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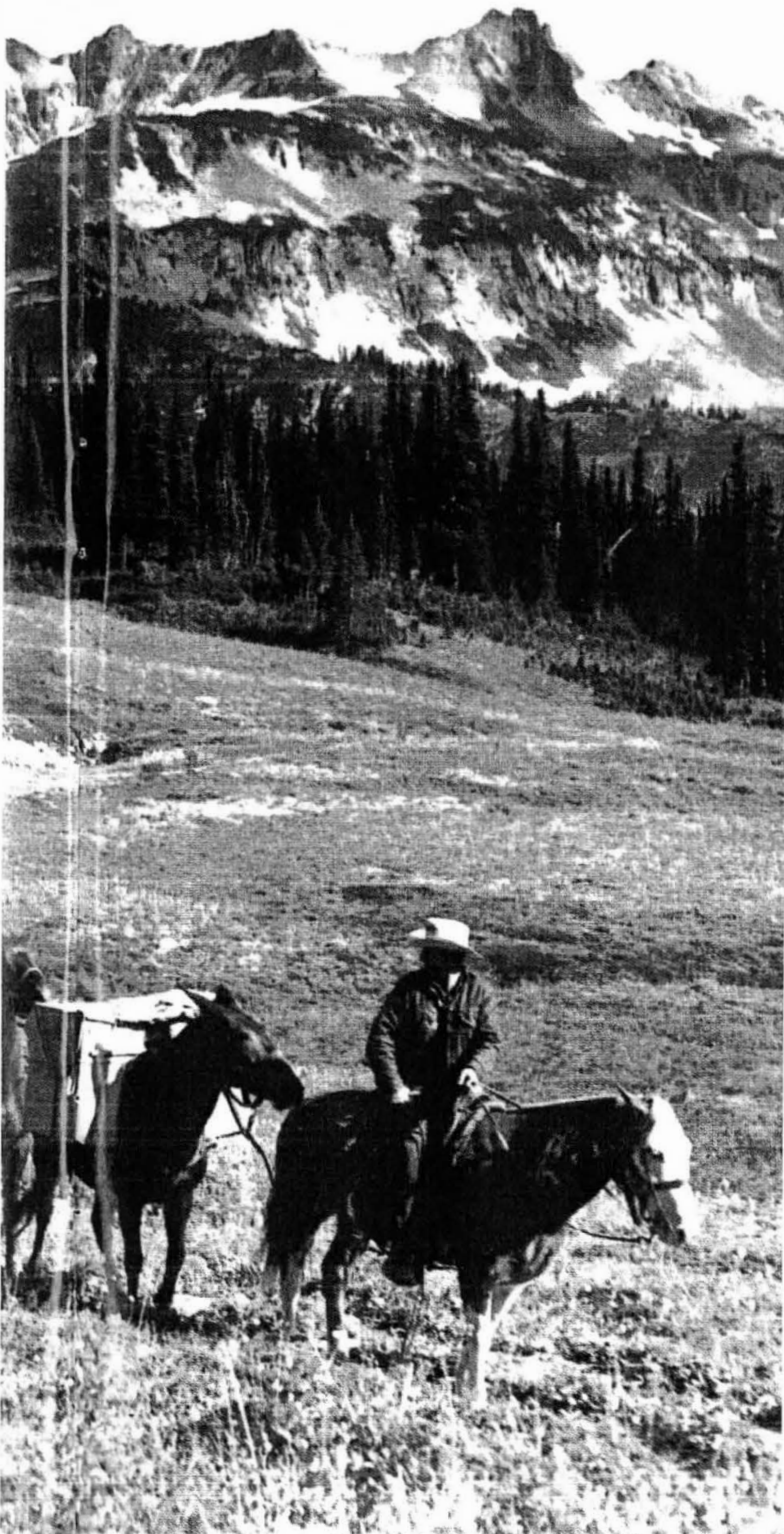
TRAIL RIDERS of the WILDERNESS

In 1933, two events—one that made headlines, one that didn't—set in sharp contrast two philosophies of exploration and travel. In the more heralded event, an airplane flew over the summit of Mount Everest, symbolizing the 20th century desire for quick access to nature via the internal combustion engine.

The less glamorous footnote in the history of wilderness travel took place in the hinterlands of the American West. Largely unheralded, it involved a corps of ordinary citizens who eschewed the internal combustion engine. This historical moment didn't change the fate of nations, but it did change lives and attitudes about the meaning and value of wild places.

In July of 1933, 22 men and women settled into saddles and made their way deep into Montana's rugged Flathead National Forest, bound for what remains one of the largest expanses of roadless wilderness in the lower 48. For seven days the trail riders looped through the South Fork Primitive Area, riding seven to 18 miles per day through green timber, vernal meadows, and craggy mountains. On the afternoon of July 17, the party made landfall in Missoula, and sent a telegram back to the American Forestry Association (now AMERICAN FORESTS) in Washington, DC.

