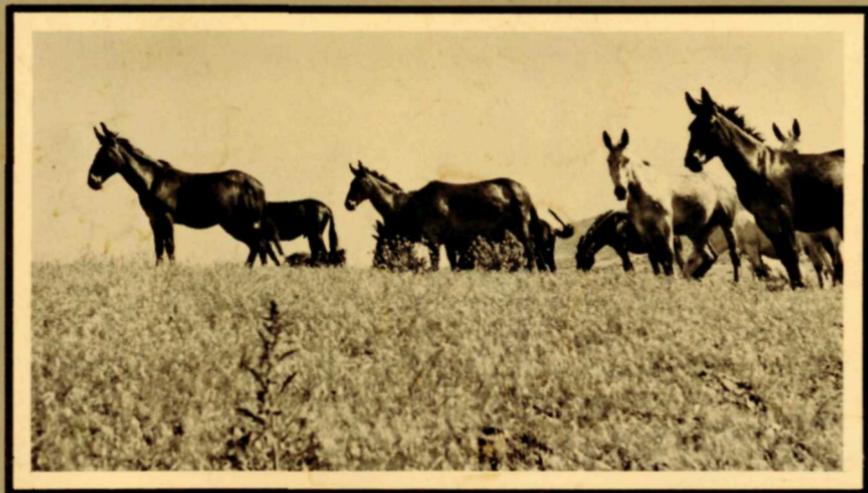

Thirty-two Years
in the
Mule Business

THE USDA/FOREST SERVICE
**REMOUNT DEPOT
AND WINTER RANGE**



Lolo National Forest

Thirty-two Years in the Mule Business

THE USDA/FOREST SERVICE **REMOUNT DEPOT AND WINTER RANGE**

By Jane Reed Benson

The USDA/Forest Service, a government agency dedicated to the conservation and administration of America's forest lands, would ordinarily concern itself with trees and Forest Rangers. Yet beginning in 1930, the Forest Service in the Northern Rocky Mountains operated a horse and mule remount depot.

Its history reveals an unlikely combination of fighting forest fires, coping with the Great Depression, buying show horses, designing trucks, building hundreds of miles of fences — and especially packing mules. The Remount Depot proved that a string of nine mules with more than a ton of supplies on their collective backs could form a solid basis for controlling forest fires.

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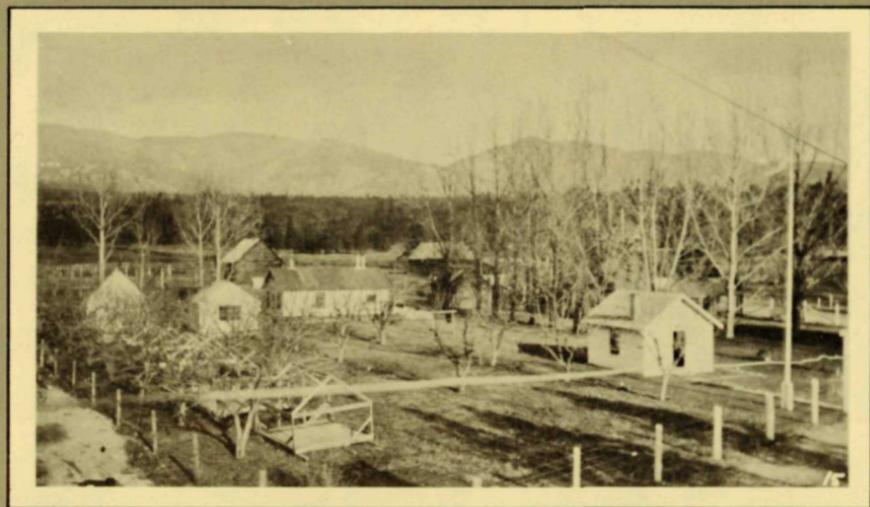
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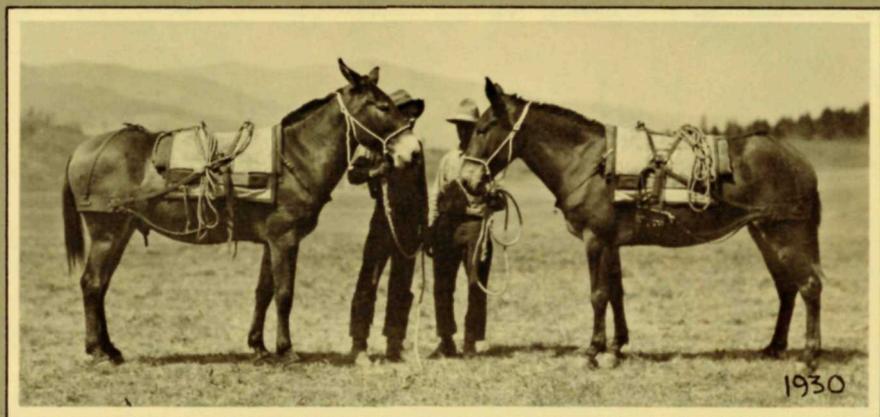
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Establishment
of the
Remount Depot





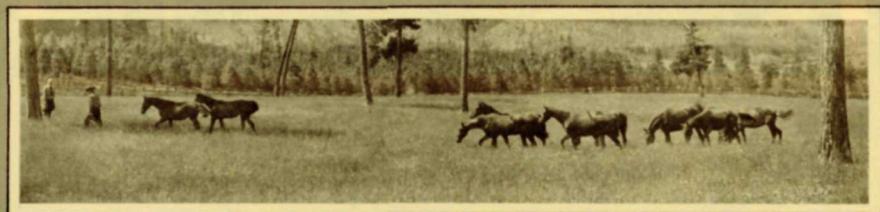
Harold Schreckendgust and John Prichard



*M. Duncan and John Matney
at end of Jocko Road*



*Charley Butler with
early stock truck crate*



One-year old saddle horses - June 1937



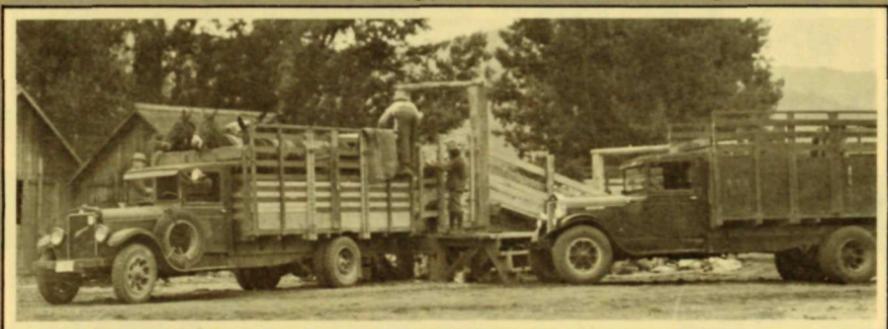
Clyde Fickes



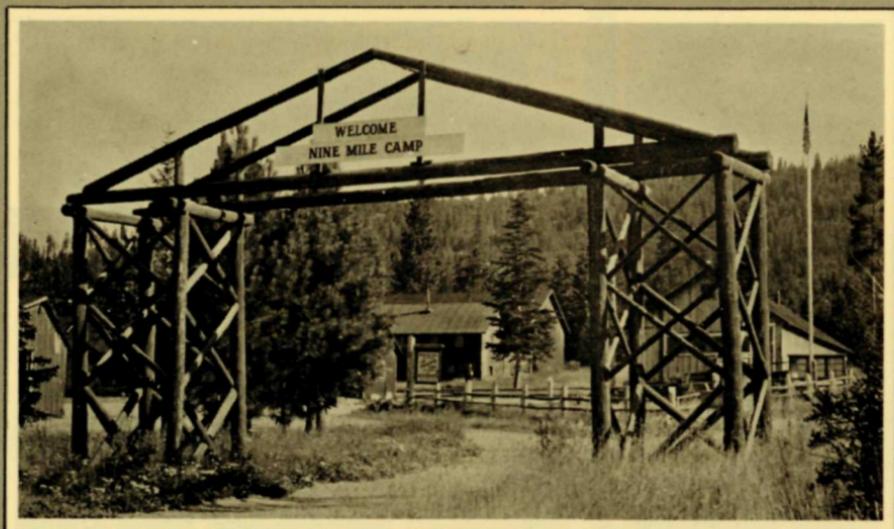
January 1937 - 28° below



Reo "Speedwagon" used until 1936-37
Bill Longpre, driver, on the right.



Les Wolfe and Dan Raser - 1929 Trout Creek fire

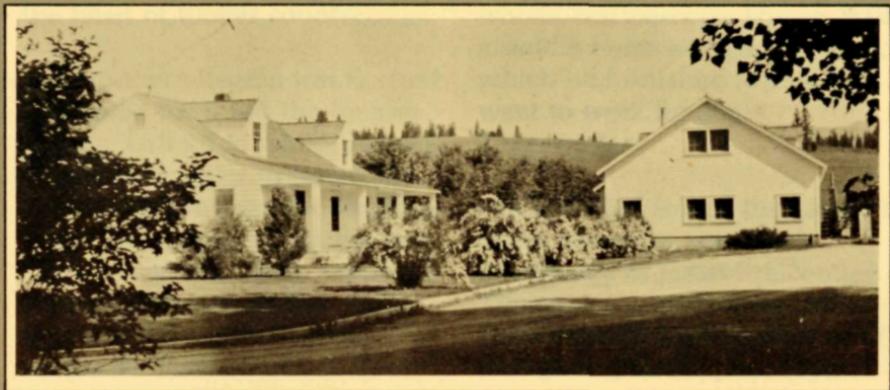
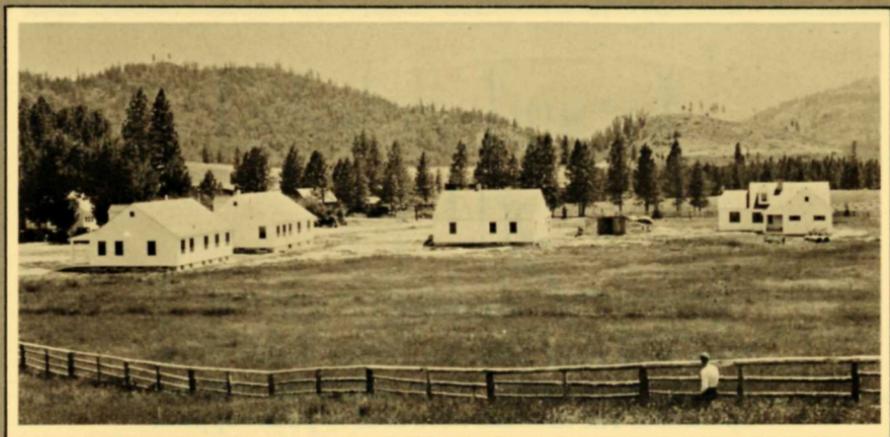


CCC - building fences



CCC - clearing land





PREFACE

From 1932 until 1962, the United States Forest Service maintained a horse and mule ranching operation. The animals were used to pack supplies to forest firefighters before the day the airplane proved effective. This is a concise and colorful history of that era....

Establishment of the Remount Depot

EARLY FIRE FIGHTING

To understand why mules were crucial for fighting forest fires 40 years ago, we must understand the kind of land the USDA/Forest Service had committed itself to protect.

Region One, or the Northern Region, of the Forest Service comprises a vast territory — all of Montana, northern Idaho, and small sections of the Dakotas. At the time of this story, the Region also included a part of eastern Washington. Administrative headquarters of the Region are still at Missoula, Montana, 100 miles west of the Continental Divide, in the heart of timber country.

The Northern Region was the first numbered for it has the longest history. Gifford Pinchot, pioneer American forester, traveled the West in the 1890's under direction from Congress to set up the first "forest reserves," now America's National Forests. At that time much of this nation's great unspoiled timberland lay in

Yellowstone National Park and the area that is now the Forest Service's Northern Region. When the Forest Service actually began, with its transfer to the Department of Agriculture in 1905, its goal was conservation of timber.

The Forest Service divided each of its regions into National Forests, and each National Forest contained several Districts. There on the District level the Ranger performed his job of protecting the public resource, having been assigned his ranger station after demonstrating an ability to measure timber, survive in the woods, and load a packhorse. With a saddle horse and pack animal, which he furnished himself, he went to work for about 1,000 a year.

