

# White Clouds – Frog Lake Pack Trip

## Brutal Beauty

By: Laurie Bryan

### **“Sawtooth’s or BUST!”**

Eleven horses, nine humans, five mules and a dog pulled out of Rob and Linda Adam’s place in Sweet Idaho, Wednesday, July 17. The five rig caravan loaded with enough provisions for five days in the White Cloud recreational area looked like a modern day migration of homesteaders.



Plans laid by our particular group of backcountry horseman are seldom strictly adhered to, but we try to make them anyway. Ours loosely consisted of driving to Livingston Mill trailhead two hours outside of Stanley Idaho, spend the night at the TH and be geared up and mounted early Thursday morning for the ride into Frog Lake.

Rob Adams, organizer, project coordinator, self proclaimed “Trail Boss” and all around nice guy - doled out the individual responsibilities for the trip well in advance. Rob would plan and execute the evening meals. Janine Townsend would take care of breakfasts. Robbin Schindele would do lunches. The Chicks, Bob and Lorraine, were responsible for the wine. Bill Selkirk and Kate Miller would be our entertainment directors for the week. I would do desserts. I don’t know if I’m becoming famous for my Dutch Oven desserts or everyone’s afraid they will get Beanie Weenees three times a day if given anything but desserts. My bet is on the latter.

We arrived in Stanley shortly after 12:00 PM for fuel and a bite for lunch. What happened next was to unfold into every horseman's worst nightmare. Willow, Rob's trail horse of more than a dozen years, went down in the trailer with severe colic. The events leading to the tragic loss of a beloved trail partner and friend can be found by following [this link written by Rob](#). I will not hash out the heart wrenching details of Willow's passing further except to say that he will be sorely missed. Without Willow, the Squaw Butte Backcountry Horsemen are less than what we were. Though he cannot physically be with us, I know we will carry Willow within our hearts until the very last backcountry horseman draws their final breath. Willow will not be forgotten.



We could quit and go home or figure out a way to continue on with one less animal. Backcountry horsemen don't quit. I offered up my new pack horse, König, as a riding horse for Bill Selkirk. I'd recently acquired König and although he had all the potential for a great little pack horse, I had no idea how versatile he would turn out to be. This made us short one pack horse. The wheels turning in Rob's head were all but audible. He could make this work. We'd cut down on the gear and take only what was necessary. Heck, we had twice as much as we needed anyway. I chuckle at what we chose to take and what we left behind. Left behind were fire starter, duplicate first aid-kits, extra tarps, rope, high-lines, various cooking utensils, solar showers and duct tape – but damn it – we didn't

leave behind dessert or the wine. There is a limit to adaptability and ours ended with the peach cobbler and boxed Cabernet.

Hauling a camper and horse trailer up the last 8 miles of gravel road into Lexington Mills trailhead is an adventure I'd rather not repeat. If anyone in front of me had any trouble with it I wouldn't know. I was busy talking to God. *Hi God, me again –please get me off this damn mountain without losing traction and rolling backwards down the hill...taking out the Chicks behind me and killing us all.* I seriously think I was commencing to have a panic attack. Just when I thought I might actually survive - the check gauges light blinked bright red in warning and my truck over heated. The Chicks pulled in behind me and stopped. It's not like they could go anywhere anyway! Chick popped the hood and gave it a once over. "Yep – she's overheated alright. Just like a Dodge. I figured we were going to have to push you up that hill with our Ford." Uh...hmmm.

We waited until my truck cooled off before giving it another go. Luckily, we were almost to the top. I fired up the Dodge and hoped like hell the road leveled out soon. The last thing I heard before pulling away was Chick asking Lorraine to put the hubs in the Ford.

