

## The Right to Ride

Backcountry Horsemen Founders Look Back on Movement They Began

BY DAN TESTA // MAY 27, 2009



Ken Ausk left Roland Cheek Right.

The plan was hatched at Roland Cheek's hunting camp along Wall Creek in the middle of the Bob Marshall Wilderness. It was 1972, and Cheek, Ken Ausk and Denny Swift were discussing draft regulations by the U.S. Forest Service that would have required anyone wishing to take a horse into the Bob to apply for, and receive, a permit. These new proposed regulations were, the men believed, a sign of things to come – a push within the Forest Service and some conservation groups to limit the public land horse packers could access. “We felt we had problems with the continuing use of horses up in the Bob Marshall,” Cheek said in a recent interview. “We were talking about it up in the hunting camp and the three of us felt like we had to try to combat that kind of mentality in the Forest Service – so we decided that we would try to form a group.”

But while stories like these can be common to organizations trying to preserve one use or another on public land, the men who formed the Backcountry Horsemen of the Flathead took a different approach. They would not spend their time criticizing Forest Service officials at public meetings – although they surely have made their voices heard on policy questions over the last 37 years. Instead, the Backcountry Horsemen dedicated themselves to education by printing a guidebook on safe horse packing practices still in use today, and to long hours of labor improving trails and facilities throughout the Bob Marshall, and other public land surrounding the Flathead, working with the Forest Service. The result has been that by demonstrating the value of the horse packing community, most other proposals that may have restricted horses on public land have quietly faded away.

Today, the Backcountry Horsemen has spread from Montana into a national organization boasting 16,000 members, with chapters in 25 states, from Alabama to Alaska. But amazingly, the core goals of the nationwide Backcountry Horsemen of America remain relatively close to the principles laid out by the Flathead founders more than three decades ago. Swift passed away several years ago but the other three men remain active in the group. “I wouldn’t ever have dreamed of the spread and advancement that the Backcountry Horsemen group has made,” said Dulane Fulton, the fourth founding member of the group, now in his 90s. “It must have been right because it’s been working all these years and hasn’t changed that much.” The role of the Backcountry Horsemen truly solidified in 1974, when the Forest Service, lacking the funds to rebuild the bridge over Big Salmon Creek, decided to condemn it, thus cutting off access to a large chunk of the Bob Marshall. The Backcountry Horsemen filed an injunction, and the headline in the July 19, 1974 Hungry Horse News from the public meeting following the decision read: “Horsemen Vehement Concerning Bridge.” But convincing the agency to reverse the decision didn’t solve the problem. So after drawing so much attention to the issue, Ausk said the Backcountry Horsemen felt they should help rebuild the Big Salmon bridge – preserving access to the Bob Marshall not just at the policy level, but in the real world as well. “That’s probably America’s greatest horse wilderness,” Ausk said. “We decided if our kids were going to have a place to ride, we better protect it.” And that’s what they did, packing in several tons of building materials. It was tricky, dangerous work, loading the animals down with hundreds of pounds while navigating steep terrain to the building site deep in the wilderness. Eventually, the men figured out a system where they hung 9-foot planks on the horses’ downhill side, so the boards wouldn’t drag on the slope, and counter-weighted the uphill side of the horses with concrete. “It was a big operation and a tough operation because, hell, we weren’t used to that and the horses weren’t used to that,” Fulton recalled. “But it worked.” The bridge over Big Salmon Creek was rebuilt and the identity of the Backcountry Horsemen of the Flathead took shape: A volunteer organization that, alone or in support of other groups, could pack supplies and crews into projects, allowing the Forest Service to do more trail work with fewer federal dollars. The group also packed in its own hay on that project to feed the horses, thus demonstrating how horse packers can minimize their impact on the backcountry. Subsequent years saw the group take on more and more projects, though none as demanding as the Big Salmon bridge. Where it was allowed, the Horsemen used chainsaws, but in the wilderness, they used crosscut saws - a practice Fulton did not necessarily look back upon fondly. “We could have done twice as much with a power saw as with those old ‘misery whips,’” Fulton said. “But that was the regulations that was on, and so we couldn’t do ‘er.” After a few horse packers from Missoula attended a meeting in the Flathead, they started their own chapter. Another soon sprung up in the Bitterroot, then in Salmon, Idaho, then Helena. After a backcountry horsemen chapter incorporated in Washington state in 1977, and the High Sierra Stock Users formed in California in 1981, the groups eventually joined to become the Backcountry Horsemen of America, adopting a Constitution five years later.

Thinking back on the early years, Cheek praised his longtime friend, Ausk, for knowing enough to keep the Backcountry Horsemen of the Flathead a grassroots-driven organization, a model followed in later chapters. “He’s the lodestone for the Backcountry Horsemen,” Cheek said of Ausk. “He’s been the heart and soul since day one, with a supreme confidence in the collective wisdom of its members.” At present, the Backcountry Horsemen of the Flathead, with more than 140 members, increasingly provide pack support for trail crews from other groups like the Montana Conservation Corp. (MCC) and the Bob Marshall Wilderness Foundation. The Horsemen have also found another way to help out: grant writing. Colter Pence is the wilderness, rivers and trails manager for the Hungry Horse and Glacier View ranger districts of the Flathead National Forest. In recent years Pence said she has found the Horsemen and other volunteer groups are often more successful in securing federal funding for certain trail projects, by demonstrating there is free labor available, than a standalone grant application would be from a ranger. Pence gave the example, as a common means of accomplishing trail improvements, of a federal grant funding two weeks of work by an MCC trail crew in the northern section of the Great Bear Wilderness scheduled for this summer, with a third week funded by the Forest Service and the Backcountry Horsemen agreeing to pack in the crews and materials. “Often, the Forest Service is not as successful as volunteers for grants,” Pence said. “We work cooperatively together to get that work done.” The Backcountry Horsemen have also branched out into offering defensive horsemanship clinics, volunteering as staff at the Event at Rebecca Farm, and teaching “Leave No Trace” camping practices at the Family Forestry Expo. At the recent statewide meeting of Montana’s 16 chapters, the Backcountry Horsemen pledged to support the establishment of more designated wilderness throughout the state.

This summer, the Backcountry Horsemen of the Flathead - which is by no means limited just to men – has another ambitious slate of projects lined up. But along with the work, there will be a lot of good food, riding, and nights spent around a campfire, under the stars. Cheek said that’s what he and the other founders hoped to preserve when they started the group – a sense of unity with the horse packers who have been riding through the mountains of northwest Montana long before there were any lines drawn on a map between private and public, unprotected land and wilderness. “We tried very hard to retain an element of that heritage,” Cheek said. “They’re doing it today.”