Not included among the Ranger's skills, however, was much knowledge of forest fire control. The early Forest Service had no knowledge of fire behavior or of firefighting techniques, beyond

the use of ax and shovel. Theodore Shoemaker, who worked for many years in the West, describes in *Early Days in the Forest Service* the difficulties of his job in 1908:

"I was alone at the time as acting supervisor of two Colorado forests, and there was not another forest officer within a day's ride to call on for help. Before I knew there was a fire, it was throwing a column of smoke hundreds of feet up in the air. There were no lookouts or cooperators to report fires in those days. When a man casually called from my office door to ask whether I knew I had a fire and I went to look, dozens of the townfolk were out gazing at the spectacle but not one had thought to come and report it. Indeed, why should they, when no one had ever tried to put one out before?"

One of the Ranger's and Supervisor's biggest problems was lack of access to their own forests. Much of the Northern Region was wilderness with steep mountains and few roads. What trails existed had been mostly left by Indians, early miners, and deer.

The combination of ignorance about fires and difficulty in getting to them would eventually culminate in disaster.

The summer of 1910 began as drier and more troublesome than most fire seasons in the Rockies. By mid-August, the lightning-caused fires, especially in northern Idaho, came so close together that men

were still battling one when two or three more would start. Finally, a multitude of small fires swept into a holocaust that burned a half million acres of western Montana and northern Idaho timberland, killed 82 persons, and destroyed a third of the mining town of Wallace, Idaho. These were the biggest fires in recorded history in the West, where the smoke and ash drifted 700 miles south to Denver. The drama of that summer has been captured in numerous books and articles.

Some of the people who would later go to work for the Forest Service have childhood memories of those 1910 fires. Walter Peery, a Bitterroot Valley horseman, recalls the cinders coming down off Saint Mary's Peak onto his family's farm. "It got so dark up there at three o'clock in the afternoon the chickens went to roost." W.B. Russell, who later became a construction foreman, lived on a farm 70 miles northwest of Missoula. He recalls that it became "dark as midnight" on August 23rd, the afternoon he helped his father thresh grain.

The fires ended, but only because of the early autumn rains and snows. Not only did the forests lay in ashes, but so did the spirit of the entire Forest Service. Since it had not been prepared for those fires in the West, a time of grim reassessment began.

Gradually, out of the destruction, rose new methods. There was

much experimenting with new tools such as the ax-hoe called a Pulaski, which today is still the firefighter's basic tool. Men hired as lookouts watched from the tops of peaks and reported fires to Rangers by newly installed telephone lines. Most important, an elaborate trail system began to grow through the roadless, timbered mountains.

Ever since the Forest Service began, pack animals had transported equipment in the newly created Forests. Now, with the concerted effort to control fires in land so inhospitable that only animals could serve as transportation, the packer and his working horses or mules became all important. As an early writer put it, "As the Forest Service grew, so did the job of packing."

All equipment — nails, telephone line, lumber, cable, food, and tools — was hauled up the new trails, mainly on horses hired from local ranchers for 50¢ a day per animal. At first, the pack stock was herded loose, not led, by a \$60-a-month packer on his own horse leading a "bell mare." Gradually, mules began to be used more than horses, and the Forest Service purchased more of its own pack stock. The crews of firefighters, some trained, some off the streets of Butte or Spokane, walked to fires up these trails, sometimes taking several days to get there. The Forest Service equipped itself to respond as quickly as possible to every fire reported in order to prevent another 1910.

The Northern Region saw other bad fire seasons through the next 20 years, as this area of the nation was caught in one of its cyclical droughts. The Forest Service handled the fires well enough with its new methods and tools, and plenty of extra mules and horses could be hired when needed. But in 1929, another particularly serious fire season erupted and forced another change in concept.

Summer of 1929 saw the headquarters in Missoula sending out rented stake-bed trucks with hired pack strings of horses and mules to help the Region's Forests fight their fires. All went well at first. But as the week wore on and more fires broke out, the men could no longer find commercial pack stock. They had to use animals that had never been packed before. Marion Duncan tells how he was taken off his usual job of driving trucks for the Forest Service warehouse. "We were leasing a corral down here in the middle of town for pack stock....I would go down and help load these 'broncs' they were hiring for pack stock — pour 'em in, pull 'em in, any way we could get them in the trucks to haul them to fires."

The Forest Service's supply of packsaddles ran out, and purchasing officer Orrin Bradeen requested that saddles be made to order for immediate use. Men who had never packed a mule before got sent out, resulting in delays and the animals with their backs

so sore couldn't be returned to their owners until Thanksgiving.

"Frankly, it was a mess," wrote Clyde P. Fickes, who dispatched the 1,500 horses and mules. "But we did the best we could. When Ed MacKay wanted fifty head of pack stock for the 'Big Rock Candy Mountain Fire' over at Powell (Idaho), he had to have them."

Until 1929, no one had realized the implications of a recent development in rural America: mechanization. The Forest Service had always relied on hiring horses and mules if more were needed than what a Ranger District could supply, for this was farming and ranching country in the valleys between the forested slopes. But the great farms of eastern Washington, Idaho, and eastern Montana had been selling their work animals for mechanical combines, threshers and hay balers. No one wanted even the horses anymore. One day in the early 1920's, W.C. "Cap" Evans — later an administrator — saw 5,000 horses sent from Butte, Montana, to canners. It seemed that only the Forest Service still had need for a horse or mule.

The word "remount" may seem strange when used by a government agency concerned with the care of our National Forests. It borrowed the term, of course, from the U.S. Army, which had been in the horse business since 1775. According to a publication of the Department of the Army, "The function of

remount depots was to procure, train and issue horses to mounted men to replace those becoming noneffective for various reasons including combat."

During the winter of 1929-30, the Northern Region of the Forest Service began to think in terms of "procure, train and issue." Clyde Fickes, who described the "mess," proposed that they set up a central depot to supply strings of pack stock for all the Forests in the Region, modeled after the U.S. Army cavalry remounts. The unique idea of the Forest Service getting into the mule business did not receive immediate acceptance, however.

Before 1929, the various Forests within the Region, in the words of one retiree, operated as "little islands." Each Forest wanted self-sufficiency, including keeping its own horses and mules, and this sometimes resulted in a serious lack of cooperation.

Probably the one man who did most to establish the Remount Depot was Evan W. Kelley, who arrived in Missoula during that fierce fire season as the new boss of the Northern Region. Kelley, who would serve as Regional Forester from 1929 to 1944, was small in size, but a very commanding person. Kelley saw that changes were needed in the Region, and he must have been attracted to the new idea of a Forest Service remount depot because it offered a chance to centralize one service of the agency. The fact that Kelley

had earned his title of "Major" while distinguishing himself in a U.S. Army cavalry unit during World War I — a horse outfit — couldn't have hurt.

Therefore, with the support of assistant regional foresters Glenn Smith and Meyer Wolff, it was decided that the Region would establish an experimental remount depot. With final approval from the Washington Office, the Region began to search for a suitable site. In his *Recollections*, Fickes, who would administer the new facility as it started, stated the goals of the Forest Service Remount Depot:

- To provide a reservoir of experienced packers and pack animals for fire emergency and other uses.
- To supply saddle horses and pack mules of a satisfactory type to the Forests.
- To develop adequate types of equipment for transporting pack stock on highways and roads.
- To serve as a training base for packers.
- To develop improved methods of packing and standardize packing practices on the Forests.

GETTING STARTED

Out in the rolling valley of Ninemile Creek 30 miles west of Missoula, lay a one-square-mile unoccupied ranch which had gone through a succession of owners since the late 1880's. The place had productive hay meadows and, perhaps more important, close access to main roads and railroad line. On July 1, 1930, the Forest Service secured lease of this property for its new facility and set out to begin immediate service.

For the next year, between forest fire calls in summer and snow storms in winter, the 30-35 first employees of the Remount worked to turn a run-down ranch into a working arm of the Forest Service. The men mowed 200 acres of hay

with work mules, and they irrigated and built corrals.

"I took the first load of mops, buckets, brooms, and paint to clean up the old house," remembers Marion Duncan about the one building that looked usable. "It was decided already that all these old buildings would have to go. Our first bunkhouse was a Forest lookout building." But until that lookout was hauled in and many temporary buildings constructed, the men slept in tents.

Before the first season was over, the new Remount Depot had performed its first responsibility: getting well-equipped pack stock

with experienced packers loaded into trucks and out to Forests to supply crews of firefighters. The first summer saw only hired stock go out — about 100 head — but more and more animals would be purchased. The horses and mules traveled in crates fitted into 1½- to 2-ton trucks, GMC's and Reo "Speed wagons," that carried five or six head of stock each.

During the next summer of 1931, the Remount Depot supplied men and stock to Yellowstone National Park. The Park actually lies outside the jurisdiction of the Northern Region, but there would be several times over the years when the Park Service would request additional help from the Remount Depot. On this particular occasion, the Northern Pacific Railroad sent three cars to the siding at Huson, just a few miles from the Remount Depot, to transport 65 head of pack stock southeast to Yellowstone.

One of the stated goals of the Remount Depot was to standardize packing equipment and methods for the entire Region. In the fall after the fires had passed, packers gathered in the meadows of the Remount to demonstrate their veterinary methods of their hitches; take photos; and, on the third day, participate in contests. Bill Longpre, the Remount's first employee, describes a Field Day this way:

"That was more fun; it's just too bad they didn't have moving pictures...We put up hitching

racks for six to ten pack strings contesting, and each guy drew...Some of them mules were 'goosey.' They'd get them all tied together and they had to run so far down that meadow and back. The first one that made that trip without losing a pack won the contest. I've seen them make that loop too far and it would kind of whiplash — every mule would roll over!"

Obviously, the Field Days provided some spectator sport, but they served a serious purpose too. After Major Kelley, the Regional Forester, presented prizes of chaps or spurs, the packers found that they had agreed on the most expedient methods of packing enough gear for a 25-man fire crew, plus a cook.

After experimenting with sawbuck and Spanish aparejo packsaddles, the Region chose to use the Decker, developed in Idaho. The advantage of the Decker packsaddle is that the loads are packed "sling" style in ropes on each side of the animal. That way, if a mule brushes too close to a tree or rock on the trail, the load will simply swing back and allow him to walk on naturally. Later the Forest Service issued written specifications and diagrams for the manufacture of the Decker saddle and its deer-hair stuffed saddle pad. There would be few sore backs among Northern Region mules.

During the tenure of the first superintendents of the Remount

Depot, Charley Butler for less than a year and then horseman Jesse "Jake" Williams, other new programs were tried. One didn't last long. An experiment with burros to pack supplies and water to trail crews failed because the truckload of little Southwest burros, which arrived with their ears cropped to brand them, wouldn't load into trucks and wouldn't step across a creek.

The Remount Depot also sent out "plow units" — a team of draft horses, worked one at a time, to cut a fireline with a plow. If the fire area could be reached by road, the truck carrying the horses also hauled supplies for the fire crew. However, if they had to travel a long distance by trail, the horses carried the plows on their backs. Bill Longpe described one such trip. "One time we walked into Moose Creek. We had a 28-mile hike there, but we couldn't take this equipment. All we took was our horses and the plow."

Of course, if the country was so steep and rocky that it was accessible only by trail, the Forest Service couldn't expect the plow unit to cut firelines effectively. Plow units served only five or six seasons, but the heavy horses stayed on at the Remount Depot to help with maintenance work such as fence building.

In those days of fewer regulations and less paper work, hiring was simple. Walt Perry, desperate for an income during those Depression times, describes how

he left his Bitterroot Valley farm for a job at the Remount:

"Mr. Fickes bought two saddle horses from me, and then he said, 'I hear you're pretty handy at breaking saddle horses.' 'Well,' I said, 'I don't know, I broke a few.' 'Well,' he said, 'I've heard different than that.' So he wanted to know if I wanted a job and I said yes, and I said, 'When would you want me to go to work?' and that was on a Friday or Saturday. He said, 'Monday morning.' "

So Walt Peery went to work at \$145 a month plus his board to "take the rough off" the newly purchased stock. He and others broke mules to halter and pack, but especially they were charged with the job of preparing Rangers' horses to ride.

The Northern Region had been acquiring its own horses to provide a mount for every Ranger on the Forest Districts. Many of these were unbroken horses from western Montana ranches, of good quality, from men like Ern Hoyt who also came to work for the Remount. Many more horses came from a government agricultural experiment station, then known as Bureau of Animal Industry, at Miles City in eastern Montana.

Besides wanting a gentle horse, a Ranger needed one that wouldn't mind a saddlebag, bedroll, and noisy rain slicker bouncing on his back. And, Peery reports, the men got the horses used to being mounted from either left or right

side so that a Ranger could always mount his horse on the uphill side of a mountain trail.

In addition to purchasing saddle horses, the early Remount also raised some of its own. When Peery came to work, he brought with him an American Saddlebred stallion which sired perhaps a dozen horses for the Forest Service.

