a packer, his life, his work, his good nature, and lastly, his temperament. In most cases the hasty analysis of this personage has been unjustly founded and only too often exaggerated by a prejudiced mind.

Let us consider in all fairness the average smokechaser's viewpoint on 'the man nobody knows' (apologies to Bruce Barton). I ask for consideration in all fairness because we must keep in mind that the smoke-chaser himself is a man who all too frequently spends dishonest hours in his cabin bed and turns those idle moments into a reminiscence of what a good packer should be and how the real packer falls below these idly set standards. To quote:

"A packer is never on time, regardless of when he is expected; he is exempt from firefighting unless under emergency conditions and is always absent when these conditions arise; his job is not a hard one, merely riding a horse all day and leading from four to ten mules; his language is profane, and as often as not is directed at beings other than his horses and mules. He generally spends his weekends at a ranger station where he gets his three squares a day set up by an honest-to-God cook; when he arrives at a camp after a day's ride he raises a vile commotion if supper is not waiting for him; he frequently forgets the mail and certain food supplies that the camp has been expecting for a week; he can generally tell the ranger where to get off and get by with it; when a crew at a camp is called out on a night fire he can rise up in his blankets and twiddle his fingers at the departing firefighters, and often does. He never has to go on a hike with a pack on his back; if, when riding along the trail he sees a small fire, instead of alighting and fighting the fire as he should, he calmly rides on to the next station and reports it, by which time the fire is much larger; and to top it all off, his yarns, told around the campfire, are highly imaginative and sometimes openly doubted."

By this time the smokechaser's conscience gets the best of him and he gets up from bed and goes back to work, generally pre-
paring the next meal. Thus it happens that the ill-fated packer has his reputation blackened all the more.

But what kind of a defense does the man in question have to offer? Very frankly, he doesn't bother himself with much of a defense. What others choose to believe is their business and none of his concern. That one fact typifies his nature to a great extent—his business is his own and other people's affairs are not his in which to meddle. It would do us well to pattern after him. Getting down to concrete facts, let us look into the life of this man and see for ourselves of what he is made. What is his background? What is his work? What is his nature?

To begin with, the packer has the background of a cowboy, horse-wrangler, rodeo-riding, or a government freighter, and sometimes all four. From these occupations he gains the most valuable fundamentals to his packing work—the knowledge of horses. This knowledge is not one obtained from books or from second hand experience, but from actual hard work and long hours spent, first, in the horse mastering him and finally, in him mastering the horse. This is not a mental combat by any means. At the start of his work for Uncle Sam he is presented with a heterogeneous group of partly broken mules or horses. To him is given the job of quieting these animals to the extent where he can pack from 250 to 300 pounds of supplies on their backs with some assurance that the load will remain there while he packs the next mule. His pack string consists generally of seven to ten animals with the preference given to mules where they are obtainable. The reason for this is the fact that a good mule can carry a heavier load and walk faster than a horse. The source of mules is generally from some rough string where unbroken stock is obtained at a premium.

In many of the western forests the center of activities lies far from a town and often far from a road. The packer immediately becomes the connecting link between the field men and the base of supplies. That is where his troubles start. Let us analyze a few of them with an open mind.

The packer is forced to work in all kinds of weather. If the mission he is on is a particularly urgent one he is required to start out in a drenching rain or a heavy snow. The temperament of his mules and himself react accordingly, but he must go on. Fifteen or twenty miles in a pouring rain puts him in a nasty frame of mind.

During a trip of this kind it develops that his mules have a decided preference for dry weather. After a few drops of rain hit their flanks they become highly unmanageable and a string of ten mules develops ten single minds as to what they want to do and where they want to go. The presence of a halter rope
from their nose to the mule ahead is only provoking to them and if it cannot be broken they can become so well tangled up in it that all forward progress is halted. Needless to say, the packer’s wrath is justified. Thus it goes.

Upon arriving at a crew camp and delivering the mail, someone finds that a few drops of rain have penetrated one of the pack coverings and the words “Dear Sweetheart” in his personal letter have been obliterated. The packer starts to explain in terms found familiar to those spending much time with horses and mules and before long he has given the mistaken impression that he cares not if the whole letter were soaked.

The daily routine of the packer consists of rising at 4:30 to 5:00 in the morning and wrangling his mules. If he is at a ranger station a corral is provided and the situation is simple, but if he is located at a crew camp the situation becomes intricately difficult. Where Forest Service regulations prohibit hobbling and picketing, the mule is given a large range of places where he might wander to in one night, and he invariably takes the most distant of the selection offered. Thus several hours spent walking over rugged mountain country in high heeled boots starts the packer out in a representative frame of mind. He returns to camp with the mules and saddles and packs each mule with two side packs averaging 125 pounds each. Two packs of this size, times ten mules results in 2,500 pounds that he must lift to the backs of his animals and rope the pack into place. The trick of balancing a pack is an art in itself.

Now he is ready for breakfast. If he is fortunate enough to find his mules close at hand he can generally have breakfast at 7:00 with the rest of the crew, but if he is a little late he must cook it himself. About 8:00 a.m. he starts out on his day’s ride. Mounting his saddle horse, he looks forward to a ride of fifteen, twenty, or thirty miles—it’s all the same to him. Does he stop at noon, cook himself a warm meal, as most all other Forest Service employees do? He does not! He either goes hungry or takes several cold breakfast pancakes from his saddle bag and munches them as he rides. Appetizing, to say the least!

Either early in the evening or late at night he reaches his destination and dismounts. There with four to ten men sitting idly around watching him, he ties up his mules, unpacks, unsaddles, feeds his mules and turns them out for the night after tending to any trail casualties. Then as he washes the trail dust from his face and hands he thinks of supper. Yes, he thinks of what he will have to cook for himself. After he piles up and covers all his pack saddles and blankets to protect them from rodents he looks forward to a good five or six hours of sleep on the cabin or tent floor. And he enjoys it.
So we see that his day is not one of pleasure. Though his work is different, it is as hard as any other. Oftentimes when an emergency arises he is required to spend days in the saddle with no rest and little food, managing mules with a vicious mind of their own. To him falls the job of getting all the equipment to the fires. He is responsible for the food supply of all the men and crews back in the mountains. He is their one contact with the outside world. When anyone gets hurt and has to be taken out of the forest, they throw themselves on the mercy of the packer and it is up to him to get them out over rough mountain trails, despite the nature of their injury.

Let’s go easy on him, men, because he’s not such a bad son-of-a-gun after all. After this, when we go to speak evilly of his erring ways, let’s remember that he has a job not many of us would want.

Here’s to you, friend—may you always duck when your mule kicks!

From Ranger Bill up on the Beartrack District comes this bit of valuable information to use when things aren’t going just right.

"I wonder why Rangers worry? Up here on my district there are only two things to worry about. The management of your district is either working or it is not working. If it is working there is nothing to worry about; if it is not working there are only two things to worry about. You are either doing your best or you are not doing your best. If you are doing your best there is nothing to worry about; if you are not doing your best there are only two things to worry about. Your health is either good or you are sick. If your health is good there is nothing to worry about; if you are sick there are only two things to worry about. You are going to get well or you are going to die. If you are going to get well there is nothing to worry about and if you are going to die there are only two things to worry about. You are either going to heaven or you are not going to heaven. If you are going to heaven there is nothing to worry about, and if you’re going to the other place you’ll be so darn busy shaking hands with your old friends you won’t have time to worry—so why worry?"