

The Mountain Canary Company Horse and Mule Packers information Bulletin #4

“The Care and Feeding of the Packer”

There is a lot of interest from folks on how I feed and care for my mules and horses when I pack in the backcountry, but very little on how I take care of me. I admit my stock comes first on the list of care but I am a tight second. The vision of a long drawn out dinner prepared to excellence in front of a flickering campfire is a pipe dream for a packer. There is many a time that dinner consists of a cold day-old Subway sandwich. If I were packing for a fun trip (which I ought to do more often), I could have the luxury of setting myself up with more and better vittles. I was blowing the foam off a cool one in the Golden Pheasant tavern one evening, while I waited for the world's best burger, when a gent asked me if I messed around with horses. I replied “kind of” and explained I was a stock packer. I guess packer meant, to him camp cook because he began to convince me I was talking to the original “Chef Boyardee” himself. He was on a great roll telling me about his cowboy buddies and their skills with cast iron kitchenware, when sadly I had to inform him I was not so equipped on my packing trips. He then informed me that I could not be much of a packer if I left home without my cast iron Dutch oven. “Goodness, some people's kids.” I did not have much of a complimentary answer for that fellow, but the barmaid sure was interested in my response, Boy'o in an earlier time it could have gotten interesting.

I do not know how I could reasonably make enough room in the packs with all the trail crew's cargo, to pack ingredients in to make my dinner in a Dutch oven. I guess one could chase down a park marmot and bean it with a rock. Which would solve the food problem, even if there were enough room for the Dutch oven. Boy'o could you only imagine the amount of paper work, beaning a park marmot would generate. All kidding aside, when you are packing cargo of any sort there is very limited room for the packer's own kit. I figure I need one more pack animal to get me in for one overnight trip.

Forage is non-existent in the areas I pack, thus I have to carry in all of my gang's feed.

Over the years, I have used many different food sources, like Meals Ready to Eat (MRE's), premade dinners (sub sandwiches), energy bars and on occasion, real food. MRE's are military rations and come in a handy pouch with a water activated heating unit. There has been more than one occasion that they made me feel like a rich fellow as I sat in a gully washing rain, wrapped up in my slicker, knowing that the wonders of modern science were about to give me a warm meal. After a few years, I have lost my taste for predigested food. Pre-made chow is also a way to go. No kidding, sub sandwiches do work, but go light on the mayo on hot days (health issue). I tend to eat this way when I pack as an assistant to a National Park packer. They are on a lot tighter schedule than I am, with time constraints and additional distances to travel on the company time clock. It can get you by, but add a few goodies to it like fruit in plastic cups. Now we come to my very favorite real food. To me real food can come in a can or a dehydrated food pouch. For my needs, it never comes as raw meat or fresh veggies. I get a chance to go for real food only when I am traveling to a site where I know I can get by with the extra space. I check out the camping supply stores for food in a pouch and hit the supermarket for my favorite canned foods.

The meals I normally have to prepare for are one dinner and a breakfast the next morning. Dinners are prepared often close to dark, after the critters are fed and my bedding area is set up. By now, my old bones are getting kind of slow and tired. That sub sandwich may be a good plan at times. I figure that at sixty-five years old, I think I am old enough to drink so I toss in a good can of micro-brew beer and a cigar, along with a few moments of quiet. These small luxuries inform one what the masses are missing. If the weather turns cold or there is any possibility that there may be an invasion of poisonous snakes, I have been know to add a wee dram of Irish whisky to my menu. This is best carried in a small plastic container from a camping supply store. One ounce or two is all a body needs to help soften the ground a bit. Anymore, in my view, makes the ground harder.

Breakfast is the most challenging of all meals. You have to be up and moving from first light. Stock must be fed, your camp needs to be broken down, high-lines must be taken down, stock saddled, packs made up and loaded. Oops! I need to clean up the mule and horse leavings. Goodness, I need to get something to eat. Do not forget we are rolling out before 0800. I have

found that a day without coffee is not much of a day. To get my world right with a coffee ration, I have two choices cold or hot. Cold is the only option when I am running super light, without a stove. I brew up a good pot of espresso before I leave home, cool it, and put it in a plastic soda bottle. At least it is good coffee, even cold. The next option is only if I have my stove. I pre-measure the coffee needed to make up a quart or so of coffee in a plastic trail-water-bottle. I boil the needed water and put it into the bottle to steep. Presto; you have good hot coffee. It may have a bit more body than usual but it is hot. The empty bottle can be used to store small stuff you need to carry out. Any kind of meal is almost out of the question. I have resorted to breakfast bars or if I have the stove, an instant cereal. My favorite is three packs of instant grits, dry lemon juice, and a small amount of bacon-bits in a plastic bag, add this to a pot with boiled water and onto my ribs. Be careful of the high-energy bars, which contain a lot of protein, that may offset one's digestive system. If this happens, you may get very familiar with the backside of a lot of trees on the way out. Experience speaking, enough said!

When the day drags on and hunger sets in, a good trail meal is Payday candy bars, which have kept me going on almost every trip. They can be gulped down with a swig of water and no need to stop (we never stop for lunch, as it is a good way to get a wreck going with our loaded critters milling around).

Earlier above, I had mentioned a stove. The trail crew has always been ready to help me out in any way they can. They have generously offered stoves, food, coffee and on occasion a beer. I have always declined, except once on a wet cold day coffee was my downfall. I do not like the idea of taking anything away from them. They are in there for a week and who knows what can happen to their food, stove or fuel supply. Unless I have my own, I will make do without.

I have used many different kinds of stoves and fuel to prepare real food in the backcountry. The best and simplest is by far is the Swedish alcohol stove made by Trangia. There are no moving parts to fail you, there are no pumps to dry out, and the fuel is the safest you can handle. Alcohol can be safely carried in a plastic soft drink bottle, if it leaks in your gear no big deal, and it can be extinguished with water. These burners were used by the Swedish army for over fifty years. I have a model 25-4, it is very compact, takes up very little space, and is very reasonable to purchase considering all of the cookware you get with it.



To get more information and neat videos' on this stove, go to the internet site www.trangia/se/english

Even though you do not have that supposedly needed Dutch oven, you can get by on apparently short rations and shorter space. The Leave-No-Trace (LNT) folks have to love us. Believe me I would take more if I could.

Ed Haefliger

www.mtcanaryco.com

Volunteer Packer:

Olympic National Park

Olympic National Forest

Washington State Department of Natural Resources

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