What's taking the Chicks so long? They should be right behind me – I drove like a blind old lady going to church coming off that hill. Several minutes later and the MIA duo rumbled into the trailhead. The “going to push that Dodge up the hill with my FORD” had busted a drive line. Karma Chick...K-A-R-M-A. ;)



The first 30 minutes of any trail ride is usually the most hectic. Horses are fresh and full of energy and mules are establishing their pecking order. Toss in an inexperienced mule and that 30 minutes might get stretched a bit. Most often than not, the problem child on these trips is Annie, my mule. I left Annie behind so I could concentrate on König's first outing. Janine's mule, Carmel, took over where Annie left off. Carmel was abused in her previous life and every bit as skittish as Annie. Janine and I had little trouble tacking her up; putting her packs on was a different story. I felt sorry for the little molly and for Janine. Everyone coming at her from different directions was more than she could handle. I recognized the distraught look on Janine's face as a reflection of how I felt when dealing with Annie. You just want to load up your ass, toss your shit in the back of the truck and go home. Thankfully, Janine stuck it out. Part of what we do on these non-project pack trips is learn from

each other and expose our animals to different environments in hopes they will become the seasoned pack animals that others enjoy. It is one thing to purchase an experienced animal with all the kinks worked out, it's an entirely different rodeo when you are the one working out those kinks. I can't imagine that too many of us have never had to deal with a green animal. Fortunately, the folks making this trip were known for their compassion and understanding in these types of situations. Once Carmel's packs were secured – she became a totally different animal. She led like a dream and carried her part of the bargain without further a-do.

We left Lexington Mill trailhead toward Frog Lake on Thursday afternoon. Trail 047 meanders its way along Big Boulder Crk for a couple miles before beginning an easy 4 or 5 mile climb that drops into the lake the last mile or so. Frog Lake is made up of Frog Lake and Little Frog Lake with Castle Peak a breathtaking backdrop in the distance; simply beautiful.

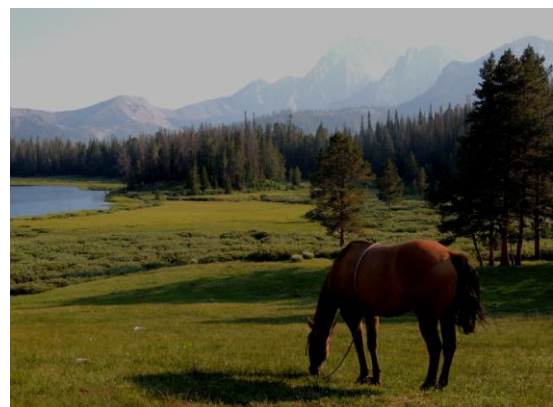




High-lines strung and tents pitched – we went about setting up our wilderness home for the next four days. “So...what kind of tent is *that*, Robbin?” We asked. “It’s called a flatent.” He answered. In an attempt to save space in regards to our limited pack stock, Robbin Schindele had grabbed a different tent than originally planned and left the poles behind. “Look for the versatile “flatent” coming soon to a Sportsman’s warehouse near you.”

I’m not sure anybody remembers what we had for dinner Thursday night. We were too tired to care about particulars. I believe it involved mashed potatoes and wine.

Morning in the mountains usually means the day starts before sunup. I watered and hobbled my horses to graze and built a fire to take the chill off the morning. Rob rose about the same time. The others followed shortly after. Janine fixed hash browns, bacon, sausage and eggs for breakfast while Kate Miller perfected a technique for coffee making unique to Michigan Mountaineers. Kate and Bill S. are remote members of the SBBCH – living in Kalamazoo Michigan. Bill and Rob have been best buds since grade school. The boys have kept in touch and try to get together a couple times a year. Bill brought Kate with him on this year’s excursion into the wild. . I can only imagine how intimidating it must have been for Kate to meet all of us for the first time. She proved to be an asset and



a complete delight. Not only is she a plethora of information on all things geological and flora, but she whips out a mean French braid too.



After the breakfast dishes were done, Rob, Bill S. and I saddled up for a day ride to explore some of the higher lakes. The rest of the crew stayed in camp to fish, read or simply relax. The Chicks, Pirelli trained with patience to spare, helped Janine work with Carmel.

The ride to the “Chain Lakes” area is a mile of spectacular, panoramic views sprinkled with mountain orchids and Indian paintbrush. We rode past Willow Lake, then Hatchet Lake and on to Shelf Lake. The trail leading beyond Shelf Lake did not look safe for equine

traffic so we made a quick recon on foot before heading back to camp. The others must see this area – it was too beautiful to miss.