**by T. Edward
Nickens**



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"Entire party of Trail Riders Trip Number One has returned," the telegram read. "Trip was complete success and through country we never dreamed existed." A half-century before the twinned notions of adventure travel and ecotourism would turn the travel industry on its head, AMERICAN FORESTS' Trail Riders of the Wilderness program started off with a bang. Or, at the least, with the pleasing, steady clop-clop of horses' hooves on a sun-baked trail.

The early ecotourism program has been gone for almost 20 years, but people still recall the pleasant memories and long-lasting friendships they made during more than 50 years of Trail Riders adventures. Horsepack guides hand-picked by AMERICAN FORESTS led moderately priced adventures into the remotest corners of the country's national forests and national parks. Pack trains latticed the country from the saguaro cactus flats of Arizona's Superstition Wilderness to the lush coves of North Carolina's Great Smoky Mountains. In later years, canoeing, wagon train trekking, and sea kayaking trips were added to the itinerary, but these were far outnumbered by horsepack trips. By the time the program was suspended in the

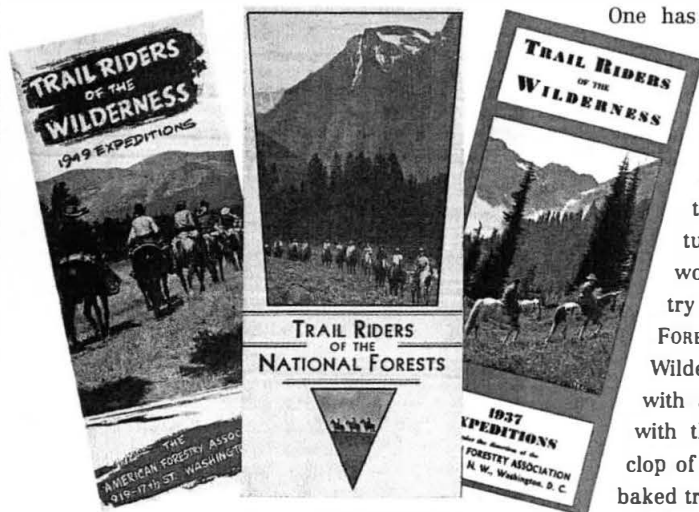
mid-1980s, some 15,000 of the organization's members had signed on and saddled up for some 900 unforgettable trips into the American backcountry.

"Oh, they were real expeditions, just wonderful trips," says Mary Ellen Walsh, who ran the program from 1971 through 1986. Walsh was the spirit and soul of the Trail Riders, as much as Western skies and steaks cooked over an open fire. She hand-picked outfitters and approved new routes, eventually shepherding as many as 43 trips in a single year, and was a fixture on the trail each summer. This even though she had never spent a night out-of-doors nor ridden a horse when she was hired.

But Walsh didn't change the emphasis of the trips just to suit her initial greenhorn status. For half a century, these were real wilderness expeditions, probing deep into the backcountry, which appealed to folks who didn't mind bathing in a frigid stream or picking fire ash out of their pancakes. No bed-and-breakfasting, this. On most trips guests pitched their own tents, packed their own gear, and dealt with the vicissitudes of wilderness weather.

Dr. Robert Christie, a Lancaster, New Hampshire, physician who accompanied more than half a dozen Trail Riders expeditions as trip doctor, recalled a harrowing climb up the flanks of the Maroon Bells, rugged Colorado mountains known for their spectacular alpine wildflowers.

"It was about two in the afternoon,"



Above: Brochures for Trail Riders held in 1949; the inaugural trip in 1933, when the program was still called Trail Riders of the National Forests; and in 1937. At top right, riders from the first trip gather for a group portrait.

Christie said, "and we were above tree line in one of the worst thunderstorms I'd ever seen. We picked our way across a boulder-strewn, exposed slope while lightning flashed all around—there was nothing we could do but ride. I've been through World War II and on expeditions to Greenland, and I don't think I was ever as scared as I was riding through that storm."

Thankfully, Christie had but one serious accident to attend to on his Trail Riders trips, when a horse stumbled, throwing an inexperienced rider, then rolled over her. (The rider was evacuated by helicopter to a hospital some 60 miles away, and fully recovered.) Otherwise, he treated "everything from morning sickness to altitude sickness," and racked up memories from Idaho's Salmon River country, the Colorado Rockies, Arizona's Superstition Wilderness, the High Sierra, and the Wyoming Tetons.

But the Trail Riders program was about more than high adventure; it served an educational purpose, too. A Trail Riders trip offered something that privately outfitted expeditions did not: The chance to meet and talk with forest rangers and land managers whose job it was to protect the nation's wilderness areas.

One of the signature aspects of the Trail

Riders program was involvement with the U.S. Forest Service. The night before departure, at each trip's get-acquainted dinner, a Forest Service ranger would visit to introduce them to the region they were about to explore and explain how land managers were working in the woods.

Linda Vos recalled how forest rangers commonly showed up at deep-woods campsites for impromptu suppers and conversation around the fire. "It was wonderful," she said, "to have that educational aspect to the trip. You learned about forest management and wilderness protection from the people actually doing it."

Vos was a Colorado schoolteacher in her mid-20s when she signed on for her first Trail Riders trip, to Colorado's Maroon Bells, where Robert Christie had his memorable ride. She followed that with more than a dozen others through the Snake River region of Idaho, the Gila Wilderness of New Mexico, the Washington Sawtooths, and others.