With the acquisition of Rosin, a Morgan stallion, the Remount in 1932 began breeding a line of half Morgan saddle horses. Since "bell mares" were no longer needed to keep mules together (now packers led their mules in trains and tethered them at night), the remount called in these horses from Forest Districts to serve as brood mares for the new saddle horse project.

Within just two years, many

decisions had been made. The initial decision, to establish a remount depot, came as a way of solving a problem — getting pack stock to fires in a hurry. After the basic problem was solved, others naturally followed. The Region standardized its packing methods, trained men to pack, experimented with plow units, bought mules, and began to raise its own saddle horses. The experiment had proved its worth.

Already in those early years, the feeling grew that the Remount Depot and all the programs that spun off offered solutions never thought of before. One of the originators of the Remount, Clyde Fickes, describes his feelings with justifiable pride. "We started with nothing; with some real experience in what it takes, in what you have to do to get (a job) done."

A NEW LOOK WITH NEW HELP

During America's Great Depression, hundreds of thousands of young men, about half of them from the large cities, found themselves out of work. At the same time, the nation's natural resources — forests, soils, and water — had been badly neglected. As part of the early New Deal efforts of the Roosevelt administration, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) began with the twin goals of reducing unemployment and performing public works. The new Forest

Service Remount Depot benefited immensely from the CCC program.

In 1933, the Ninemile CCC Camp was organized under the direction of Ranger Ed MacKay. This camp, situated just 3 miles north of the Remount Depot headquarters, was believed to be the largest in the country, for it actually held three companies of 200 men each. All 600 men worked during winters building fences at the Remount Depot. In spring, two companies left the valley for work on other

Forests, while one remained to serve as firefighting crews directed by Forest Service foremen, in addition to their labor at the Remount.

One of the important jobs of CCC men was to cut lodgepole pines from the slopes near the Remount pastures, then to construct miles and miles of "jack" fences from those poles. CCC men also cleared rocks from pastures, driving mules who balked and ran and reversed in their hitches to the delight of the oldtimers. Stories abound concerning the "green" New York City boys trying to guide teams of mules. W.B. Russell, an improvements foreman, laughed, "You could look around that pasture any time of day. Somewhere in the pasture there'd be a span of mules runnin away!"

Now that it had a huge influx of government money for work projects, the Forest Service purchased, for a little over \$14,000, its leased ranch and in 1934 began an ambitious permanent building project for the Remount Depot.

With the help of CCC labor, the Remount grew from a cleaned-up but slightly shabby old ranch into a white-painted showplace for the Forest Service. Under the direction of Louis Vierhus, CCC project superintendent, the permanent employees of the Remount Depot became foremen of the work projects. The crews constructed homes in the latest design for the Remount

superintendent and for a District Ranger who would also work out of this facility. They put in a permanent bunkhouse and cookhouse and built a huge barn with concrete floor and hand-hewn ceiling beams. Of the temporary buildings constructed earlier during 1930-31, only the small white stud barn remained — the rest were moved or torn down.

Walt Peery tells how the new buildings were a little too fancy for some. "Everbody was more happy with their tents than they was with that new layout... Everybody had hobnail shoes where they were working; they had to pull their shoes off before they could go in there. It was all hardwood and polished."

After completion of the buildings in 1935, it was time for such improvements as bringing in an electric line and building a descent road from the Remount to old Highway 10 (now Interstate 90). The old road was, in the words of the foreman, "A road like you'd run out to the barn — two rows in the grass."

After the building irrigation and sprinkling systems, the crews began planting. Forest Service architect William Fox helped work out a detailed planting guide for the grounds which would use trees and shrubs purchased from a Missoula nursery. "We'd come in with two trucks every morning," describes Bill Longpre of his work with CCC men, "and we'd load up one truck. They were getting all

the trees, all the shrubbery from there, and that's what's around the Remount now. We even went out in the woods and got thorn bushes, sarvisberry (or serviceberry) bushes, chokecherry bushes... staghorn sumac. I guess those fir trees that we planted are 30 feet high now."

By the time Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace arrived for a visit in the summer of 1936, the Remount Depot shone with its new paint, young grass, and perfectly notched fences. One retiree recalls that Wallace road around with a pack string and helped plant a maple tree. But the visit could hardly be termed a dedication ceremony, for the Remount had been performing its job for several years.

By the time construction ended, the Remount Depot saw two administrative changes. W.C. "Cap" Evans became superintendent after Jake Williams died unexpectedly in the summer of 1935. When Clyde Fickes transferred to the Engineering Division of the Forest Service, the Remount Depot's supervision was assumed by the Regional Office's Service Division, then known as Procurement and Supply. In

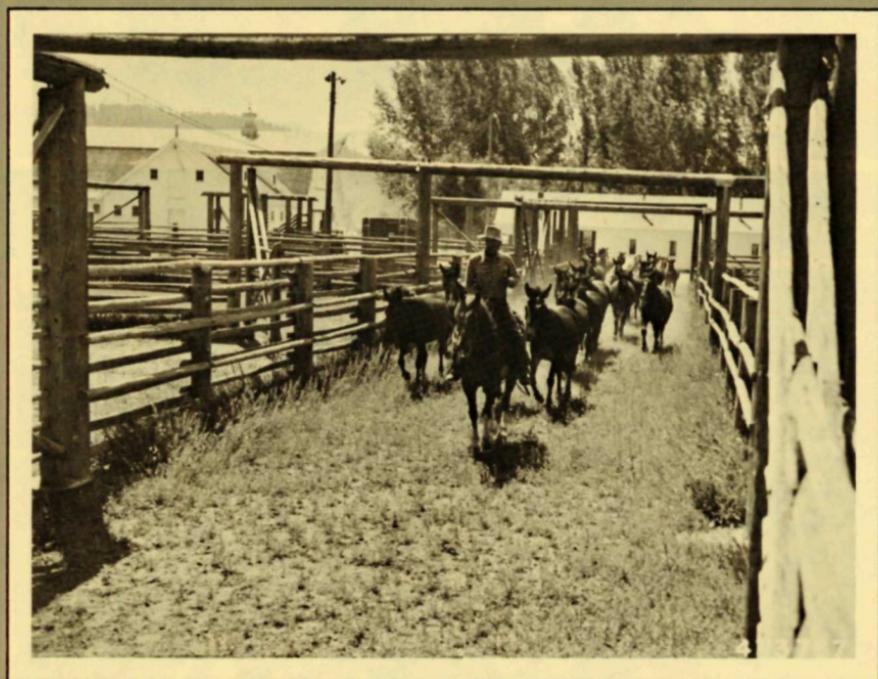
coming years, the Remount Depot would become the more than ever a service organization.

The curious relationship between the Depression and the beautiful new Remount Depot remains intriguing. The Forest Service was immensely proud of its Remount and fully recognized the debt it owed to the 1930's CCC program.

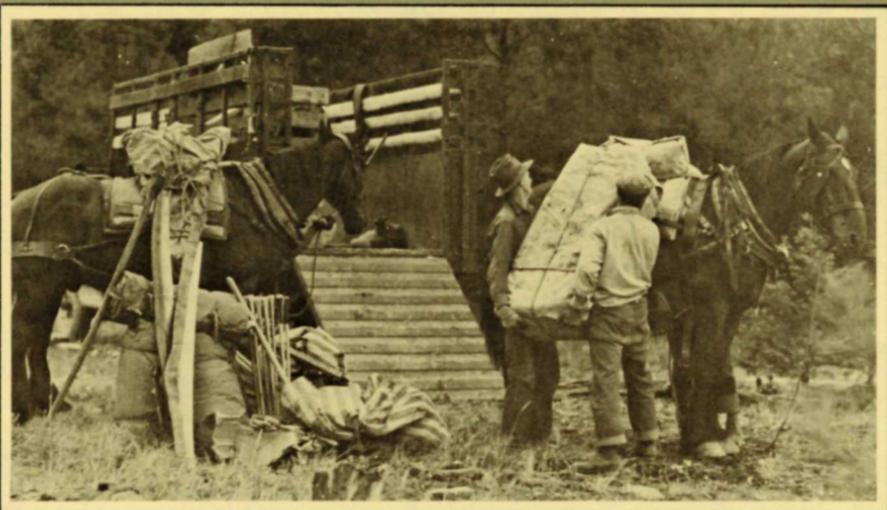
"Prior to that time," muses Cap Evans, "the Forest Service had no money — very meager appropriations. Here came this landslide of the CCC operations and all the Emergency Relief money coming into the picture. Why then the Remount expanded and that became the showplace of the Northwest for the Forest Service. That was really the first spread of any kind that they had in this part of the country — when they built the Ninemile."

In addition to the monetary relationship, the CCC program affected people, too. Many of the CCC enrollees stayed on to live in western Montana. Some went to work for various arms of the Forest Service, and several used their newly learned skills as permanent employees of Ninemile Remount Depot.

Daily Operation



Les Wolfe



Packing plow unit - 1930's - Howard Bratton on left



Hamby Lake - on way to Berry Cr. fire - 1938, M. Rice



Daily Operation

ON THE WAY TO A FIRE

It takes more than attractive new buildings to get pack mules to a fire. It takes a well-thought-out transportation system.

At its inception, the Remount Depot had used several two-ton stock trucks which each carried five head of stock. However, since a pack string comprises ninepack animals plus the packer's saddle horse, it would be simpler, the men reasoned, if all 10 animals could travel in one vehicle rather than sending two or more trucks on every fire call. Roads in the Northwest had improved by the mid-30's to the point that the time seemed right for larger trucks and a unique development.

Marion Duncan, who drove a lot of trucks for the Forest Service, describes how a truck idea starts.

"Dee Stewart, he was an old logging driver.... He had a real good idea what the gears and the motor should be for a truck that could really move out on the highway and had lots of power. I wanted a sleeper cab on these trucks because I could think of the

many times that you'd drive 24 hours without ever quitting.... We really beat this thing around.... and then turned it over to the engineering department and they took it from that.... Some of the things we wanted, like power steering on 'em, they didn't know what that was."

After more on-the-ground suggestions and some back-and-fourth visits with the Kenworth Truck Company of Seattle, the Northern Region of the Forest Service got the only truck of its kind in the country. Kenworth delivered a 1937 model bus chassis with a specially designed aluminum stockrack on the back.

The new truck had no power steering, but it had everything else; and the Forest Service equipment shops in Missoula built two more just like it over Kenworth bus chassis. They were cab-over-engine designs with 10 wheels, sleeping cabs, steel sides (no more aluminum, the mules kicked holes in it), and weighed 24,000 pounds unloaded. These \$18,000 green trucks were big

enough to haul an entire pack string, packer's horse, and all the saddles and equipment needed. The trucks burned gasoline in their 270-horsepower engines because of the literally backwoods places they had to deliver their loads. The drivers might not find a diesel pump for days.

For their time, these transporters were fast — gaining far over the speed limit of 45 m.p.h. on good highways and 35 m.p.h. fully loaded up steep Evaro Hill on the way to a fire in the Flathead Forest. The trucks were driven fast (up to 70 m.p.h. if we can rely on the stories) because with such a heavy load and no power equipment, speed was easier on the driver. Don Harrington drove them in the 1940's and says, "It was a full time job! The trucks were heavy and if you drove slow, they steered hard."

The agency's equipment shops also developed one 12-head trailer to pull behind a large truck. Trucks and trailer were well built and beautifully maintained. Gene Polette drove them much later, in the 1950's, when more sophisticated transporters appeared on the highways. "The body work was meticulous," he says. "Somebody had put a lot of planning into them and a lot of good designing."

The well-managed Remount Depot proved its worth on a typical day in a fire season. When a fire was spotted on a Forest and the local Rangers knew it was too big

for them to handle alone, the call went to the Supervisor of that Forest, then to a fire control center in Missoula, and immediately to the Remount Depot.

"If the call came of a night, you'd grab your clothes and put 'em on as you went out of the building," relates "Coy" Rice, a long-time packer. Everybody had a job to do to help get a fully loaded and equipped truck out the front gate and on its way to a fire.

At least 100 mules and sometimes up to 200 stayed all fire season (roughly July through mid-September) in Remount Depot pastures. Four of these pack strings of 10 animals each stayed in corrals inside the Remount grounds in readiness. At the sound of the alarm, the first packer "under the gun" responded. (Packers rotated calls throughout the season.) He gathered his own stock and haltered them in the loading chute leading from the corrals. If several pack strings had to go, men would ride or run to the far pastures to bring more stock down a lane connecting all the pastures to the main corrals.

Meanwhile a driver moved his Kenworth carefully out of the specially built truck shed with only inches to spare on each side and maneuvered the truck into position at the end of the loading chute.

