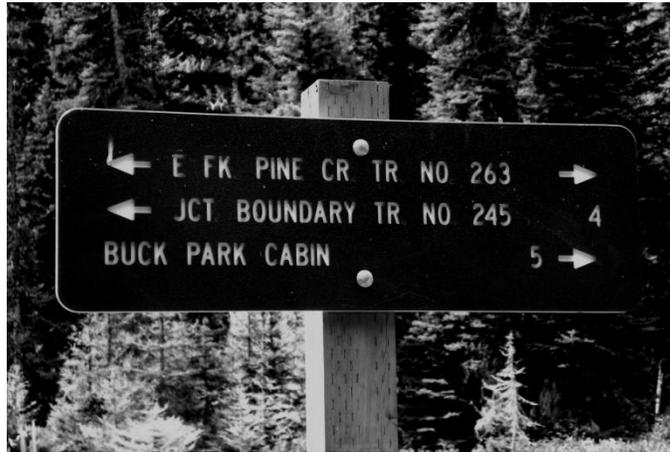


Boundary Trail Part II

A fish out of water



I was a little worried that nobody was going to show up to my second trail project in the Payette National Forest. Rob, Phil and Robbin, a few of the more experienced packers in our chapter, would be away on a ten day support crew project in the Frank Church. Without some of our more seasoned members to guide us, I wasn't sure anyone would be willing to follow a directionally challenged newbie with a knack for misadventure. I would not blame them either. Especially since all they might get to eat for three days is bottled water and Beanie Weenies.

Rob assured me that I would not be clearing trail alone, even if we had to twist a few arms in the process. Feeling more like a fish out of water than a project coordinator of any kind, I set about preparing for a weekend of trail work and meal preparation for an undetermined amount of crew.

Mike Mullin, our Forest Service liaison, presented two options. We could either clear trail toward Rush Creek or head up East Pine. The Rush Creek trail needed the least amount of work and the terrain would be easier to navigate than the E. Pine trail. (Insert boring!) East Pine had several dead falls to clear and a significant amount of brushing. Mike explained that the E. Pine trail was fairly steep with a few washouts dropping down to the creek below. One such precarious spot he later referred to as, “the drop of death.” I don't remember him calling it that at any time during our pre-planning discussions. It's always the quiet, mild mannered types you have to watch out for.



A week before the project, the only other person who had signed up was Shannon Schantz. I asked Shannon if she minded that it might be just the two of us and if so, I would cancel the weekend as an official project and turn it into a wood cutting trip. Shannon's determination and faith in our capabilities as two women of the backcountry meant the project would go on as planned. We would meet at the trailhead Friday night. I would bring ribs, sausage and salads, and Shannon would supply potatoes and eggs.

Two days before the trip my cell phone rang with an unfamiliar number. “Hi, this is Linda Erickson. We are newer members of the Squaw Butte chapter and we are planning on coming to your project on Boundary this

weekend.” I had met Linda and Devon at the Jump Creek fun ride earlier in the spring. Devon was on crutches at the time and Linda spent much of the fun ride picking up garbage along the trail. I liked them both instantly. Linda said that both she and Devon would be coming as well as Linda’s mom, Mildred Bryant. Linda offered to cook the Sunday breakfast. It was beginning to unfold into a real project, so why was I nervous?

“You’ve got mail.” Checking my email is usually one of the last things I do before heading out the door on any adventure. I was pleasantly surprised to see an email from Rob Adams, our Project Coordinator and V.P. Rob had made it back from the Frank Church project early. He and Bill Selkirk, a Michigan member of our chapter, would be joining us for the day on Saturday. Rob would leave his pack animals at home for a well earned rest and ride his young bay mustang, Payette. Bill would ride Willow, Rob’s buckskin quarter horse/Arab. I felt a lot better knowing an experienced packer would be there to help me with tacking up Annie. I’d just bought a Decker saddle for Annie and it would need adjusting. It wouldn’t hurt to have supervision of my limited packing skills either. I am a hands-on learner. It doesn’t matter how many times I’ve been shown, or how many books I’ve read – I learn by trial and error before I really get something; usually more error than trial.