And even as she recounts what made the Trail Riders trips so special—the connection with forest rangers, the safety of trip doctors, and quality control of Mary Ellen Walsh—she's quick to point out that it was the wilderness that was the main event.



Above: Colorful characters from an early ride. Below, as many women as men saddled up for AMERICAN FORESTS' wilderness adventures.



"It didn't matter if you were rich or broke or a lawyer or a housewife. You shared everything out there—hardships or whatever—and you had a whole lot of fun."



When AMERICAN FORESTS discontinued the Trail Riders, that outreach was picked up by American Wilderness Experience. Now A.W.E./GORPtravel, the group still offers similar expeditions (800/444-0099; www.awetrips.com). If you book a trip, say you learned about them through AMERICAN FORESTS, and AWE-GORPtravel will plant a tree in your name in an AMERICAN FORESTS' Global ReLeaf Forest, Vice President Dave Wiggins says.

highly recommended. My year wasn't ever complete until I had that time in the wilderness."

The Trail Riders program ran strong through the early 1980s, adding covered wagon trips, canoe adventures through the

"The beauty and the solitude really got to me," she recalled. "You never had to worry about anything, because you knew the outfitters had come

Boundary Waters of Minnesota, and Alaskan sea kayaking trips to its program offerings. But a changing wilderness ethic began to cause concerns as more and more people trekked to backcountry regions during the explosion of interest in backpacking and wilderness travel.

The Trail Riders operated under AMERICAN FORESTS' guidelines to lessen environmental impacts. These included requiring that temporary rail fences be fashioned from downed branches and then scattered along the ground when the



group moved on. But the potential for ecological damage to fragile mountain meadows and popular camping sites was real, especially with larger groups.

"There was the thought that perhaps this no longer reflected the philosophy of the organization," mused Walsh. In a sense, it seems, the Trail Riders was a victim of its own success. Having helped usher in the environmental and ecotourism movements, with thousands of participants turned on to wilderness preservation, the program suffered under changing perceptions of what was appropriate in the nation's remaining wild regions.

In 1986, Walsh was let go as the trip was suspended for a year. The tents were folded for good after the 1988 season.

But if the program no longer exists (*see page 34*), the memories it spawned continue to glow, embers in a fire stoked with the American wilderness. "Oh, they'd forget about everything in the world but what they were seeing and doing right then," recalled Claude Miller, a

Washington state outfitter who led Trail Riders trips into the Pasayten Wilderness. "All they'd have to think about is waking up in the morning and working the stiff out of their joints. That's how it is back there."

Back there. That's where the real history of the Trail Riders is writ—not in journal notes or association office archives, but in the desert blossoms of the Southwest, the meadows of the Bob Marshall Wilderness, the fjord-like lakes of Washington's Pasayten Wilderness. And the history of the Trail Riders is as much about people as places, about friendships made and fostered as meals laced with wood smoke.

It's a history written not so much with words as with laughter drifting skyward through pine boughs. It's about Sisters Suzy Bartuss and Jodie Guisinger, once-cloistered nuns on horseback and in awe of Montana's Chinese Wall, a 12-mile-long, 1,000-foot-high escarpment like a granite jewel in the Continental Divide's tiara.

It's about Pearl Dorr, an early participant and world traveler who so enjoyed her Trail Riders adventures that she left to the association a nearly half-million-dollar

bequest. And it's about the late Walter Pfeiffer, an architect from New Jersey, who always emerged from his tent—no matter where the trail or how difficult the day—dressed as if he'd just visited a haberdashery, complete with polished boots and white shirt and tie. ("I don't know how he did it," said tentmate Robert Christie, who met Pfeiffer on an Idaho trail ride and struck up a years-long friendship.) It's about skinny-dipping in alpine lakes and pranks played on guests and guides alike. (Once, Vos recalled, a Rider slipped a gold tooth from his mouth into a stream, tricking a fellow rider into the momentary elation of having struck it rich.)

"You really got to know the people," said Miller. "Over the years, they become like family to you. I'm just an old packer—I've never been anywhere. But a lot of those people had been all over the world, and I did my travelin' through other people's eyes."

"It didn't matter if you were rich, or broke, or a lawyer, or a housewife. You shared everything out there—hardships or whatever—and you had a whole lot of fun."

After that very first Trail Riders expedition, one of the original riders, Angela Janszen, published a little essay called "My Dream Come True," in which she recalled her groundbreaking adventure. Some of her memories are likely shared by most of her 15,000 fellow Trail Riders—falling to sleep as horse bells tinkle from a nearby meadow, singing by a campfire, groaning as the camp cook rang the back-country breakfast bell, most likely a clattering dishpan smacked with a spoon. And it's a fair bet each would agree with her final few words:

"What a changed group we were," she wrote, after emerging from Montana's Flathead National Forest after that pioneering trail ride in 1933. "Those days in the forest had bound a party of strangers together as brothers. We were all 'lovers of the wilderness,' with a common aim: that of preserving such areas as had cradled us for many happy days." AF

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