First came the saddle horse, which the mules would always follow, and then two of the larger mules to

ride three abreast at the front, facing forward. A steel gate closed behind them. The packer chose four smaller mules next, one of them a "wedger" or ill-tempered one who would rear up and spread the four into position. These four rode in the center tier where the packer carefully positioned them according to the mules' own preferences — some wouldn't ride on the outside next to the metal sides.

Another gate closed. Three more mules made up the last row to total the entire string of 10. Experienced mules loaded easily, handled always by the same packer, and rarely objected to the trucks.

At the same time as the loading of animals, other men grabbed the pack-saddles down from storage shelves in the barn and ran with them to the front of the truck. Into the equipment racks they loaded saddles, ropes, and blacksmithing tools — each set of equipment marked in the barn for only that packer and his mules. The packer joined the driver in the cab and out the gate they went — to the Selway in Idaho, to central Montana, sometimes to Yellowstone Park or the Grand Teton.

One packer, Coy Rice, set a record in the 1940's — 8 minutes out the gate during a Forest Service "Show Me Day" demonstration. (Eight minutes was not unbelievable for Rice for, as others verified, his mules always "came at a dead run" into those loading

chutes.) Even on a typical fire call, the truck could be loaded and moving out within 10 to 15 minutes.

During the trip down a highway in these open trucks, the mules were well protected. Tied down to the dividing gates, they wore canvas and leather goggles with isinglass lenses to protect their eyes from insects and wind.

The drivers came to expect problems in hauling mules. Sometimes the animals jostled each other until one or two would end up down in the truck. Then the driver and packer unloaded the mules and got them all back in again. Few accidents occurred, though Marion Duncan tells of a mule who one day insisted on trying to climb out of the back. This distraction resulted in a huge truck rolling into a ditch and cutting one mule so badly that the men performed an emergency sewing up job on his belly skin at the side of the road.

Other arms of the Forest Service cooperated to get supplies to firefighters. While the packer and his string drove to the "base camp" of a fire, the supplies were loaded into trucks at a central warehouse in Missoula or Spokane, Washington. Each packstring supplied a 25-man fire crew plus cook and packer, sometimes up to 30 men, with cooking tools, canned goods, sides of beef, and other kitchen supplies, as well as packages of firefighting tools. In the days

before airplanes, the mules brought in everything a crew needed, even sleeping bags and lunches, which had been organized into the back of warehouse trucks. There were joking contests to see who would arrive at the fire's base camp first, mules or supplies.

The ideal base camp would be located at the end of a road in a draw with a creek. The camp boss situated cooking and sleeping areas upstream and the mules and cargo area below. If there was no access to water for the camp, then one string of mules did nothing but haul water to supply the fire camp. Usually, however, their job was to haul supplies from this camp up trails to where firefighters worked. (In the days before roads into forests, pack strings carried supplies by trail just to establish a base camp.)

The packer, sometimes assisted by a cargo man, unloaded the supplies from trucks and "cargoad" them, or prepared them for mule transportation by assembling goods in *manta* (a Spanish term) or "manties," 6-foot-square canvas tarps. The men roped packs carefully on each side of a mule's saddle, each pack weighing 125-150 pounds.

The base camp was usually a well-organized system, though Johnny Breazeal worked often as a fire foreman and remembers some that proved otherwise. "The camp bosses would have their crews back... when the mules came in,

without disturbance. But once in awhile!... I helped pull two CCC crews into a fire on the Nezperce one time, and we'd fought fire until way in the morning, and so we bedded the kids down to get a few hours rest... We didn't pay much attention to where we were bedding.

"We'd been down about an hour or so when this packer brought these mules in. (Breazeal is sure it wasn't a Remount packer.) He pulled those mules in in the dark, bringing in equipment, and he brought 'em right in over that bunch of people alayin' — stepping right over.

"And it was all right up until the kids got scared. And they started jumping up and scared the mules! I never will forget what the packer said. 'Hey you s.o.b.'s! Lay still! Don't get up and jump around. Lay down or you're gonna get killed.' Everybody just quieted down and lay down, and those little ol' mules went right on over them and he pulled them right through there and nobody was hurt."

On large fires, dozens of pack strings moved up and down trails to create a transportation network serving hundreds of men. For example, the Pete King and McLendon Butte fires of Idaho in 1934 blew up into one conflagration. Because of the remote location, this fire was served exclusively by mules. Forest Service records show that these two fires had a combined perimeter of 410 miles. The

agency established 74 fire base camps, some of which lasted only a day or two, but many were needed more than 20 days. Eighty percent of the equipment used was trucked to a place called Elk Summit, then packed 27 miles to a central service area. Forest Service pack stock from the Remount Depot and from Idaho forests, and private pack stock served — a total of 475 head.

Fire alarms might come at any time of day or night. Packers tell of loading up at 1 a.m. from the Remount Depot and driving the rest of the night and morning to get to a fire. Trucker Don Harrington once drove nearly 24 hours straight to deliver his load. Even if the men found that they'd arrived at a fire in the middle of the night, the procedure was the same. This sometimes meant a pack string traveled over mountain trails in the total blackness of a forested canyon. Often packers had to dismount and lead their horses and mules through the darkness on rough trails.

Even in daylight, the trail to a fire crew presented hazards. Coy Rice tells of an incident in 1945 where he took his string along the banks of a large creek to a crossing. By the time the tenth animal stepped onto a soft spot on a trail, the bank crumbled. The mules, tied to one another, slipped and piled into the fast creek, rolling among huge boulders and falling over each other with their loads pulling them deep into the water.

Rice went down too, though not pulled by his mules since he never tied the lead mule tight to his saddle, but simply held the rope in his hand. After getting to the bottom he ducked kicking legs to cut lead ropes and pack ropes so that his mules could separate themselves and scramble to their feet. He knew that he had to act quickly for, in spite of all their admirable qualities, mules tend to give up easily in such a situation and might drown.

Rice's mules got out, but the carefully cargoesd packs had to be pulled out of the water. That day the fire crew went hungry.

There were other hazards on the trail. Fishermen or campers might spook the mules — or wild animals. One story is told about packer Howard Benschotter who had to cut a new trail through the lodgepole pines for his pack string because a bull moose wouldn't give up the trail. Sometimes a packer had to take his animals through an already burned-over area to get to the firefighters, watching for "hot spots" in the forest floor that could burn an animal's feet.

The packers all agree that hornets caused the worst problem. Those nasty stinging insects would nest in late summer in the forest floor or in hollow logs at the side of a trail. If the bears hadn't dug up a hornets' nest along the trail, then a previous pack string might stir them up. Marion Duncan tells how the latter situation once caused his

friend, George Case, to have to get all his mules out of a creek because of a swarm of hornets. Case's comment on the day was, "Duncan, if there was anybody here to quit to, I'd quit!"

However, the successes numbered far greater than the failures on the fire trail. The Northern Region felt

great pride in its ability to provide trained packers and well-chosen mules when needed. And the trucks loaded with their four-footed cargo became a familiar sight to the citizens of Missoula and nearby valleys all through the late 1930's and the 1940's fire seasons.

THE PEOPLE WHO SERVED

It should be obvious by now that the skill of the packer created the basis for the entire operation. A good packer had to handle himself in the woods alone, doctor a sick animal, and most importantly, talk mule language. Bill Bell, a long-time Forest Service Ranger and packer, was one of the best. Author Norman Maclean, in *A River Runs Through It and Other Stories*, describes him this way:

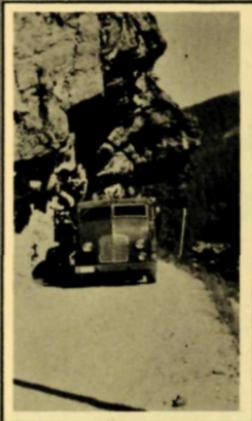
"He was a sort of 'Yeah' or 'No' guy to human beings — now and then he talked part of a sentence or a sentence or two — but to his horses and mules he talked all the time, and they understood him. He never talked loud to them, especially not to mules, which he knew are like elephants and never forget."

The best packers had that quality of gentleness with animals. They were concerned with the welfare of their pack strings on every fire call. Furthermore, they were resourceful and damned independent. Walt Peery, who met

a lot of packers while he broke horses for the Remount, described one called Slim. It seems Slim let it be known that when his mules came down off a fire trail, he wanted a supply of grain for them. Once when the truck didn't show up with the grain, he simply turned his pack string loose in the nearest rancher's oat field. The government paid the bill.

Packers understand mule psychology. The story of the packer who led his mules over men in sleeping bags, knowing the danger of flying hooves, illustrates that knowledge. And the packer knows the idiosyncrasies of the mules he works with, as noted by Walt Peery. "You can take the lead mule or the one right behind — if he's not in the right place, he'll try to get up in front and get in his right place... You can't keep him back there. Those packers know where those mules go."

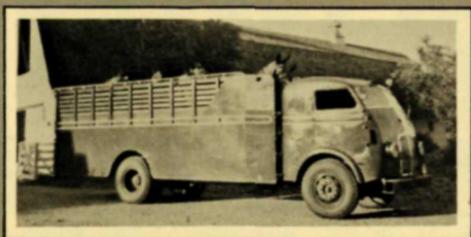
Packers performed many other jobs besides supplying firefighters. Until 1947, when the



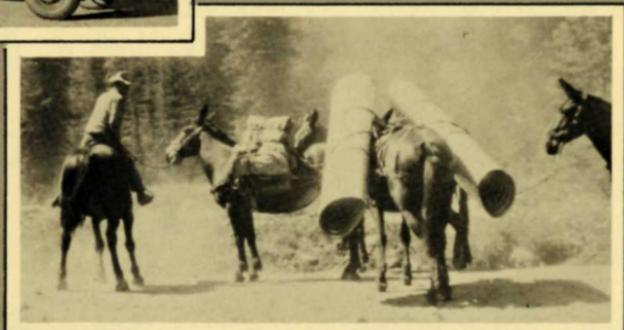
Traveling between
Orofino & Lewiston



Dixie, Idaho Packers-M, Benson,
J. Pritchard, Driver- L. Townsend



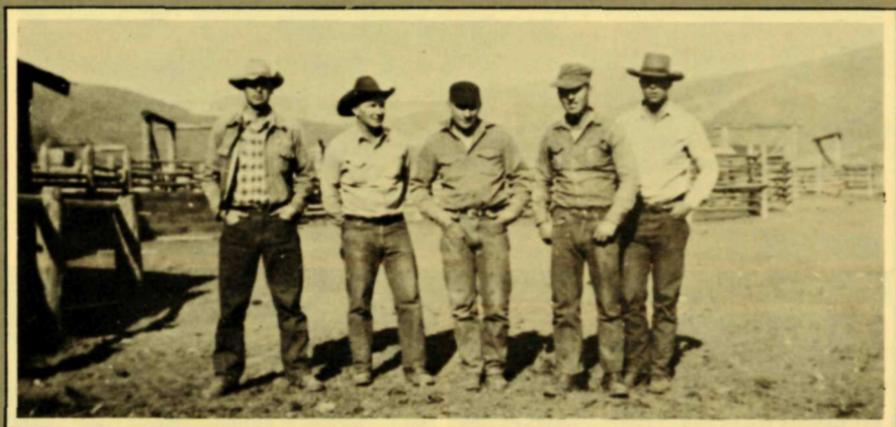
Bill Bell's pack train,
Monte Peyton, driver-1939



1955 - Hauling culverts - Lost Horse Camp, Bitterroot



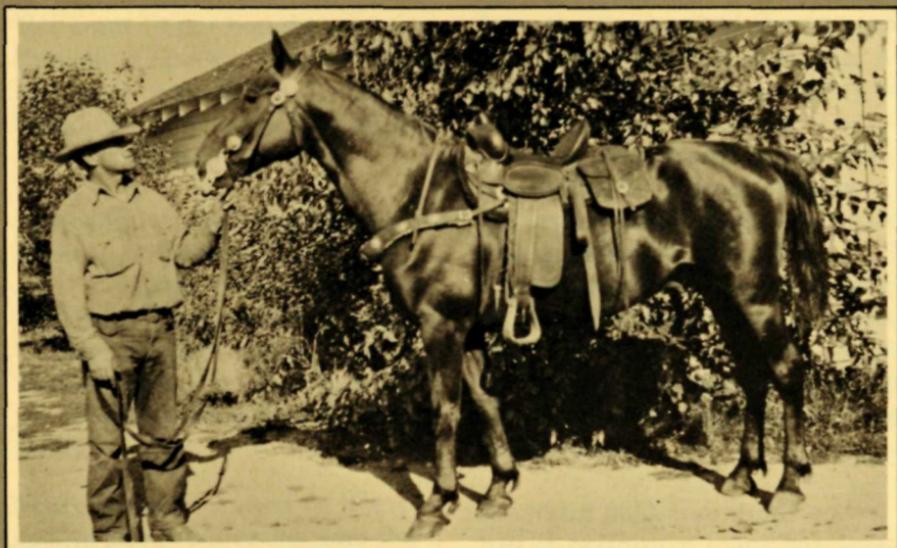
Bill Bell and Monty Payton packing mules



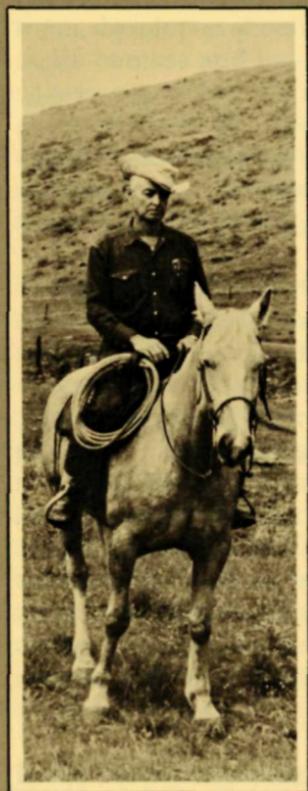
D.Perrin, J.Christensen, B.Albert, D.Schreckendgust, C.Harrington



Jake Williams on "Laddie"—1932



M. Rice & "Hermes", Am. Saddler



Eldon McKee & J. Christensen
on way back from Miles City
1959

Les Wolf - Winter Range - 1962

Remount Depot bought a power mower, the packers worked teams of horses or mules in the hay meadows. They cared for all the stock at the Remount.