Absence of a solar shower was not going to stop me from taking a bath. I grabbed swimsuit, towel and water shoes and headed for the lake. By the time I got my ankles wet, Rob, Bill S., Bill Holt and Kate joined me on shore. The bottom of the lake was so boggy you would sink up to who knows where two feet from shore. I’m not the greatest swimmer – but if you weren’t dog paddling or swimming, you were sinking knee deep and beyond in a mud bog.

Somebody mentioned leaches. Leaches? Surely not. Aren’t leaches found only in the South? Nope. They are not found only in the South. They are also found, quite plentiful I might add...in Frog Lake!



“Uh...Laurie...you have a leach on your shoulder.”

“A what!? A leach? You’re joking, right? Tell me your joking!”

“Yes, we are joking. You don’t really have a leach on your shoulder. You have TWO leaches on your shoulder!”

I don’t normally scream like a girl, do I? I sure as hell do when there are leaches on my shoulder!

“Get it off! Get it off!”

“Don’t you mean: get THEM off?”

“Whatever! Get them off of me!”



Bill Holt, the quiet one of the group, peeled the leaches off my back as he calmly, yet purposefully made his way out of the lake. "Well...time to go."

"Laugh if you must boys, but take a look at your legs!"

Every one of them, except Kate, discovered they had a leach of their very own attached to their body. Paybacks are hell.

Not nearly as tired as the evening before, I remember what we had for dinner: Chicken and black rice. Actually, the rice is more purple than black and tasty none-the less. We topped dinner off with Dutch Oven peach cobbler and wine.



Shade, my German shepherd, came unglued sometime in the middle of the night. My dog does not bark just to hear herself rattle. Something was out there. *Something* may have been a chipmunk or a ground squirrel...but something was definitely out there. I crawled out of the four person tent I shared with Janine and fumbled for the switch on the cap light. Rob and Bill S. met me in the middle of camp. Shade took us directly to the area where the horses were high-lined. König had slipped his halter and was standing not far from where he was tied. I don't know if something came through camp and startled him or if he slipped out of his halter during a good roll. However he managed it, it was reassuring to know that my little quarter horse-mustang would not take off in the middle of the night when he got loose. I thanked Shade for making us aware of the situation and went back to bed.

Saturday would be the last full day in camp. The day when you eat like Kings and Queens so you don't have to pack anything out. Janine cooked bacon and sausage. I made a batch of biscuits in the DO. Chick, being gluten intolerant, is forced to get creative when it comes to his food. He formed the left over rice from the night before into patties and fried them in bacon grease. With a little more seasoning, they could have passed off as sausage!

"Hey, look what I got?" I found two large morel mushrooms while brushing my teeth along the creek bank. These would be perfect with dinner sautéed in butter with onions! We scanned the area in search for more but found none. The only two morels left in the White Clouds would have to suffice.

Everyone, with the exception of Robbin, saddled up for a day ride to the Chain Lakes. I missed what happened, but apparently, Kestrel, Rob's stand-by horse that Kate rode in – had thrown some sort of a hissy fit. Spoken like a true horseman, Kate exclaimed: "I'm not getting on



that horse!” For the rest of the trip, Bill rode Kestrel and Kate rode König.



Content with Robbin keeping an eye on our pack stock, the group single filed their way to the Chain Lakes area. Bill S., Chick and Bill H. fished along the shore of Shelf Lake. Janine curled up with a good book. The rest of us went off in different directions exploring our own paths.

I left the trail and climbed up a bowl lined in granite boulders. I stood atop the second highest boulder in the area and took in the sweeping view. Kate stood perched atop the highest boulder

behind me. We waved and snapped a picture of each other before disappearing on our individual adventures.

Raspberry bushes! The entire granite bowl was littered with wild raspberry bushes. I bet the bears love this area. Some were just blooming out while others were covered in immature berries. Dang, I'd given anything if they had been ripe! Morels AND Raspberries! A person could survive up here pretty easy. At least until the snow flies. Speaking of snow – at just under 10,000 feet – we had reached the snow line. I felt pity for the poor souls back home. It had been in the triple digits on and off for the last two weeks.



