

West Mountain



“Is this your idea of a joke, Dave? What the hell...you said to take a hard left...I took a hard left. You call this washed out, pot-hole infestation a road? This is a road for four wheelers Dave, not for trucks hauling 8,000 pounds of horse trailer and cab-over. I knew I should have Google mapped instead of relying on you. You have not been right one lousy day of our 5 year relationship. Five years Dave! Five years of wrong turns, dead-end shortcuts and illegal U turns. I can't drive like this anymore, Dave. I've listened to your patronizing monotone voice for the last time. I have a notion to toss you out of the truck alongside this boulder lined rut hell you call a road. Don't worry Dave, you'll find your way. After all, West Mountain is just 25 miles due west as the crow flies. I hope you can fly Dave.

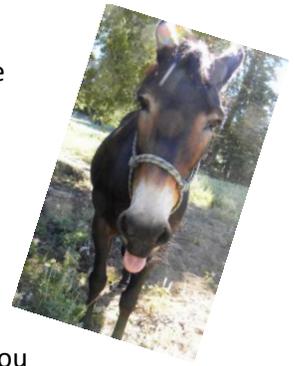
The ¾ ton Dodge, laden with camper and pulling a fully loaded three horse slant, bounced and heaved from rut to rut. West Mountain rose directly in front of us. Dave's hard left had taken us down a road suited for four wheelers at best. The problem wasn't that Dave's directions were wrong; the problem was we were not driving a four wheeler.

I kept one eye on the road and one eye on the precious cargo contained within the trailer, all the while willing the turnbuckles holding the camper together to remain intact. The longest two miles in history came to an abrupt stop at a securely locked wire gate. Dave didn't have a key. I asked. I considered cutting the fence and blaming Dave if I got caught, but thought better of it. I somehow managed to turn the rig around without wiping out anything important and pointed back toward the main road, ignoring Dave's endless insistence that we make a safe and legal U turn whenever possible.



Right or left? Left took us toward Emmett. A right would take us toward Council. Left just felt wrong – so left it was. The further we went, the harder Dave whined about getting further and further from our destination. Alright Dave, we will do it your way. I turned the rig around and headed back toward Council. This appeased Dave for several miles until we passed the four wheeler trail that would now be a hard right turn. The persistent whining continued. I don't think so, Dave.

The remaining miles to our destination once again began to increase. It had to be one direction or the other. I know Rob would not have suggested I take this more direct route if it required unloading and riding in horseback the last 25 miles. Salvation appeared in the form of a weathered rancher gathering his mail. I could not see a house for miles. It was possible the man became weathered from the extensive journey to his mailbox and back each day. I rolled down my window and pointed north and south: "Excuse me, do I go this way...or that way to get to West Mountain?" The man pointed due west, "West Mountain is that way." Now, I know you should not look a gift horse in the mouth and I did not want to offend the only person within 40 miles who might be able to help. "I know that sir...but I can't go that way unless you give me the key to what I assume is your locked gate." He smiled. Good – I had not pissed him off, yet. "Where on West Mountain are you going?" He asked. "Trail head 653!" I said with confidence and a big smile. "No numbers...I need a name." He said bluntly. "Uh...Wilson corrals? Gabe's Bathroom?" I said with less confidence. "Give me a different name." He responded. I thought about asking him if he was related to Dave. "Well, I could give you Parma as a name, but I don't want to go to Parma." He smiled, sort of. I prefer to think of it as a smile and not a smirk. "Do you have a map Ma'am?" YES! I have a map! I handed over the map I'd printed that Rob emailed me. The man looked over the map – "Ah, I see...you want to go back toward Emmett – the road makes a 90 degree turn – hang the first left...get on Sheep road...." I was saved! The rancher continued: "Once you get on top – watch for the corner that never ends. If you are going too fast, you won't make the corner." I thanked the nice man for the directions and the warning, backed around without wiping out his mailbox and waved my goodbyes. With more optimism than I had felt in the last 15 miles, I reached up and disconnected Dave's power supply.



At the top of Dodson pass, I geared down as far as the Dodge would allow. I had yet to make an appointment to get the trailer brakes hooked up. Stupid, I know...but too late to do anything about it now. The Rancher gave an accurate description of the corner that never ends. Sitting at the top of Dodson pass – the corner seems to go on forever in a treacherous hair-pin curve. The weight of the trailer pushed the truck around, bouncing it near enough to the edge to make me wish I'd gone the long way through Emmett.