In springtime packers helped shoe horses and mules. Most of this work occurred at the winter Range, a vacility which kept stock during the "off season." The Winter Range, another important part of this story, will be described later.

Many packers worked in the saddle shop, which became the supplier of leather goods for the entire Region. The men made Decker packsaddles and repaired them, developed shoeing hobbles, made harness and halters. Of course, many packers also broke stock. Between fire calls a man might work with four young mules at a time for two or three days to get them ready for packing.

Truck drivers also performed essential services for the Remount and its Winter Range. On fire calls, they were just as concerned as the packers in getting their part of the job done — delivering pack strings at fire camps by a certain time. Drivers also rotated duty unless, as sometimes happened, a special relationship built up between a particular packer and a truck driver. Coy Rice, for example, wanted only Don Harrington to drive his mules.

Drivers took responsibility for minor repairs and maintenance on all trucks. They drove loads of hay

from the Remount to the 400-ton hay shed at the Winter Range. A driver might haul a packstring to another Forest for a season's work or a fire, drive on to the Spokane warehouse to pick up supplies needed in Missoula, and return to find another fire call. Truck drivers usually got the mechanical repair jobs at the Remount, helped with field work, and even hauled garbage to the dump a mile down the road, where they had to chase bears away.

Remount men and mules and trucks performed many services over the years. In 1935, they helped Forest Service photographer K.D. Swan take one of the first trips into what is now the Bob Marshall Wilderness near Glacier National Park. A pack string was sometimes assigned to a Forest for an entire season, such as the work done at Priest Lake in Idaho in the 1950s to help control blister rust — a forest disease. A pack string might carry lumber and cable for building forest bridges, or the cement mixer (broken down into parts), or beds and stoves for lookouts.

Charles Edgar Randall describes in an article in *American Forests* another common project, with an uncommon ending. "A Montana lake was named for a Forest Service pack mule. The mule, one of a pack string carrying live trout... sank to its haunches at the edge of one of the unnamed lakes. In commemoration of the struggle the crew had getting the animal

out, the lake has since been known as Mule Lake.”

During World War II, the U.S. Army called on Remount Depot packers to come to Fort Carson, Colorado. There the men trained Army packers for their work with pack mules on the European Front.

The Remount’s sign shop and blacksmith shop operated year-round. In the mid-30’s, the Regional sign shop moved from downtown Missoula to the Remount Depot where the CCC’s worked alongside salaried men. The blacksmith shop kept two men working through every winter to improve horse and mule shoes by adding heel and toe pieces to basic shoes — 15,000 every year.

Under superintendent Evans, Ed MacKay (from 1939-1949), who had worked as a Ranger and as organizer of the Ninemile CCC Camp, the Remount Depot became the horse and mule supply center for the Northern Region. In the case of horseshoes, it supplied the Forest Service nationwide.

While the superintendent coordinated the operations of the Winter Range and CCC Camp with the Remount, the ranch foreman took charge of daily operations. He assigned packers and drivers to their fire calls and took responsibility for all equipment used. Alma Thompson, widow of the first foreman, recalls, “He had to be on duty all the time... didn’t have any time to himself at all.”

Yet she smilingly adds that because of Boyd Thompson’s insistence, the Forest Service constructed a home for them near the Remount headquarters. Most of the laborers and packers lived in the bunk-house.

The wives of those men who lived full time on the grounds, mainly superintendents and foremen, remember those as good years. Their children rode the schoolbus with the other Ninemile Valley children. The wives developed a social life in nearby towns and with the ranch families in the valley. But only an occasional woman ever worked for the Remount Depot — as cook for 50-60 men at a time or as busy-season secretary.

Imogene Rice remembers that the worst times came when the men were gone on fire calls. Then the women “listened to the radio and chewed our teeth and tongues wondering what was going to happen next — if anybody was going to get hurt.” Fortunately, there were no serious injuries.

The Remount Depot tried to be a good neighbor in the Ninemile Valley, though it had gotten off to an uncertain start during its first year when the local cattle ranchers had to insist that the Forest Service limit its spreading appropriation of government grazing land. Ranchers depended on that land for their own herds. Cooperating with the Ninemile stockgrowers association, the Remount later helped build a concrete dipping

vat to control livestock diseases in the middle 30's.

The Remount Depot became a center for visitors. There the Forest Service entertained its administrators visiting from the Washington Office, assorted congressmen, and local civic groups who wanted to see the operation in action.

Cap Evans reports that sometimes 200-300 guests came at a time. They were always entertained at the Remount's cookhouse with reportedly excellent meals. Gifford Pinchot, the father of American forestry toured the facility. After Donald Chamberlin became superintendent in 1949, there were United Nations-sponsored groups of foreign foresters wanting to learn the latest methods in forestry and fire control.

In earlier years, the Remount Depot often provided demonstrations on its own grounds in parades or at county fairs. One 1938 account details how packer Bill Bell and driver Monte Peyton drove their truck around a racetrack with its siren open, stopped in front of the grandstand, unloaded the mules, and then packed a complete 25-man firefighting outfit — all to much applause from the audience.

Newspapers in the Northwest often featured the Forest Service Remount Depot, describing the fire calls, repeating mule stories, and showing photographs of mule

shoeing. The facility was simply not like anything else. Most people in the Region, while used to seeing livestock, had never before seen so many mules or such a well-organized program to use mules for a specific job.

The people hired to work the Remount helped make it unique. They were not trained foresters at all. Rather, the Remount Depot was more of a ranch operation which required persons skilled in the use of farm equipment and knowledgeable about horses and mules. The only foresters at the Remount administered its overall work for the Region, and even then, many of those men had ranching backgrounds before coming to the Forest Service.

A spirit of cooperation, more than people's backgrounds, helped create the Remount's widely known efficiency in answering fire calls. Packer Coy Rice put it this way: "Everything has to click just right... everything has to be right there, even the fellow who brings the time slip out from the office."

Johnny Breazeal, who observed the Remount operation from his job as Assistant Ranger, recalls: "The people there were very dedicated.... They might get out on Saturday night and even fight among one another, but when that old bell rang and a fire call came — they were as loyal a bunch as you ever saw." Breazeal, who recalls they got paid no overtime in those days, and other Ranger District

employees often ran over to help. Marion Duncan remembers a sign painter who went out in the middle of the night to help shoe

mules that had to go back out again. Everybody worked. Everybody cooperated to get a job done.

Winter Range

THE NEW WINTER RANGE

When the Regional Office, in the 1930's, decided to centralize all the packstock for its Forests in one place, it had to find more pastureland than was available in the Ninemile Valley. Therefore, at the same time as the 1930 lease of the Remount Depot, the Forest Service had also set up its wintering range about 90 miles north of Missoula in an area known as the Big Draw. In 1935 when more breeding programs were planned, the Region moved its Winter Range farther south to the banks of the Flathead River between the towns of Perma and Dixon.

The Big Draw and the Perma area are opposite ends of a huge rectangle that seems out of place in mountainous western Montana. This rectangle situated southwest of Flathead Lake is nearly treeless hills and open prairie, cut with gullies and scattered with sagebrush. This country had opened to homesteading about 1910, but by the mid-30's the combination of drought and Depression had caused ruin to the sheep and cattle ranches.

Beginning in 1935, the Forest Service began securing 30¢ per-acre leases on abandoned ranches in the Pema area from owners who were happy to have any income at all. The new Winter Range grew to almost 44,000 acres of good grass and had the added advantage of an exceptionally mild climate. Since the Region had a large wintering area situated closer to the Remount Depot — only about 20 miles cross-country — the two facilities coordinated their efforts to serve the Forests.

By 1936, the Winter Range had many functions. It would expand its provision of all horses and mules to the Northern Region: wintering, doctoring, shoeing, and dispersal to Forests for the working season. It would provide the Remount Depot with pack stock for emergency fire control as a service to the service organization.

In addition, the Region then concentrated on scientifically breeding its own animals rather than buying them. The horse program begun in the Ninemile

expanded and moved to the Winter Range. And the Forest Service started what would become the largest mule ranch in

the Pacific Northwest with its decision to breed, to its own specifications, not only saddle horses, but also pack mules.

MULES AND HORSES

The mule, that sturdy but sterile offspring of a donkey and a horse, had for many years been the preferred pack animal in the Forest Service. Charlie Shaw, an early Flathead Forest Ranger, lists these reasons for choosing mules: they are sure-footed, require less feed than horses, can carry heavier loads, and won't attempt to rub their packs off against the trees along the trail.

Also important is the mule's motion when traveling. A writer for *Western Horseman* magazine put it this way: "It is the peculiar fox trot gait that makes the mule supreme as a pack animal....The extended walk or jogging trot of the horse transmits motions to the load, greatly handicapping the animal. Never underestimate the mule when it comes to brains. He quickly learns to acquire a gait which enables him to move to best advantage without rocking his load, and wearing himself to a frazzle — even at 5-6 miles per hour."

Forest Service packers would agree, for one noted that you can pack crates of eggs on a mule but not on a horse. And they all vouch for the mule's intelligence.

In the early days of mountain packing, the men had preferred small mules of about 1,000 pounds. It was easier to throw a load on their backs, and some said their feet were better. When the Forest Service began using mules for increasingly larger jobs such as hauling lumber and machinery, larger mules became necessary.

In 1936, the Northern Region bought two large jacks (male donkeys) with cross Spanish/Mammoth breeding. They were bred with 90 large mares with mixed Percheron blood purchased from eastern Washington farms. The result: 1,200-1,400 pound straight-backed mules with strong legs, "mealy" nosed, and good dispositions.

The size of the herd varied, but in the early 1940's the Winter Range held more than 250 mares and 4-6 jacks (Paddy was best known) to produce some 200 mule colts each year. One set of mule twins appeared.

The men in charge of the breeding of horses and mules kept exact records. It has been said that Les Wolfe, who later became

superintendent of the Winter Range, knew the stock so well he could name which mares would foal that spring and whether they would produce horse or mule offspring.

The continuing influence of that horseman-turned-forester, Major Kelley, was felt again. Kelley wanted his Rangers to have quality saddle horses, bred from a recognized breed, and noted for their riding qualities rather than for packing. Inspection trips were made in 1936 to Yakima, Washington, stables to inspect riding breeds, and Remount Superintendent Cap Evans and others made the final decision — they would raise American Saddlebred horses.

The "Saddler" is the familiar five-gaited show horse. The Forest Service purchased several stallions during those early years, the best known being Grand Menard. Winter Range Superintendent Herb Stone purchased the sorrel stallion at an auction in Nebraska for between \$2,300 and \$2,500 — memories are at odds on the exact price. At any rate, it was a might sum of money in 1936 for a horse. The agency also purchased several Saddlebred mares.

The Forest Service tried another line of saddle horse, the Nonius, a Hungarian cavalry horse. These were small, similar to Morgans or Quarter Horses, and considered good mountain horses because of their shorter bodies and legs as

compared with Saddlers.

