

A PACK TRIP IN THE WALLOWAS

By Nelson Jay Billings

In the extreme northeast corner of Oregon lies a land of deep, precipitous canyons, timbered plateaus and towering granite peaks; a region to charm the most exacting outdoor devotee and nature lover. Here are still to be found elk, deer, bear, a few mountain sheep, and an abundance of upland game birds. The numerous lakes and streams are well stocked with trout. The Wallowa river flows through the region and on its banks at the lower end of a lovely valley is located a town of the same name.

Early in August two seasons ago a barn lot at the edge of town was the scene of intense activity. I had promise to take my fourteen year old boy and his chum on a camping trip in the mountains. They had caught the horses and were saddling the riding animals while I made up the pack of camp equipment and provisions and lashed it on the pack horse.

Before the sun was an hour high we were on our way up Bear Creek a stream that empties into the Wallowa River at the lower edge of town. After a few miles the road ended and we took a narrow trail that skirted the hillside. Here many triangular tracks in the soft earth showed where a doe had brought her family down from the benches for a drink. A short distance further along a pair of blue grouse and their half grown brood flew into the trees from beside the trail and watched us as we rode by. Where the trail dropped onto the creek bottom the tracks of a bear were discovered. The boys had been discussing the possibility of encountering a deer or even a bear or a cougar on the trip, and now fully expected to see one at each turn in the trail.

At noon a short stop at Bear Creek ranger station was made to allow the horses to rest and to eat a lunch, which the boys had been mentioning with increased frequency for sometime. This was a hurried affair as there was a hard ride ahead.

The horses were soon re-saddled and the trip resumed. A noticeable quiet had now settled over the rear guard, possibly because all known subjects had been discussed or perhaps certain spots were becoming irritated by coming in contact with saddles and taking the owners' attention.

The trail now crossed Bear at a shallow ford and started up the hill in a series of steep switchbacks. The day was hot and the heavy grade made hard going for the horses, frequent stops being necessary. This called for much use of spurs accompanied by appropriate remarks of a more or less unorthodox nature. The pack horse was, as usual, the worst offender, having to be continually yanked forward to the detriment of hands and temper. There is nothing that I know of that can so quickly and thoroughly wreck a man's chances in the great unknown and unascertainable that to yank a jug-headed pack horse over a mountain trail.

After an hour's climbing, the trail left the open grassy slopes and rocky rims of the low altitudes, crossed a swift turbulent stream and followed along the boulder stream banks under groves of spruce and fir. Every swale and glade was a riot of color - nature's flower garden being in full bloom.

A few clouds had appeared shortly after noon which had now developed into a dark mass of thunderheads and thunder could be heard rumbling among the granite peaks to the southwest, in the direction we were headed. The sun was soon blotted out and in short time a few gigantic drops of rain began splashing off the rocks and kicked up little clouds of dust in the trail. Then a sharp crash of thunder and we were in a typical mountain thunder shower. There were several close flashes followed by deafening crashes, and a deluge of water drenched horses and riders and blotted from sight the canyon walls on either side. The storm lasted but a few minutes, then went rumbling and grumbling down the canyon and the sun

came out on a drenched and dripping world. A wet and shivering cavalcade finished the ride to the supply camp on a sheep outfit at the summit of the canyon. A Basque herder was preparing a late dinner and we lost no time in gathering around his fire. We stopped long enough to dry our clothes a little and to get the coats out of the pack where they had been snug and dry during the storm, then started the unwilling horses down the trail.

A ride of a couple of miles across a beautiful alpine meadow, at the head of Big Canyon, with its waving mountains bluegrass and symmetrical clumps of alpine firm, then three miles down a steep canyon and we reached the Minam river. A short distance up stream there was an abandoned cabin built when a lumber company was constructing a splash dam and here we camped.

The boys were of course anxious to fish and the horses were unsaddled, hobbled, and turned loose in record time; rode and tackled rigged, they headed for the dam.

Knowing from past experience that it was not a bad idea to have camp in some semblance of order before dark, I scouted around and finding a couple of old mattresses in the cabin, packed them outside and made up the beds. The stove was cleaned off, table cleared of the accumulated trash left by the last campers and pack rats, provisions packed away and then for the fish. The old steel rod was taken from the saddle, a leader with a coachman and brown hackle attached, and I followed the boys to the stream.

As sun had dropped beyond the ridge black shadows were already on the water when the stream was reached. A drift extended out from the upper side of the dam and the boys were casting out into the center of the pool from here. Trout were rising all over the pool and they were having good luck.

A few trial casts to wet up the leader and the flies were dropped in an opening at the upper end of the leg drift, a whirl in the water, and the end fly was fast to a good sized rainbow. This was soon landed and in a short time two more were added to the string.

It was time to quit if any supper was to be had that night, so taking the fish and a couple the boys had caught to camp, a fire was started and the fish cleaned by the last remaining light. Coffee was put on, the trout rolled in cornmeal, and a pan of wriggling, twisting fish was soon sputtering on the fire. Gosh, how I hate to cook fish that have just been taken from the water! But by turning them rapidly and severing a vertebra here and there, they were soon in a fairly stationary condition. Darkness had driven the boys in with a good string of fish and voracious appetites and we ate supper by the light of a lamp that we found on the table, washed the dishes, and crawled into the blankets.