With the corner from hell out of the way, the rest of the road was a piece of cake. Winding its way through timber, the road climbed further and further from pristine Squaw Creek. I wasn't looking forward to the drive back down without brakes and decided then I'd probably go home a different route. Less than 10 miles from Ramage Meadows camp ground; wherever that was, I considered trading Dave in for a Garmin.

I glimpsed the top of a horse trailer in a campground to my right. Two horses were high-lined between trees. This must be it. I dove off the side of the road and into the wrong campground; a very small wrong campground. How was I going to get back out? I addressed the gentlemen, "I'm sorry – I thought you were part of our group and just dove right into your camping spot." The man asked me which group I was with. "The backcountry horseman, but don't hold it against them, most of them have a better sense of where they are going than I do." As it turns out, he was familiar with our group and had gotten hold of Rob earlier and inquired about the area. I asked him if he knew where we were camped and he did. I

finagled my trailer around and managed to once again do so without wiping out anything important. One hundred yards farther and I made, without help from Dave, a hard right into Rammage Meadows.

Rob and the Chicks, Chuck and Lorraine, had camp set up. Chick guided me to a nice level spot between two large trees and a rail fence. At least it was level enough for me. Not so much for Chick. Apparently, Chick requires his sleeping quarters be level to a gnats butt. Lorraine says it's because he's afraid all the blood running downhill will make his head explode. He could be on to something. I leveled my camper as best I could.



Rob pointed to a good spot to high-line the horses and camp was set. I was still a little frazzled from the hot, dusty drive in. Lorraine grilled each of us a bratwurst for dinner. We shared a few camp-fire-less stories and discussed the next day's project. We would clean trail up Wilson's Corral's Trail, eat lunch at a meadow on top and ride down Gabe's Bathtub along Gabe's Peak Trail. BATHTUB! That's what it was! It was no wonder the rancher didn't know what I was talking about; I told him I was looking for the bathroom!

I opened every window in the camper and crawled on top the covers. I barely made it through two chapters of "The Streets of Laredo" and a little work on my netbook before the coolness of the evening's breeze and the whispering rush of the nearby creek lulled me to sleep.

The groups' internal alarm clock seemed to be in sync as bodies began to stir around 6:30 AM. Rob cooked a breakfast of sausage and eggs. I fried a small batch of potatoes and onions and laid out a bowl of cut up melon. By 9:00 am, we were ready and in the saddle. Rob rode his young mustang Payette and Moose packed the saws and tools. Chick and Lorraine rode their Parelli trained Arabians, Sassy and Sammy. I rode Jack and Annie came along as our free roaming trail guide.



We were not far into the project when we encountered our first downfall. Rob tossed me a set of Kevlar chainsaw chaps; a lovely olive green pair that I swear weighed more than my roping saddle. In order to put them on, you had to use the ever familiar bra maneuver – meaning you put them on backwards, and then twist them around your waist to the front. The only part more difficult than snapping the leg straps, was unsnapping the leg straps. I took them on and off twice before catching on to the neat little trick of leaving the blasted things on for the remainder of the day.

Ellen, Charles and Lou Ann caught up with us within the first few miles. Ellen rode Pecos and Charles rode Brio, both beautifully gated Paso Fino mounts. Lou Ann rode her young palomino mare, Brandi. I remembered Brandi from last years'

All Girls pack trip into the Frank Church. She appears to be coming along nice and has matured into a horse of excellent conformation. Not only was it good to see our fellow members, but we would latter appreciate the extra hands.



We must have mounted and dismounted a hundred times. There was deadfall around every bend. It became common practice to send a scout ahead to look for more deadfall while the others cleared trail. Frequently, Annie would volunteer for the job, but if she spotted any downfall, she wasn't telling anyone.

Many of the trees were large trees aging 100 years or more. Most took at least four cuts to remove. It was hard work, but nothing compared to what we were about to encounter. We were still on Wilson Corral's Trail 135 when we came upon the granddaddy of all blow downs.

Three, very large trees stacked on top each other, had completely obliterated

the trail. An assessment was made to clear a tunnel through the mess at a spot above the original route. Rob, Chick and Charles fought their way into the jungle of pine boughs and began to limb in a tiered approach. Rob limbed from the top most tree, Chick the middle and Charles worked from the backside. Ellen, Lou Ann, Lorraine and I carried away the cut



limbs. We had to drag the limbs a good distance to prevent them from blocking the newly cleared trail. Once the limbing was complete, the boys went to work cutting a path through the three large logs. By the time a tunnel was cut through to the other side, the saws were beginning to dull and we were running low on saw gas. Seven members gathered on the other side of the tunnel and gave each other a well earned symbolic pat on the back. It was then I remember the flask of Janine's famous elixir I carried in my pant leg pocket, aka "The Coconut

Cowboy." I suggested we make a toast: "To a job well done, and to Janine, creator of the infamous elixir!"