Friday came as a double edged sword. Gone was the concern that Shannon and I would be going it alone, and in its place stood apprehension. I’d now have a six person audience judging my project coordinator abilities. Would we have enough food? Enough hay? Would the technical level of the trail match the skills of the crew? Did I bring enough tools? Ellen usually carry’s the first aid kit. All I had was a container of butte and some vet wrap.



Shannon and Linda’s party planned to meet me at the trailhead Friday night. Rob and Bill wouldn’t come up until early Saturday morning. I arrived at the trailhead mid afternoon and set up camp. I tried to mimic Rob’s setup as best I could. The awning on my camper wasn’t nearly as big as the one Rob made for his trailer. My table wasn’t quite as long either. I had two burners to Rob’s four in the outdoor kitchen. I hope everyone brings their own eating utensils. Rob has enough for everyone. He’s probably a better cook than me too *sigh*. I stood back and inspected the new centralized trail maintenance engineers’ common gathering vicinity, to be known in

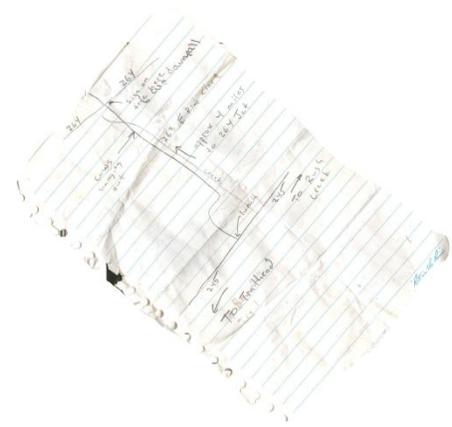
government committee’s everywhere as the “CTMECGV.” We all know how the government loves its acronyms.

With nothing left to do but wait for folks to show up – I tossed the bareback pad on Jack, held on to Annie’s tow rope and went for a ride. Shade flushed up a few non-appetizing looking birds and harassed the local chipmunk population. We rode to the top of the trailhead and down toward the grove of downfall that Rob used as training material for Janine and my sawyer certifications a month ago. We

rode toward Seid Creek road before turning back to camp.

Not long after Shannon's arrival a few hours later, Linda, Devon and Mildred pulled into camp. I recognized Mildred from a couple of the monthly chapter meetings. You would never guess Mildred at 80 plus years. With the movements of a woman half her age, Mildred shook my hand and introduced herself and the sorrel mare she would ride for the first time this weekend. It takes a lot of gusto to get on a horse you know little about. If she was nervous, you would never know it by the spark of pure horse-sense mirrored in bright, sea-blue eyes.

True to form, Rob and Bill promptly pulled into camp by 9:00 am. I presented "the plan" to Rob. "The Plan" comprised of a hand drawn map that Mike drew up. The map showed the two route options, the placement of a non-motorized sign, and a small description of the benefits and perils of each. Rob's boyish grin at mention of the East Pine trail over the easier Rush Creek trail sealed the deal. E. Pine it was.



With a few minor adjustments to Annie's rigging, Rob helped to place the saws, loppers and chainsaw gas into the canvas panniers and secure them to the Decker. "Would you hand me my mule when I get on?" "Yes Laurie, I will hand you your mule when you get on." "Oh no – I forgot my camera. I'll be right back. Would you hold this mule?" "Yes Laurie, I will hold the mule." "Ok...I am back – Hey Rob, would you hand me my mule when I get on?" "Yes Laurie...I will hand you the mule." "Oh crap, I have to pee. "Hey Rob..."

I kept the fact to myself that I had absolutely no problem getting on my horse bareback while hanging on to my mule without help. I have no idea why I couldn't manage now. Nerves I guess. Nerves that passed through me to my horse who danced around every time Annie's pack touched him. Any other time and that sort of thing wouldn't bother him a bit. Why did it bother him now? I remember a friend telling me in a similar situation, "Your horse is not nervous...you are nervous and you are making him nervous." She was right then and Rob was right now when he said I needed to just relax – it was all going to be fine.



It seems like the first quarter of a mile into any ride is the most chaotic. Horses are establishing their place in line while others are burning off the edge of nervous energy. If an accident is going to happen, it usually happens in the first quarter of mile from camp coming or going. Not this time – this time it wouldn't occur until into the first mile or so.