The boys actually went to sleep without talking and I was so tired that I did not even worry about where the horses would head for, which is the first and last thought of anyone who rustles pack and saddle stock on camping trips.

Birds and squirrels awoke us the next morning so early that we caught the horses before they had begun to stray. If feed is at all plentiful they will usually stay close to camp until shortly after daylight and then begin to travel. By taking advantage of this habit a good many extra miles of hiking can be avoided.

Some friends were once caused considerable embarrassment by over-sleeping the first night out. They camped just above a settlement and turned their horses across a bridge above their camp. Early the next morning they heard the horses cross the bridge and start down the trail. Pulling on their boots they started in pursuit but did not catch the horses until they had gone several miles down the road. They rode back through the settlement arrayed in boots and B.V.D.'s much to the astonishment of the settlers who were just coming out to do their morning chores.

The boys wanted to get some big ones so rigged up their tackle with copper spinners and went back to the dam while I cooked breakfast, which was to be fish, hotcakes, and coffee. By the way, have you ever tried putting an egg and a tablespoonful of honey in prepared hotcake flour? If not, do so the next time you have a chance.

It took several calls to get the boys to quit fishing, but they finally appeared with three nice fish. Breakfast was soon over and the horses headed up the trail.

The landscape was far different from that of yesterday, the trail following spruce bottoms, crossing swampy thickets of alder and willow, or winding through heavy stands of lodge pole.

At the base of a cliff where the trail had left the river and skirted the foot of the canyon, the horses pricked up their ears and gazed with attention up the hill; looking in that direction, we saw a black bear climbing the rocks above the trail. Were the boys excited? You can imagine! The next hour was devoted to a discussion covering the entire range of bear habits and actions, both imaginary and real.

Some miles were left behind and the episode of bruin almost forgotten when the north fork was reached. Leaving the river here and turning to the east, we followed the stream, leaving the timbered bottoms and keeping along the open canyon sides for several miles when the canyon closed in and then next four miles was mostly slow going as it was necessary to rest the horses on every switchback.

But what a sight! How a rock-garden enthusiast would have enjoyed the picture which was before us. Terraces of bluebells, gentian, larkspur, aconite, monkeyflowers, potentilla - patches of blue flecked with gold, on slopes, between rocks, along spring brooks, hanging from cliffs - everywhere!

Two more miles and the country opened out into grassy meadows, winding between massive granite boulders; scattering clumps of whitebark pine indicating that timber line was close. In a short time Steamboat Lake appeared, blue as a sapphire distance camp made by a clump of spruce a short distance from the water.

As it was early we had plenty of time to make a good camp. Poles were cut and driven into the ground about seven feet apart. A cross piece was wired to these, breast high, and two small logs laid eight inches apart under the cross piece to hold the frying pans. Kettles were suspended from the cross piece by wires and the cooking arrangements were complete.

While I was doing this, the boys had been sent across the meadow after boughs from the alpine firs that grew in scattered thickets on the opposite slope. Two ten foot logs were cut and placed five feet apart, a log laid across these at each end and the boughs put in place, the large ones first, laid shingle style bow side up. A thick covering of smaller ones was put on top and the beds spread over all.

The boxes that oil companies use for containers for their five gallon cans of lubricating and coal oil were used for a table; a box holding two cans fits nicely into the ordinary canvas pack. By placing them on their sides with the bottoms together, they make a very good camp table.

As soon as camp was made, dinner over, and dishes cleaned up, the kids started for the lake on an exploring expedition. I tipped a saddle up on its horn and using it for a back-rest, enjoyed a pipe or two. It was a warm afternoon and still. A few conies squeaked in the rocks, a pair of robins who had a nest in the spruce overhead, went quietly about their business, and a Clark's Crow winged lazily across the valley. I went to sleep and did not waken until the sun was getting down towards the western rims. As fish would soon be rising, I gathered up my fishing tackle and followed the boys.

They had found a raft that some fisherman had constructed from dead logs which they had paddled out on the lake and having no luck with the fish had gone in swimming.

# Wallowa History Center

Preserving Our Past for the Future

Wallowa History Center  
P.O. Box 481  
Wallowa, Oregon 97885  
email: [powwat@yahoo.com](mailto:powwat@yahoo.com)

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Hubert Mitchell

Steven J. Billings WHS

Hubert Mitchell and Steve Billings on the steps of Wallowa High School.



Nelson Jay Billings fishing in a Wallowa Mountain Lake c 1925. He came to Wallowa from the Fremont Forest at Lakeview where he was a ranger. He moved to Wallowa c1912 to serve as Deputy Supervisor for Harvey Harris the Supervisor. In June of 1920 he was promoted to Supervisor. In 1930 the Billings home burned, Jay lost his collection of Indian Artifacts and all the families belongs. He retired a few months later because of ill health and moved with his family to Salem, Oregon where he lived until his death on February 27, 1942.

Thanks to Wayne Johnson for providing space for the Wallowa History Center