It soon became obvious that we were not going to make the entire loop. We were running out of saws, and frankly, out of energy. The larger of the Stihl's needed constant attention. The thing didn't want to start when it got hot. Chick thought it might be vapor lock. Rob cleaned the air filter numerous times to keep the thing running. I figured it was just tired. I know I was. Maybe it needed a beer. I know I did.

We rode to the top of Wilson Corrals meadow where we met up with the rider whose camp I'd invaded the night before. He had ridden ahead of us, picking his way through deadfall and alternate routes. I handed him my camera and he kindly agreed to take a shot of our group. I couldn't help but notice he might make an excellent prospective member. Not only did he have two nice looking mounts tethered to a tree, but he himself looked able bodied and husky enough to lift heavy objects such as 100 year old sections of downfall.

Wilson Corrals meadow was as far as we would get on this day. The group decided to head back to camp and call it good. I cannot ascend a mountain without checking out what is on the other side. I cantered off in the opposite direction while the rest of the group made a bee-line off the



mountain. Annie had little confidence in the group's ability to navigate the trail without her and made a dash for the front of the line. Jack apparently thought we were being left behind for the turkey vultures and fought against my efforts to hold him back. He danced, pranced, jigged and snorted his way down the mountain trying to catch Annie. In hindsight, I probably should have faced him uphill until he calmed down. None of the others seemed interested in slowing down, so I continued down the mountain on a ball of muscle bound buckskin on hooves. We passed Lou Ann, Ellen and Charles before overtaking the Chicks. Ellen and Charles pulled up to ride with Lou Ann. The Chick team seemed to have little trouble containing their well mannered animals and looked to be coming down at a safe pace. Ahead of us now was Moose following Rob on Payette at Annie's heels. My hope was that Jack would calm down once we caught up with Rob. Payette can out-walk anything on hooves and is normally well ahead of the string. My hopes were soon dashed as Jack continued to jig sideways down the hill. I fought the urge to spur that misbehaving buckskin of mine into dead run straight off the mountain in hopes he would get it out of his system. Maybe if we managed to make it to the bottom without breaking either of our necks, Jack would figure out that slower is better when going downhill. Alas, I had never been to the mountains of Snowy River and the horse beneath my saddle bore only a slight resemblance to Denny.

We overtook Rob and Payette and weaved our way behind Annie. It helped being out front and Jack relaxed somewhat. We continued to haul butt down the mountain behind a mule on a mission: Get to camp as fast and as direct as all possible.

Annie shot down the trail and across an old logging trail. I pulled Jack to a halt. I don't remember crossing a road on the way up! Nothing looked at all familiar and Rob was nowhere in sight. I had no doubt Annie would find the way to camp, but her idea of a direct route was more akin to Dave's navigational preferences than mine. I spun Jack around and headed back up the trail. I was relieved to see Rob's hat appear from around the corner. "Am I going the right way?" Rob confirmed we were not lost, "Yep...just follow Annie."



Jack kept up a steady clip on Annie's hind-end. Rob and Payette were only a few paces back. Although Jack was no longer fighting the bit, he kept up with Annie's brisk trot. Annie came to a creek crossing that routed around a section of trail we had cleared earlier. The bank dropped straight down a couple of feet, directly into a deep water hole. Annie navigated the crossing like any good mule should. She gingerly skirted around the extreme edge, avoiding the deep spot. Jack, however, is not a mule. He lunged down the embankment and plunged nose-first into the hole. It

was the splash heard around the world, second only to Rob and Payette plunging in directly behind us. Jack stumbled out of the creek bed and emerged on the other side a little more cautious than when he went in. I hoped the plunge had taken a little of the wind out of his sails and he'd pay more attention to his feet. Rob made a comment that perhaps that was not the best way to negotiate a creek crossing before suggesting we hold up in the clearing and let our animals graze while we wait for the others. The others were not far behind. It was a calm, easy trek back to camp as seven riders and eight horses followed one mule safely into camp in record breaking time.