Shade was tracking me. I watched from a secluded area as she retraced my steps over boulders and shale. I had met up with the trail and came upon Sliderock Lake above Shelf Lake. Shade, as she often does – had gone off on her own chasing squirrels. She always finds me. I was not worried. I need only to whistle to bring her running. I wanted to see if she could find me on her own. If she had continued straight up the trail, she would have run into me eventually. Instead, she

followed my scent – stopping to sniff every boulder I stopped at along the way. She was coming to a particularly precarious section when I whistled for her and waved my arms; over here girl...no need taking a chance on going up that steep slope.





I followed Shade to a more direct route along the trail back to the others at the lake. We gathered along the shore and divvied up our lunch rations. We split a little cutie tangerine, some weird exotic sausage I've never heard of and shared my personal concoction of trail mix complete with nuts, seeds, dried bananas and Jelly Beans. Afterwards, we pointed our horse's ears in the direction of camp.

Chick and Lorraine had reported the other side of Fog Lake had a rockier, less boggy area. I wouldn't have thought it possible to get me back into that leach infested lake. Perhaps less bog meant less leaches? I really wanted to wash my hair and Kate offered to braid it again for me if I did. Rob, Bill and Kate, Lorraine and Chick and I headed across the lake to the opposite shore. The Chick's were right. The water was much cleaner and I am happy to report...no leaches. The horseflies took the place of those.

Bill H. became grill master for the evening and attended to the flank steak grilled over charcoal. Rob made a batch of scalloped potatoes and I sautéed the mushrooms I'd found earlier with onions, butter and garlic salt. I'm not a big meat eater, but that was the best steak I've ever eaten – hands down. For dessert – cherry/blueberry upside-down cake...gluten free. Best dinner ever.



A riveting game of cribbage commenced atop one of Janine's pack boxes. I've never played cribbage and from the sounds of it, I know why. It appears to take a degree in astrophysics. A degree I do not possess. I went in search of more mushrooms.

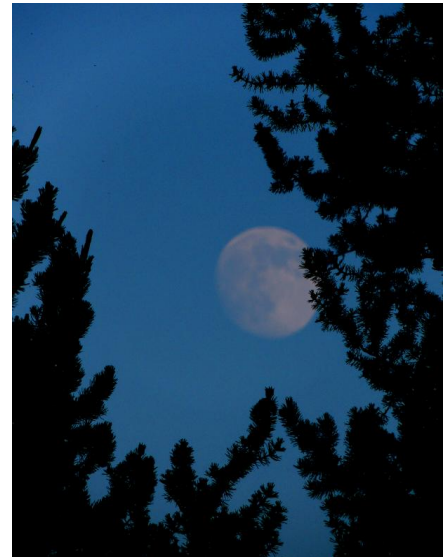
I went to bed a bit melancholy. This would be our last night at Frog Lake. Each time I go to the wilderness, the harder it is for me to come home. I've often pondered how long I could hold out: Until I ran out of food? Until the

snow drove me down? Would I eventually go crazy from loneliness? I doubt that. You are never really alone in the wilderness. Mother Nature is your constant companion and God your nearest neighbor.



I shot out of my sleeping bag like a rocket. What was that sound? I'd never heard the sound before and still I knew exactly what it was: Wolves. It sounded like a musical frame of eerie wailings. One wolf started the song and was soon joined by what sounded like two others. It was beautiful. Where was Shade? She hadn't made a peep. I scrambled out of the tent and called for my dog. Shade silently slid out from beneath my saddle and slipped into the tent. She must have known that her only defense against a pack of wolves was silence.

Rob had also been startled awake by the wolf song. We stood in the middle of camp and strained to hear more. The melody lasted no more than 30 seconds before fading into the moonlit night. Rob started to make his way up the hill to check on the rest of the horses when he stopped dead in his tracks. A throaty, deep growl followed by a short yelp came from the darkness in the trees. "Rob...did you hear that?" What was that? Robbin? Was that you?" Robbin rolled over in his "flatent" but didn't respond. "Robbin – I swear – that's not funny...was that you?" Again...no response. Rob continued up the hill. "Rob! Don't go up there! Didn't you hear that?" Rob didn't answer either. The night was getting creepier by the minute. I stood at the base of the hill with my little .38 and Janine's cap light and pretended like I could save Rob should whatever it was try to eat him. Whatever it was seemed to dissipate into the darkness with the rest of the creatures of the night. I'm really glad it didn't eat Rob. Who'd cook dinner? Safely back in our tents, I curled up with my faithful dog and drifted off to sleep for the few remaining hours of the night.