Annie was towing along nicely until something from behind spooked her into a trot around and ahead of Jack. The spot in the trail was not wide enough for me to pull her around and she jerked the lead rope out of my hand. Annie usually does pretty well at liberty, although I now understood why Rob suggested I use a longer lead; trial and error lesson number 1. I tried to snag her rope when I could, but the crafty little mule was having none of it. I'd have to wait until she wore down a little or couldn't get away from me.

Boundary Trail starts to descend toward the beginning of the trail. The decline switch-backs down a steep, barren canyon slope that drops down to East Pine creek at the bottom. Things were going along fairly smooth when we reached the top of the canyon wall. Uncomfortable with riding downhill, Shannon put her Arabian, Sar, directly behind Jack. She likes to use Jack as a brake of sorts to slow down the chargin' Arabian. It's a method we've used before and it worked well. Annie must have been toward the rear of the line. I heard a commotion behind me. I turned to see Annie bolting down the trail, scattering horse and riders as she went, her pack leaning precariously to the left. She bolted uphill as the pack continued to slide. Upon reaching the top, she spun and bolted down the hill at break-neck speed – bucking and scattering gear as she went. Annie looked as if she would topple head over hooves and roll to the bottom of the canyon. To the sure-footed little molly's credit, she managed to stay upright as the pack slipped completely around and underneath her. The pannier containing the saw had



ripped apart, scattering its contents across the hillside. I jumped off and handed Linda the reins. "I've got him...go take care of your mule." I clambered down the steep hillside to where Annie stood trembling in sweat. A quick scan revealed that she appeared unhurt. Cautiously, I unlatched buckles and latches that I could reach and untangled Annie from a mass of twisted leather. Once free of the entanglement, I led her back to where Rob had collected the pieces and parts of the Decker system. "This is one disadvantage of an un-tethered pack animal." Trial and error lesson number two.

Annie barely tolerates me most of the time. To stand there and let Rob and I readjust and replace a burden that she surely must have thought tried to kill her, was no small thing for my skittish mule. I watched as Rob tightened the cinch. Not only had none of us thought to check Annie's cinch before heading down the steep hill, but after watching Rob cinch her up, it became obvious that had not tightened it nearly enough in the beginning. Trial and error lesson number three.

The Decker was unharmed. The canvas pannier was a different story. I recognized the wheels in motion look on Rob's face as one that appears on my own from time to time, "I can fix this..." Using the shredded canvas bag like a pack mantle, Rob wrapped the saw gas and loppers like a Christmas present and secured it to the Decker. It would do.

Rob led Annie and I led Jack to where the others waited for us lower down the trail. Mounted up, we continued on our mission. With a more fervent grip on Annie's tow rope, I made a resounding pledge, "I promise from this point forth to try and keep control of my mule at all times!"

Annie seemed to do better depending on who was behind her. In retrospect, it might have been better for us to take up the rear. Every so often, something would spook her and she would try to dart ahead of Jack on the trail. It would have been all good in open terrain – but we were not in open terrain. We skirted a hill on one side and a creek that sometimes dropped straight down on the other. On one particularly puckering spot, I believe the very spot Mike called the "drop of death" – the line ahead of me stopped to do a little brushing. Jack and I fell in line in such a way that his legs straddled the section of trail over the drop of



death. “Hello...can we move up a little? I’m freaking out back here!”

Surviving the drop of death, we continued on. A pack string of six people and at least 5 dogs overtook us on the trail. We pulled over to let them pass. The group was packing in to Bucks Cabin. They seemed a merry bunch, if not somewhat incapable of containing all members of their pack. One young pup was content to hang out with us in the cool creek despite its owners continued pleas.

I tried to hang on to Annie. I really tried. Once again, something spooked her from the rear and she bolted ahead of Jack, ripping the rope from my hand. She managed to weave around the riders ahead of us on the narrow trail. There wasn’t much I could do about it now but hope she didn’t further disturb the others. Things managed to calm down for awhile as we continued brushing and clearing deadfall.

Annie was still toward the front of the line when something went amiss. I never did find out what happened exactly. Jack and I were toward the back, if not last. Suddenly, the line of riders seemed to have done an about face in the middle of the trail and were heading towards us. Annie shot by Jack, spinning us around, nearly forcing Jack off the trail; a dangerously vertical drop-off to the creek threatened below. Afraid that Jack was going over the edge, I bailed. Instead of bailing off the upside as I had intended – Jack spun in mid bail and I went over the edge. It must have looked worse than it was. Linda yelled, “OMG Laurie...are you alright?” I scurried up over the edge in answer, “I’m good!” What I was really thinking was, “What the hell just happened?” Trial and error lesson number four: If you are going to bail, bail off on the uphill side.