If there is one thing we do well on these projects, it's eating. Rob grilled steaks and sautéed baby red potatoes and onions. We had potato salad, green salad, melon and various other side dishes. For desert, I brought a batch of snicker doodles and what was supposed to be Granny's Oatmeal Chocolate Chip Cookies. Instead, Granny's cookies ended up more of an experiment in cookie cuisine. I was working from my home office the day I made them. I placed all the ingredients, including a cup of chocolate chips, in a kitchen-aid mixer. I ran upstairs to check on my work. One downed system led to another and an hour had passed when I remembered the cookies. The kitchen-aid was literally smoking hot. My batch of oatmeal chocolate chip was now a dense wad of chocolate oatmeal with the consistency of a power bar. "Hmmm....I wonder." I didn't want to be wasteful, so I mixed in a little peanut butter and plopped them in the oven. They actually didn't turn out half bad. If I couldn't get the crew to eat them, maybe they would make excellent horse treats.

During dinner, Lorraine reported that we had cleared a record 26 trees. Rob estimated we had made well over 100 cuts as each tree required an average of 4 cuts per tree. Not bad for a bunch of weekend volunteers. Chick mentioning during dinner that he could, on occasion be talked into reciting such classics as "Old Shorty" and "Froggy Went-A Courtin." We couldn't seem to get him to rise to the occasion that evening, but the sun had not yet set on this project, and tomorrow was another day.

Ellen, Charles and Lou Ann would not be staying the night. Ellen, in her ever efficient manner, prepared to break camp immediately after dinner. The trio had departed as swiftly and adeptly as they had arrived. We would miss them come Sunday, even if Rob had planned on a short day ride. Best laid plans, however, are seldom followed in a group such as ours.

Rob may have been looking out for our best interest when he suggested a short day ride up Trail #136 to Gabes Peak instead of the longer loop. Lorraine would not be underestimated. “We don’t want any stinking short day ride Rob; we want to make the loop, right Laurie”? I looked around trying to read the faces of the others. Of course I wanted to make the loop. I’d take a long ride over a short one any day, but I didn’t feel comfortable putting any more stress on Rob. I shuffled my feet and avoided eye contact, “Short...long ...makes no difference to me; I’m just along for the ride.”

It took a fraction of the time to reach Wilson Corrals meadow as it had the day before. Rob entered tour-guide mode as we passed through the meadow where we had turned back on Saturday. He pointed out landmarks and patiently answered my relentless inquiries into the names of this mountain peak or that meadow. We encountered some deadfall, but nothing like the day before. In total, 8 trees would be cleared on our Sunday ride.

The climb to the top of Wilson’s Peak was exhausting and seemed to never end. Even Annie stopped to catch her breath from time to time. We zigzagged our way to the top one plodding hoof at a time. The spectacular panoramic view from the top made the ascent worth it. We would rest here and have lunch. Rob gathered his lunch and perched himself on a large rock overlooking Indian Valley. I recognized the change in his demeanor, this was his personal wilderness.

After lunch, we prepared to make the descent into Gabe’s Bathtub. Trails jut off in all sorts of directions and according to Rob; most of them do not end well. In order to reach the meadow, we had to side-hill our way down off-trail. Most of the trails seemed to lead to the edge of rock cliffs. Rob’s “local knowledge” of the area proved invaluable. Safely within the basin of Gabe’s Bathtub, we let the horses graze on sweet, mountain grass.



“Frog went a courtin' and he did ride, uh-huh
Frog went a courtin' and he did ride, uh-huh
Frog went a courtin' and he did ride
With a sword and a pistol by his side, uh-huh uh-huh uh-huh...”

Chick’s resonant voice cut through the clear, mountain air as he broke into song just as we crested the ridge into the last leg of our journey. YES! I’d been waiting all weekend for this and Chick did not disappoint. Tex Ritter could not have done it better. If anyone could keep from smiling the rest of the way into camp after that performance, they didn’t deserve to be on the mountain.

Rob packed up and headed for home as soon as we rode into camp and watered the horses. Lorraine and Chick planned to wait until it cooled off. I intended to follow them off the mountain and take the long route home through Emmett – I’d be avoiding any more mountain passes until I had trailer brakes.

I geared down and tried my best to not fall off the edge and plummet to my death. The sun and dust turned every bend in the road into a blind corner. For some reason, I could not seem to keep my right trailer wheels from dropping over the edge. I suppose I was hugging the hillside too close in fear of being pushed over the edge by the heavy, brakeless trailer. Whatever it was, I just wanted off the damn mountain. The Chicks pulled over several times and waited to make sure I had made it off the mountain.

I relaxed the moment my tires hit pavement outside of Ola. What a beautiful area. A picturesque white church perched atop a rise on the edge of town. I could live here. We had made it safely off that mountain with nothing but white knuckles and a prayer. I could definitely live here.

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The End