The group made short work of breaking camp. Breakfast is light on take-down day to expedite the process and minimize dish washing; a package of or two of instant oatmeal and a granola bar and call it good. If you weren't tacking up a mule or saddling a horse, you were holding one for the guy who was.



With final touches to their respective outfits, our group of backcountry horsemen filed one by one down the trail toward home.

Bill Holt's riding mule, Billy Bob, had come up lame from the previous days ride to the chain lakes. The creek crossings are lined with large river rock that can be hard on tender hooves. Bill noticed his mule gimping most going downhill. Several doses of Bute barely took the edge off. Kate and I hung back with Bill while the others rode on ahead. Rob left me one of the radios just in case we had trouble or got lost. Get lost? THAT would never happen.

Bill rode for the first mile or two of the uphill portion of the trail. As soon as the trail started to descend, he got off and walked to offer Billy as much relief as possible. Kate and I would ride ahead,

stop, and wait for Bill to catch up. Bill's asthma had been acting up in the higher altitude and honestly, I was afraid he'd keel over dead on us for sure. Kate and I offered to take turns walking Billy Bob and he could ride Jack or König. Too chivalrous or just plain too stubborn I don't know – but Bill would not hear of it. "Ya know, Bill, it's not that I feel sorry for you so much as I'm afraid of what Chris will do to us if you die of an asthma attack out here. We'll never be able to get you loaded up on that mule without quartering you first."

If sympathy won't do it, let's try for the guilt approach! Kate and I dismounted and walked with Bill. It didn't work. He still wouldn't take us up on our offer and ride for awhile. "I just want to get to the bottom of this damn hill." You win Bill. It felt kind of good to stretch our legs anyway.

We came to a junction in the trail. One trail crossed the creek and another made a hairpin corner the other direction. Which way to go? The creek's foot bridge looked familiar to me and I do remember riding Jack into the water to let him drink. On the other hand, there were tracks leading down the path with the hairpin curve. Kate was certain we crossed the creek. We asked Bill what he thought, "I don't have a clue" Great. Bill checked out the sign and deduced that we *probably* needed to take the hairpin trail.

My feet were getting sore and *probably* wasn't going to cut it. I hit the button on the radio - "Rob – this is Laurie." No response. "Rob Adams – Laurie Bryan." Silence. "HELLOOOO! Is anybody out there? Is this thing working?" Stupid radio.

Bill held my horse while I scurried across the precarious foot bridge to the other side of the creek to check for tracks. No tracks; back across the bouncing foot bridge.

"There are no tracks on that trail. I hereby decree Bill's *probably* as good enough for me. Let's go."

A family of hikers and two dogs meandered toward us. "Have you seen more people on horseback?" We asked. The man affirmed that yes, he had seen others about a ¼ mile down the trail and they told him to be on the lookout for four horses and a goat. We only have three horses. A goat? "Do you mean a dog?" I asked. "No," the man said – "they mentioned a dog too – but said you had a goat with you. Do you have a goat with you?" Does it look like we have a goat with us? Bill generously declared that he would be the goat and we bade farewell to our family of hikers.

Bill tried Rob on the radio again and finally got through. At least we were on the right track. We decided that if we walked real slow the others would have everything unpacked and loaded before we got there...and we were right. Another mile brought us in view of Lexington Mill's trailhead. Our fellow packers had finished sorting through gear and watering stock.



I did not want to go back on that road again. Chick assured me it would be ok. "It's all downhill going back. You won't overheat and I won't need four-wheel drive." Chick was right. I don't know what I was worked up for anyway. I'd just spent 4 days in the wilderness with a pack of wolves and lake full of leaches. I owned this road.

We stopped and ate dinner in Stanley and said our goodbyes. It was an adventure that had started out near as rough as it gets. We cried a little and laughed a lot. We experienced the tragic loss of one friend and gained several more. Nature is as brutal as it is beautiful. As in life, the highs of the tallest granite peaks and lows of the grass covered valleys are never ending. All we can really hope for is to saddle up and enjoy the ride.

The End