The new brown horses didn't succeed, however. The principal stallion, acquired from the Miles City experiment station, had to be destroyed after an injury. And when a Blackfoot Valley rancher attempted to continue the line, he found that most of his Nonius colts fell prey to mountain lions during a hard 1940's winter.

After much experimenting, the consensus seemed to be that a purebred horse of any kind, especially the Saddlebreds, did not produce a good Forest Service saddle horse. "Hot blood horses were no good on a trail; they were too fast and too nervous," or "They're wonderful for roads, but not up in these hills." But when "cold blood" mares were crossed with those Saddlebred stallions, most Rangers were happy. Along with all those mules foaled every spring at the Winter Range would appear 30-50 horse foals destined to become Rangers' saddle horses.

Sometimes an idea comes along that proves to benefit everyone. The stallion service provided by at least two government agencies — the Army and the Forest Service — worked like this:

The government-owned stallions, in this case the Saddlers such as Grand Menard, Hermes, or Easter Fox, or the Nonius stallions, Shorty and Kipling, were offered to the public for breeding. A rancher could bring his mare to the Winter Range for service by the

stallion of his choice, or the rancher might make arrangements to keep the stallion on his property for some specific time. Either way, the rancher paid nothing. He signed an agreement with the Forest Service stating that he could keep the offspring of these unions if he chose. Or if the rancher wanted to sell, the Forest Service had the first option to buy any gelded colts — for about \$100 each in 1940. The Northern Region wanted quality saddle horses available for its Rangers.

Many mares came for visits at the Winter Range and the Forest Service stallions spent time over much of western Montana.

Oftentimes permanent trades took place. The Forest Service might trade one of its purebred horses for two mules or two grade saddle horses. Or, for example, Howard Neas of Kalispell writes: "In the spring of 1942 I traded two saddle horses and a mule for a stallion 'Montana Peavine.' He was an American Saddlebred.... I had Peavine two years when I sold him to a man from Mercer Island, Washington."

In these ways, the influence of purebred horses spread. Many persons cite evidence today of the upgrading in horses brought about by the Forest Service's stallion service and stock-trading.

RANCH OPERATION

Hank Viche, in charge of the Winter Range during the early 1940's, describes its organization. "The main headquarters was at Ferry Basin where all of the activity was during the winter period. During the spring, summer, and fall periods, we had...the Gustine Ranch which was just a short ways from Camas Prairie; it was kind of a showplace and that's where Grand Menard, the famous stallion, was stationed... And over the hill from there was what was called the Clark Ranch, where Les Wolfe was with the breeding program for the mules. The spring ranch was at MacDonald, which was just down the river from Dixon, where we used to take the mules and horses

down in the spring and shoe them."

The Winter Range, then, became a somewhat atypical western Montana working stock ranch. There was no place for cowboys at the Remount Depot in the Ninemile, but the Winter Range hired them to work with an average of 1,500 head of pack stock and breeding stock.

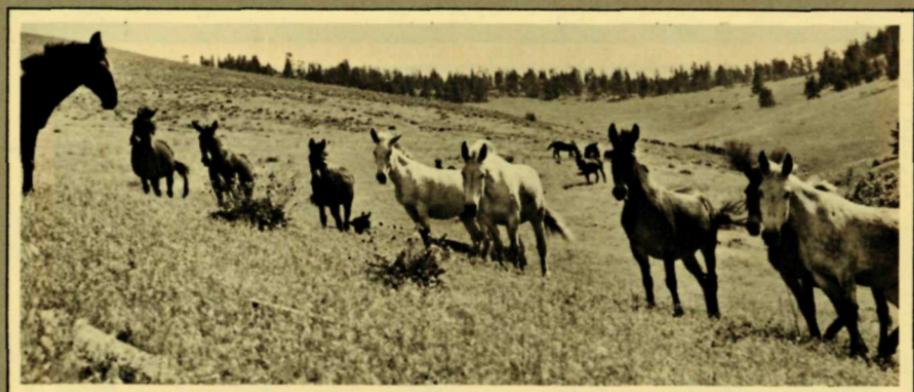
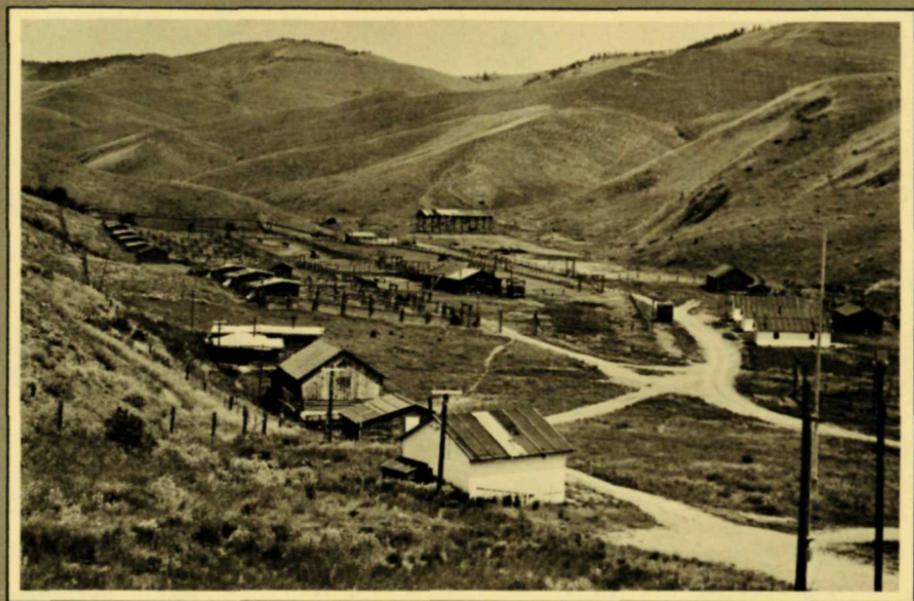
Spring roundup time meant days of riding to bring in the animals that had roamed freely all winter. After the men corralled the horses and mules, they were sorted, branded, clipped, and shod.

In the early days, every time a

Winter Range



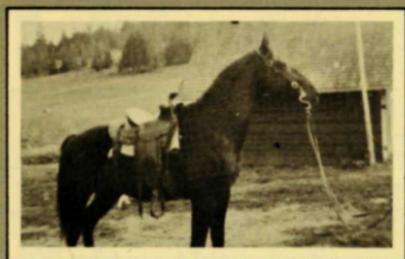
George Vinson at McDonald Basin



(Grace left) (Noonie) D.S. Irving



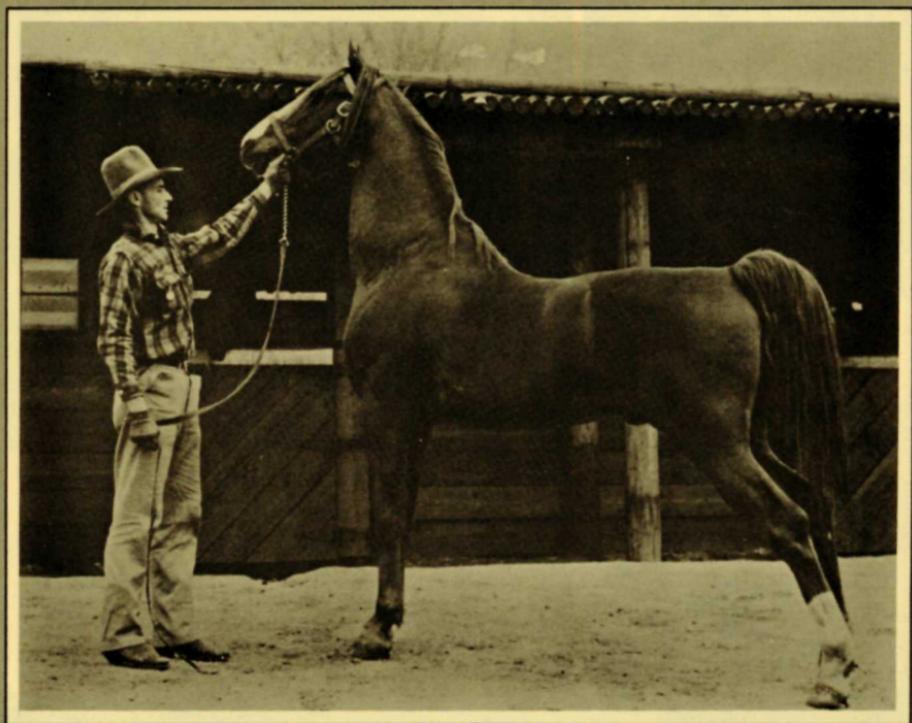
Bessey and companions (McCoy string) 1931



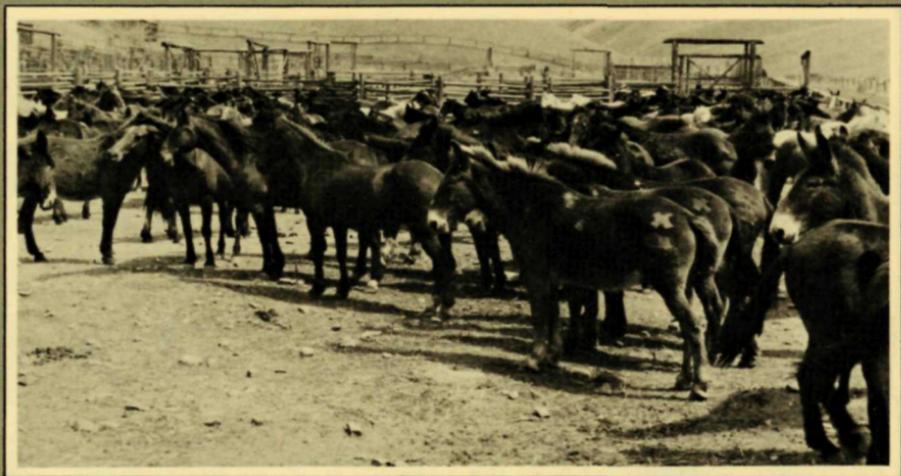
"Mont. Plovine"-saddler



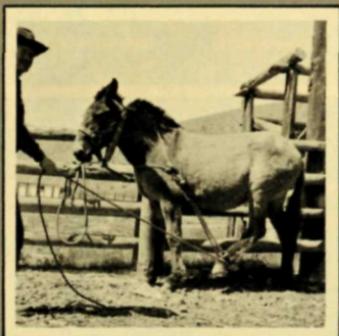
Winter Range colts



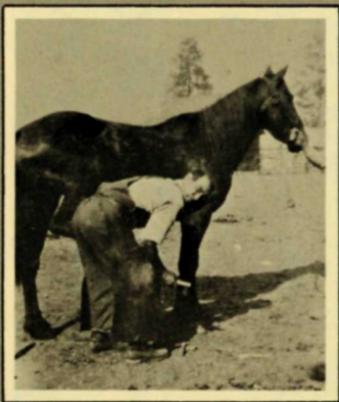
"Grand Menard"-American saddler, Les Wolfe