Concerned that extensive tree pruning and minor mishaps were slowing us down; I feared we would run out of daylight before reaching our destination. The sign that Mike had given me to place at the junction of 263 and 245 called to me from Annie’s bags in tenacious determination. The sign became an obsession more than a mere task. I would reach the junction and hang that damn sign if I had to do it by flashlight...if only I hadn’t forgotten to bring a flashlight.

The sorrel mare Mildred rode was beginning to show signs of fatigue. According to “the plan” (aka the map) we were getting close to the junction. Mildred and Linda stopped to let the sorrel rest in a nice clearing while the remaining crew went on. The junction came into view several hundred yards from where we left Mildred and Linda.



YES! We made it! All that and we made it! I jumped down, did a little happy dance, and tied Annie and Jack to a stout tree and retrieved my sign. Rob took the chainsaw and rerouted a section of trail that concerned Mike. Someone had gone in and re-blazed the trail from the original route obstructed by downfall. While Rob worked on the trail, I studied “the plan” for sign placement. “I think it goes here. I hope it goes here. I’m not totally positive it goes here...but I’m putting it here.” I figured if Mike later finds that I put it in the wrong place, he’s not likely to say anything anyway – being the mild mannered quiet type that he appears to be; aside from the whole drop of death thing.

“Lead us home,” said Rob. That I can do. I knew Rob and Bill needed to be on the road and back home before too late. If there is one thing a bunch of trailer sour ponies can do is haul butt back to camp and Jack can out walk the best of them when he wants. As we neared the spot where Linda and Mildred waited, Devon whistled a signal that we

were on our way. Both girls were in the saddle in no time, falling in line as we rode toward camp.

Shannon wanted to check out the corduroy we built at the junction of Boundary and Rush Creek on an earlier project. Bill, Rob and I continued on as Shannon and the others took a quick detour across the creek. By the time we climbed halfway up the steep canyon we descended earlier, Jack began to tire. Willow was well in front and showed no signs of slowing down. Payette encouraged Jack from behind. Hot, tired and hungry – we reached the top of what will forever be known as “Mule wreck Mountain.”

Shannon caught up with us as we descended into the trailhead; the others not far behind. Rob commented that it was a successful project. After Rob’s last adventure in the Frank Church, I think he deemed any project that did not involve someone requiring a medivac, a success. As for me – my motto is any day you don’t get bucked off is a good day.

Shannon, Rob and Bill pulled out of camp Saturday evening. Devon, Linda, and Mildred would stay over and ride with me on Sunday. We enjoyed a dinner of BBQ’d ribs, corn-on-the-cob, honeydew melon and salads. My granddaughter Audrey came up from Payette to spend the night in Grammy’s camper. Both Audrey and my grandson Emmett think that I live in a camper. My daughter laughs every time Emmett sees a camper, he points and hollers, “GRANDMA!!”



Audrey may have had a few too many gummy dinosaurs before bed. She chattered non-stop about bears and Bigfoot before drifting off to sleep. I lay awake most of the night listening to a raging thunderstorm unfold. I kept reminding myself that Devon was right- if the horses were at home during a storm like this, they would be standing out in the open in their pasture, just as they were now. Still, if Jack and Annie would have fit in my camper...



Linda prepared a breakfast of Ziploc omelets. I had heard of such a thing from an email that circulates from time to time. Like most of those types of emails, I had dismissed the claim as something that might appear on snoopers.com. This time, it was deliciously legit. You place two scrambled eggs, pre-cooked sausage, cheese and whatever else you prefer, in a Ziploc bag. Squeeze all the air out of the bag and place in a pot of boiling water.

Each baggy had our names on them to designate our individual creations. After 25 minutes – a delectably fluffy omelet slides out of the baggie with your name on it and onto your plate.

The small camping area adjacent to the trail head is actually private property. The land owner allows use of the area, and in kind, we try to leave the camp spot cleaner than we left it. Linda and Mildred went above and beyond by scouring the campsite pulling thistle. By the time they finished, an extra large trash bag stuffed with invasive weed and seed was removed from the forest floor. I knew I liked these people.

The four of us decided to go on an easy, Sunday ride. I opted to not lug my heavy saddle onto Jacks' back and instead rode bareback. I was again amazed as I watched Mildred mount her sorrel mare. With no assistants from man or mounting block, she stuck the stirrup like a seasoned cowhand and swung aboard with ease. I've seen people half her age struggle more...myself included. Riding with Mildred had the added advantage of listening to her tell stories of a life filled with adventure, strife and prosperity. Each memory told with the wit and humor borne of a woman to be reckoned with.



As we rode, Linda picked up litter along the way. Not a discarded beer can escaped Linda's searching eye as she climbed in and out of the saddle to clean up after others thoughtlessness. It never made sense to me why someone would be willing to carry a full case of beer up a steep mountain, but could not find it within themselves to carry it out empty.

We rode up a dirt road that dead-ended after 50 or so yards along a tributary. A hound dog lay dead at the base of a tree where it had been tied up and shot. I wondered what kind of person would do such a thing. I can't imagine anything a dog could do to deserve such treatment. Even if the dog had been vicious or rabid – why not have the decency to bury it? I imagined whoever did it was probably the same type of person that would leave empty beer cans scattered throughout the forest. I said a small prayer for Copper – as he reminded me of the hound dog from Disney's Fox and the Hound, and suggest that he look up my old dog and tell him hi. Even though I know Spud is always with me, I figured Copper could use a friend – and Spud was the best friend any dog...or girl, could hope for.

Halfway into the ride we came upon a cross decorated with beads and a small American flag. Each of us speculated as to its purpose. The marker was placed on an embankment midway up a steep four wheeler track that dove off a logging road above. I asked Mike later if someone had died up there. He explained that a couple had rolled a four wheeler coming down the steep hill, killing the passenger. Everyone was silent for a bit before making our way up the steep embankment...leaving the melancholy below.

Annie had been content to follow along unfettered– grazing as she went. You could tell at the exact moment she realized we were pointing in the direction of camp. She merrily trotted up and got in front of Jack and led the way. Even though we were not going back the exact same way we came in – Annie knew we were going home. She took the lead and blazed the trail back to the campers. Every so often she would stop and wait at a bend in the road until she was sure that Jack was not far behind. It was comforting to know that, being directionally challenged as I am, I would never truly be lost as long as I had that wise little molly as a member of my string.

Devon built a small fire and Linda brought out the hotdogs. I don't think any of us were really ready to

go home, even if we weren't starving. None of us had hotdog buns or any kind of bread to speak of. We didn't need it. The Ball Park franks were the best I think I'd ever eaten. For desert, I wrapped an apple in tinfoil and placed it in the coals. We had divided the apple amongst the four of us and sat chatting around the fire when the property owners arrived on four wheeler. They had seen the smoke from our fire and came up to make sure that it was an intentional fire and not a result of the prior nights lightening. We kindly reassured him that we would make sure the fire was dead out before we left.

All that was left was to finish dowsing the fire and load up the animals. Using a rubberized bucket, I scooped up a pail of water to drown out the smoking embers. I emptied the bucket over the coals and jumped back, "What was that!?" Something had flopped out of the bucket and into the firepit. Have you ever had one of those moments where you saw something, but either didn't understand what you were seeing or just didn't believe it? I was having one of those moments. I stared at the "thing" for a few seconds before it dawned on me: "OMG! I scooped up a fish!" I scrambled to retrieve the fish from the puddle of hot water and ash." Have you tried to retrieve a wet, ash soaked four inch brook trout from a pool of hot water? I dropped it twice before grasping the wiggly little bugger between both hands and running toward the creek. I could hear Mildred laughing as I dashed toward the creek with Nemo in my clutches. Not just laughing...belly laughing! As gently as possible, I chucked the fish into the creek. Ok, maybe not gently – it sort of squirted out between my fingers just as I reached the waters' edge. I sat down on the culvert and busted out laughing, "What just happened?"

I scooped bucket after bucket of water to douse the fire; each time checking to make sure I had not scooped up any more unexpected passengers. I smiled to myself as I thought about that fish and how, though he was the purest definition of such, I too felt at times like a fish out of water, and, like my little finned friend who found himself in a pool of hot water, everything worked out just fine in the end for both of us.

The End