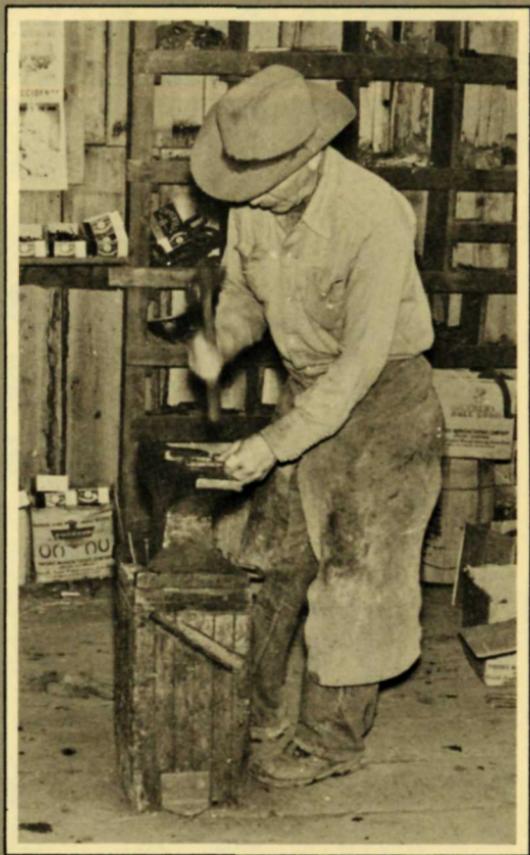
Spring roundup at Winter Range-1959



*J. Christensen -
mule hobbled-1946*



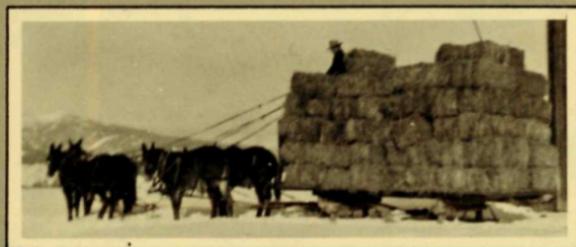
Bob Estes



*John Christensen at Winter Range
Remount Farriers*

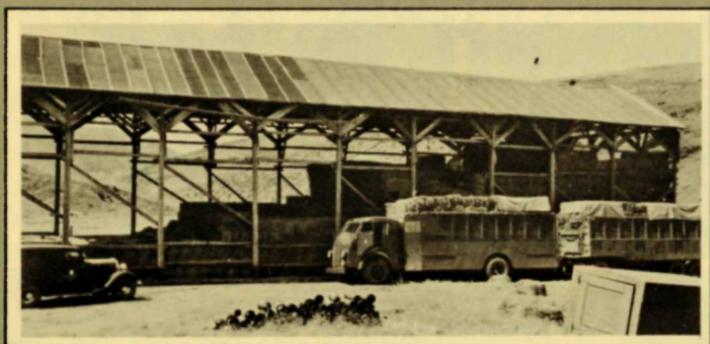


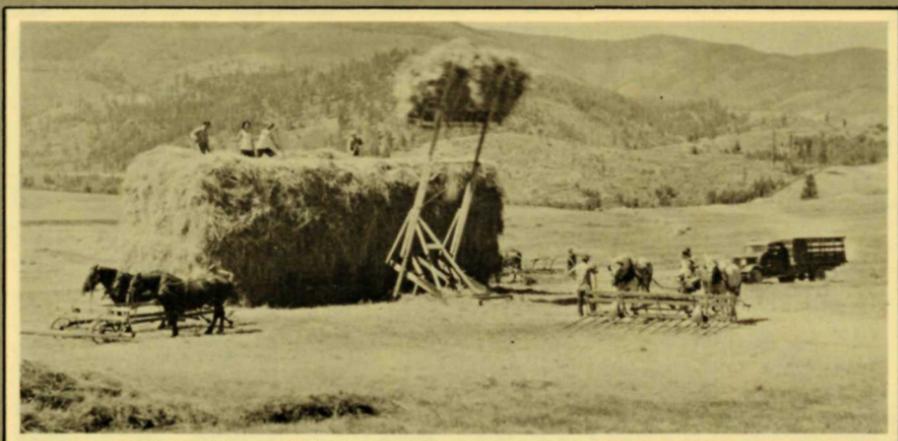
Slim Deardorf, J.Christensen, Bill Reynolds, Don Perrin-1961



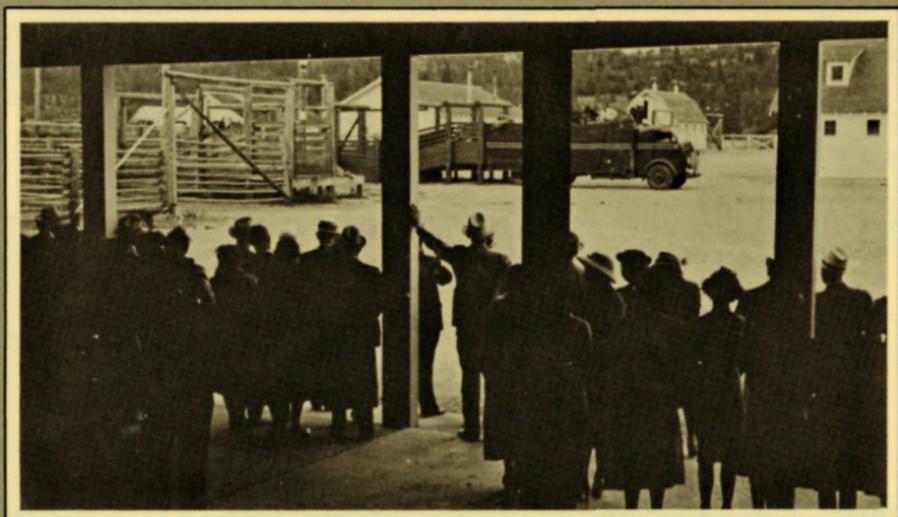
*Charlie Harrington
and J.Christensen*

Threshing oats-1938





Winter Range Superintendent home & office



Field Day at the Remount

mule transferred to a different Forest for a season, he got a new brand. This resulted in what Cap Evans called "every mule looking like a Chinese laundry ticket." By the time stock was run at the new Winter Range, the system became more organized. From 1936 on, every mule or horse carried one brand for life — "US" plus a number — and that number was recorded in a master record book.

In spring, the winter-long hair over the mule's brand was clipped off, and while the men were at it they clipped a large design on the rump — F for the Flathead National Forest, L for Lolo, and so on. This way the animals could be quickly sorted into groups.

Shoeing time started in late April and continued for as long as it took to get four new shoes each on anywhere from 1,000 to 1,500 mules and horses. A ferry came across the high spring water of the Flathead River with a load of shoes — thousands of them fashioned the winter before in the blacksmith shop at the Remount. Then a horse-drawn wagon carried tools and shoes to the camp.

The men put in long days in the shoeing shed. Three or four crews of three men each roped and held mules, trimmed the hooves, and nailed on the shoes. Two and a half or three minutes for each shoe — maybe half an hour altogether for each animal. The blacksmiths and ranch hands worked fast, for the mule's benefit as well as their own.

Sometimes it took wrestling a mule to the floor and tying all four legs together. Mules in particular seem not to like to get shot. One writer watching the spring roundup during wartime observed, "Until I saw this show, I thought all brave men were on the battle fronts. But they aren't; the mule shoeing profession has a lot. They all deserve medals for each season's work. It took four men...to get one shoe on a mule. They wear their own wound stripes."

Or, in the understated words of Rice: "Any animal went in that building, came out with shoes on."

One shoer might turn out 16 to 20 animals a day. Or if he was Dave Pronovost, a man who spent a lifetime shoeing stock for the Forest Service, he might set a record of 33 animals in one day. And the end of the spring shoeing at the Winter Range was only the beginning of the working season for blacksmiths. The animals would need shoes every 6 weeks throughout the summer; two or three men traveled all the Ranger Districts keeping horses and pack stock well shod.

By the end of May or early June, the mules and Rangers' horses, freshly shod and clipped and conditioned, went to their respective Forests. For many years, the stock traveled on their own legs. Forest Service trail drives were a familiar sight to western Montana residents as 100 head of stock walked and trotted as

far away as the Kaniksu Forest in Idaho or 150 headed south to Darby in Montana's Bitterroot. The 200 head of mules who would summer at the Remount Depot for fire assignments trailed down a main highway and over a forest trail to the Ninemile Valley, a two-day trip.

To help improve the Winter Range, a CCC "spike camp" housed a detachment of 30 men. They constructed 300 miles of fences along with buildings and corrals, working all year around. One winter, 1936-37, a Dorrien Wolfe, then wife of an employee, remembers it, a severe cold spell held for so long that the Flathead River froze over and construction logs were hauled over the ice.

Usually a ferry crossed the river, an old ferry rebuilt by the Forest Service out of steel drums and powered by an outboard motor. Since there were no roads into MacDonald Basin, the shoeing area of the Winter Range, the ferry transported everything needed, including workmen and visitors. It served well except on one occasion as described by Peyton Moncure, a Forest Service writer:

"It was in the summer of 1938...that the ferry broke its cable and began drifting down the river with its load of a five-ton truck, a load of pipe, and several Civilian Conservation Corps boys and Forest Service personnel. The CCC Boys were taken ashore by the motorboat while an employee by the name of Bill Riddle rode the

ferry downstream until it grounded on a sandbar near Perma."

Just as on any ranch, there was never a season with nothing to do. The CCC crews, sometimes joined by Remount packers during the "off season," developed springs on the rangeland, continued to build and repair fences, fed stock, and cared for weanling colts or injured animals. During at least one season during the meat rationing days of World War II, the Region fattened its own beef on this rangeland.

The Winter Range had no farming. Any hay and oats that were needed came by truck from the Remount Depot meadows. But the rangeland became another showplace for the Forest Service. "The result of that program wasn't just horses and mules," says Hank Viche. "It was the land itself, also."

They planted crested wheatgrass to improve the grazing land, rotated pastures by seasons, and controlled grasshoppers. At its peak in the late 40's, the Winter Range exemplified the best in range management.

Because the winters were mild in the Perma area, the stock seldom was bothered by the weather. "In all the years they had that place, I can only remember one time when they got in trouble with the stock being out..." begins Marion Duncan, who worked at both the Remount and Winter Range. There

had been a chinook, a sudden warm breeze in the middle of winter, which caused ice to form over the snow. Duncan and three others succeeded in bringing in 300 head of stock caught on icy hills away from feed, but it must have been mostly a case of pointing the mules in the right direction and letting them slide. The men's mounts had sharp cleats on their horseshoes, but the range stock didn't. Says Duncan, "They got on a hillside and they started. They never knew where they would stop!"

Life for families at the Winter Range was not quite as pleasant as at the Remount Depot. The headquarters area was hot in summer, nearly treeless, and isolated from towns by impassable roads in winter. Hank Viche's children weren't allowed out of the yard for weeks in late summer for fear of rattlesnakes. Fortunately, the old farmhouse supplied to the superintendent had many additions, including a large porch for playing.

The Winter Range, as well as the Remount Depot, provided many attractions. (The employees of both facilities sometimes felt burdened!) Western Montana people wanted to watch the shoeing, see the horses, or make arrangements for the stallion service. For several years there were Field Days such as one in 1938 where the visitors were treated to a barbecue lunch for 25¢ each and demonstrations of packing, shoeing, and loading

stock on trucks for fire calls. Later there were tours for officials or small groups.

Again, all that visiting came about because of the uniqueness of the operation. When Lloyd Noel, the Region's administrative services officer, retired in the 1960's, he said, "Except for the Army, we were the only government agency with a remount depot and a breeding ranch for mules.... It was the only one of its type in the West."

Through the influence of such men as Major Evan Kelley the Forest Service bred a superior line of pack animals and, incidentally, supplied them with one of the best winter grazing areas in the country. Many mules from the Northern Region even went outside the area. Several strings of pack mules were sold, for example, to Forests in California.

One has to remember that though other means of fighting forest fires were developing in the 1930's and 40's, mainly airplanes, first a depression and then a war was going on. It was difficult to get money to fight fires. Probably the main reason for an elaborate 2-day guided tour for newspaper people in 1945 was to make a public plea for funds.

As quoted in Spokane's *Spokesman-Review*, then Regional Forester P.D. Hanson told the writers:

"At the rate of present

appropriations for forest development roads, it would require 100 years to complete an adequate road system for the protection and utilization of the region's forests.... The ambition of

the foresters is to develop a road program that will allow men to be put on a fire within an hour after reported."

Meantime, the mules served.



The End of the Mule Era

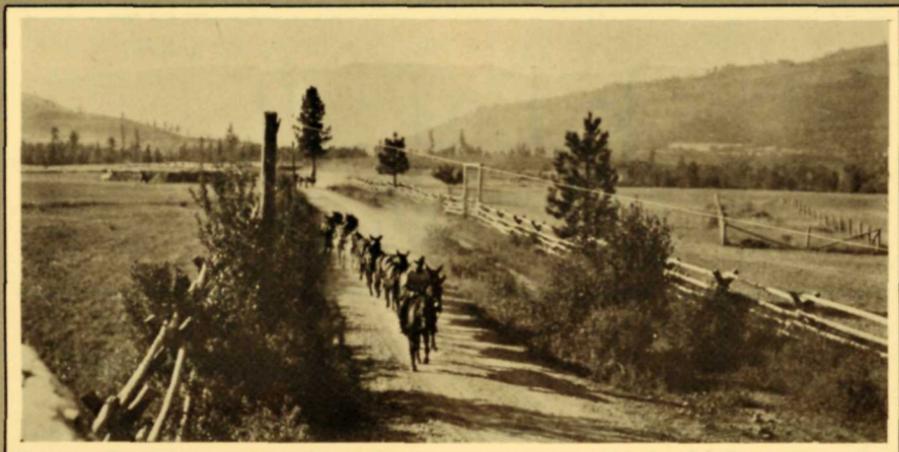




*Les Tull (left) and Bill Bell (right)
giving mule packing demonstration-1941*



*L to R. Bill Bell, "Queenie," Ed Mckay, Evan W. "Major"
Kelley, Reg. Forester, at Kelly's retirement party-1944*



Trailing stock to Perma - George Huntly



Lee Cohon

The End of the Mule Era

AIRPLANES AND MULES

The Forest Service's Northern Region had been experimenting with airplanes to fight forest fires during the same years as the establishment and peak of the Remount Depot operation. In 1929 the Region began free-fall cargo dropping of cans of drinking water, food, and firefighting equipment. During the 1930's it used parachutes to drop supplies to crews of men on the ground.

Mules still supplied most fire crews, however, because the slow-moving and small planes could not get into most of the hazardous areas where fire occurred. Only small signs pointed to the end of the mule era. In the mid-1930's, Forest Service mules packed warning beacons for airplanes to western Montana mountain peaks. Then came the perfection of a totally new concept, parachuting men into fire zones.

In 1941, the nation's first training base for smokejumpers began, ironically, just three miles from the Remount Depot at the site of the Ninemile CCC Camp. By that

time, World War II needed the young men who had previously filled the barracks of the CCC Camps. In 1943, the smokejumper center moved down the road, closer to the Remount Depot, to Camp Menard, and Forest Service crews constructed a small landing field just west of the Remount headquarters. Many of the Remount's visitors drove on another mile to watch the spring training of smokejumpers as they parachuted into Remount pastures where the irrigating had been shut off the night before to allow the men a dry landing.

As if in return for the favors, smokejumper back-up crews often came down between assignments to the Remount. "They'd help pitch hay, shock oats, build fences — whatever we had to do," according to Donald Chamberlin, the Remount's last superintendent.

Smokejumpers are simply men who fight forest fires, except that they can arrive much faster at the scene and often have the fire put out in a few hours. Their story is an

exciting one in itself. But the coming of the smokejumpers would have a great effect on the use of mules in the National Forests. Gene Polette, a mule-truck driver in the 1950's, put it this way: "Due to the time involved in the airplane dropping smokejumpers on a fire (compared to) the time it would take a pack string to reach a fire, the handwriting was on the wall that the airplane was going to win out...."

For at least 10 years, mules continued to prove essential, but for different reasons. The Forest Service figured approximately one mule per smokejumper was needed to haul out the smokejumpers' suits and sacks of equipment which the firefighters stashed along trails for the mule strings to carry out. That procedure would continue for as long as the Forests had few roads, for even if everything — men and equipment both — dropped by plane to fires, there was still no way to get it all out without using mules on mountain trails.

As late as 1951, mules played a major role in control efforts on certain fires. In September of that year, the Gasquet District in Northern California had a severe fire blowup. In addition to Northern Region men who flew to California to help, Remount Depot mules also responded. Three truckloads of pack mules, with their packers, extra drivers, and all equipment, drove for two days,

before there were interstate highways, to assist the men and mules already there.

This trip was the farthest away from "home" that the Region's pack stock ever traveled. During the three weeks on that northern California fire, the Remount trucks and their drivers also served in the fire control effort. Smokejumpers fought that fire, but equipment was brought in by truck and mules rather than planes.

Alfred E. Spaulding, Northern Region chief of fire control at the time, recalls the widespread reputation of the Remount mules and men. While the animals were being loaded up for their first trip out of a base camp, one of the local California packer's wives said, "I don't believe it's true that the Remount packer blows a whistle and his mules line up in proper order!" No one else believed it either, but the mules were so well trained that it was almost true.

During the summers of 1950 and 1951, the Remount Depot found itself center of unusual activity. Twentieth Century Fox sent in its crews to film "Red Skies of Montana" starring Richard Widmark, the motion picture that told the story of the smokejumpers. Much of the filming took place at the smokejumper center at Camp Menard and at the Remount grounds. The moviemakers shot film of Remount activities such as employees trotting across a driveway to the corrals, loading

mules into trucks on a fire call, and the fully loaded trucks heading up a mountain road.

When the film editors were finished, all that remained of the Remount Depot was a background shot behind the credits at the

movie's beginning, one packer, George Feucht, and one shot of "feet, nothing but feet" headed out to the corrals. After all, the film's theme emphasized the new technology of fighting fires with planes and parachutes.

THE FINAL DECISION

"Missoula, Montana, July 1, 1953. Services formerly rendered by the Forest Service Remount Depot at Ninemile will be considerably reduced commencing in July, it was announced by Regional Forester P.D. Hanson. This reduction is in line with a program of economy aimed at reducing government expenditures...." Thus began the press release marking the year-long phasing out of the Remount Depot. Many factors contributed to make the final decision.

Both smokejumpers and pack mules served the roadless areas. As the new smokejumper program grew larger, its effectiveness increased so much that there were few large remote-area fires.

Growing gradually during the 40's and 50's, the network of access roads in the mountains reached the point where most areas had roads into them and could, therefore, be supplied by trucks and bulldozers.

"Roads probably did more of it than anything," explains Cap

Evans. "You've got a road going up the creek here, and you've got a fire over there. Well you could take those big 'cats' and you just push a road over to the fire with it. That probably took the need for pack stock out more than the airplane did — the roads."

Even in remote areas, airplane cargo delivery had much improved. In addition, much of that gear dropped was disposable — fire camp equipment and paper sleeping bags. The Region needed fewer mules to haul out gear dropped by planes.

Since the mid-1920's, the Forest Service had been developing aerial fire detection. This new method reached such a peak of efficiency that the lookout towers on mountains were no longer replaced when they became unusable. Remount pack strings had once carried both the construction materials for these lookouts and the supplies for the men and women who lived in them during fire seasons.

In the early years of airplane use,

large forest fires often created conditions of such smoke and haze that pilots could not fly into areas where planes were needed. Thus mules had still served, for they could get through trails on the ground where visibility was better. As the fires were kept smaller, the periods of zero visibility became rare.

By the late 1940's, privately owned herds of horses and mules had increased again and the Northern Region could hire pack stock in emergencies or buy it to replenish the herd.

Fire calls had always been sporadic — one in two weeks, and then four or five in a matter of days for the next two weeks. By the early 1950's, there were one or two seasons where the pack mules served the Forests on work projects, but answered no fire calls at all. But even as fewer and fewer pack strings went out on fires, the cost of maintaining the animals remained high.

For all those reasons, many in the Forest Service saw the Remount Depot as having served its purpose. With various arms of the agency competing for funds, priorities had to be placed in those areas where the most fire control could be bought for the least amount of money.

The decision to close the operation had apparently been put off for some time. Referring to Evan W. Kelley, the Regional Forester who had led the establishment of the

Remount, Alfred Spaulding explains: "When Major Kelley retired in 1944, he left a strong legacy to continue to maintain the Remount Depot. It was a difficult decision for a Region Forester to eliminate such a colorful and efficient arm of Fire Control."

Cap Evans, for five years a superintendent of the Remount Depot, and Lloyd Noel of the services arm of the Region recommended closure, feeling that the Forest Service hadn't really needed mules for many years.

The last superintendent, Don Chamberlin, *remembers* otherwise. "Thirteen strings were out in August of 1953 at the time of the closure decision," he says, and insists to this day that most of them were on fire calls. But it was not his decision to make. Arguments went back and forth at the time, and still continue if one strikes a sensitive nerve. Much of the feeling was sentimental.

One writer, referring to mechanical substitutes for animals such as scooters and equipment carries, could just as well have included airplanes in his 1954 article "The Mechanical Mule." He wrote: "Oldtimers like Ed McKay of Darby, Montana, who were with the Forest Service for 40 years, would hate to see the mules go. And they're right. The mules are creatures of flesh and blood and feelings, and with remarkable personalities, some of them. And we're proposing to replace them with brute machinery. We're

wrong, and we know it, and the only honest defense we can make is that we're keeping up with the rest of the world."

Regional Forester Hanson, who succeeded Kelley, issued orders for the closure. Superintendent Chamberlin transferred in September to a Forest assignment, and enough hands stayed on the Ninemile during the winter to get in the hay crop and care for stock. The Forest Service transferred the 10-head trucks to its engineering department and all three were eventually sold to the public on sealed bids. Mules and horses belonging to the various Forests could continue to spend off seasons at the Winter Range, but the Remount Depot ceased to exist by the next fire season.

In July 1954, the facilities of the Remount Depot became the headquarters of the Ninemile Ranger District, Lolo National Forest.

Since mules could again be purchased or rented from private owners, the Forest Service had ceased breeding them in 1948. And since Forest Rangers no longer patrolled their Districts mainly by horseback, the breeding program for horses had also ended.

The public auction of 50-60 purebred horses attracted much attention in the Northwest, as 300 people attended the sale at the Winter Range. Sentiment ran high also within the Forest Service for

this stock. As Eugene Polette put it, "Some of the older packers, who were horsemen from the day they were born, were concerned as to whose hands those horses were going to fall into."

Some of the horses were purchased by Missoula area people; most went out of state. Rosin, a Morgan stallion, went to the Glacier Park saddle horse concession. Grand Menard, the American Saddlebred, was sold to a Spokane stable.

Curiously, at about the same time as these horse dispersal efforts, the Forest Service also acquired horses on a custodial basis from the U.S. Army — dispersing its own herds and closing its remount depots. In 1950, the Winter Range at Perma had become the home of several Thoroughbred horses from an Army Remount depot in Nebraska. These animals had produced foals which were traded for mules or saddle horses for the Forest Service. In the fall of 1956, the stallion Off Chance, nine mares, and about a dozen young Thoroughbred colts and fillies were sold at another public auction. The Northern Region was finally out of the stock-breeding business.

Even before the Remount Depot officially closed, it needed fewer people to run its operation and that of its twin, the Winter Range. With fewer animals and fewer fire calls, there were fewer jobs for employees, especially the packers. Many of them found other

positions within the Forest Service, working on road maintenance or in equipment shops, for example. A few packers went into business for themselves as outfitters and guides to hunters and tourists. Some retired.

A few packers stayed on, for even after 1954 mules served on service jobs and occasional fires, leaving from the Winter Range at Perma rather than the Remount.

Stock from Northern Region Forests still spent their winters at the Winter Range where, since 1935, the Forest Service had tried to purchase these grazing lands rather than lease them. By the time Congress appropriated funds for purchase in the 1950's, there was no longer any need for a 40,000-acre block of land. The leases were gradually let go until 1962. That year saw the closing of the last 18,000 acres of the Winter Range — and the end of an era.

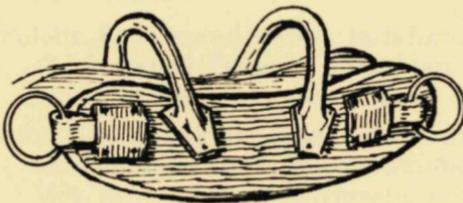
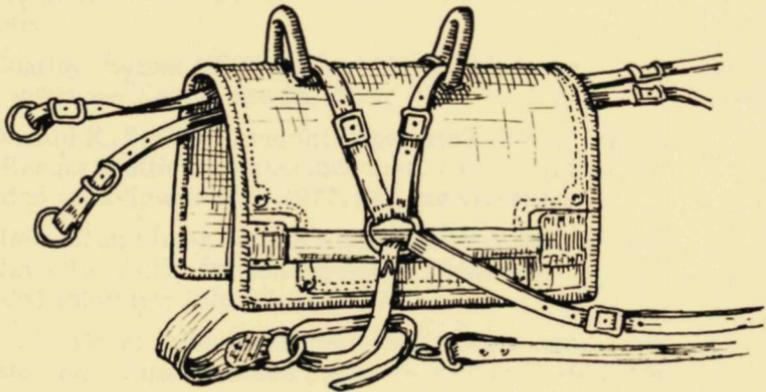


THE DECKER SADDLE: The steel-formed saddle was invented and patented by a man named Moore and was tried out by the U.S. Army in the late 1860s. After a trial, it was discarded in favor of the Aparejos. The discarded Moore saddles were afterwards sold to dealers in obsolete and excess Army stores. Twenty-five years ago (1889) Moore steel-forked pack-saddles could be purchased from Bunnerman of New York.

The honor of bringing the saddle to its present state of perfection belongs to the Selway National Forest (R-1). The outfits as used by McDaniels and Decker were chiefly crude, homemade affairs, no special pains being taken to

make a saddle that would fit a horse. Al Robinette, an employee on the Selway, designed the present tree. He did it by picking out a mule with an average back and whittling out a tree to fit him. All saddles afterwards were made according to this pattern.

For pack stock on the Selway, the method used was to shape the tree and iron, then fit it to the bare back of the animal it was intended for by bending the iron forks and, if necessary, trimming the wood until it was a perfect fit. The saddle was then rigged and the outfit marked with the animal's name and was used by that animal and none other as long as he remained on the Forest.



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