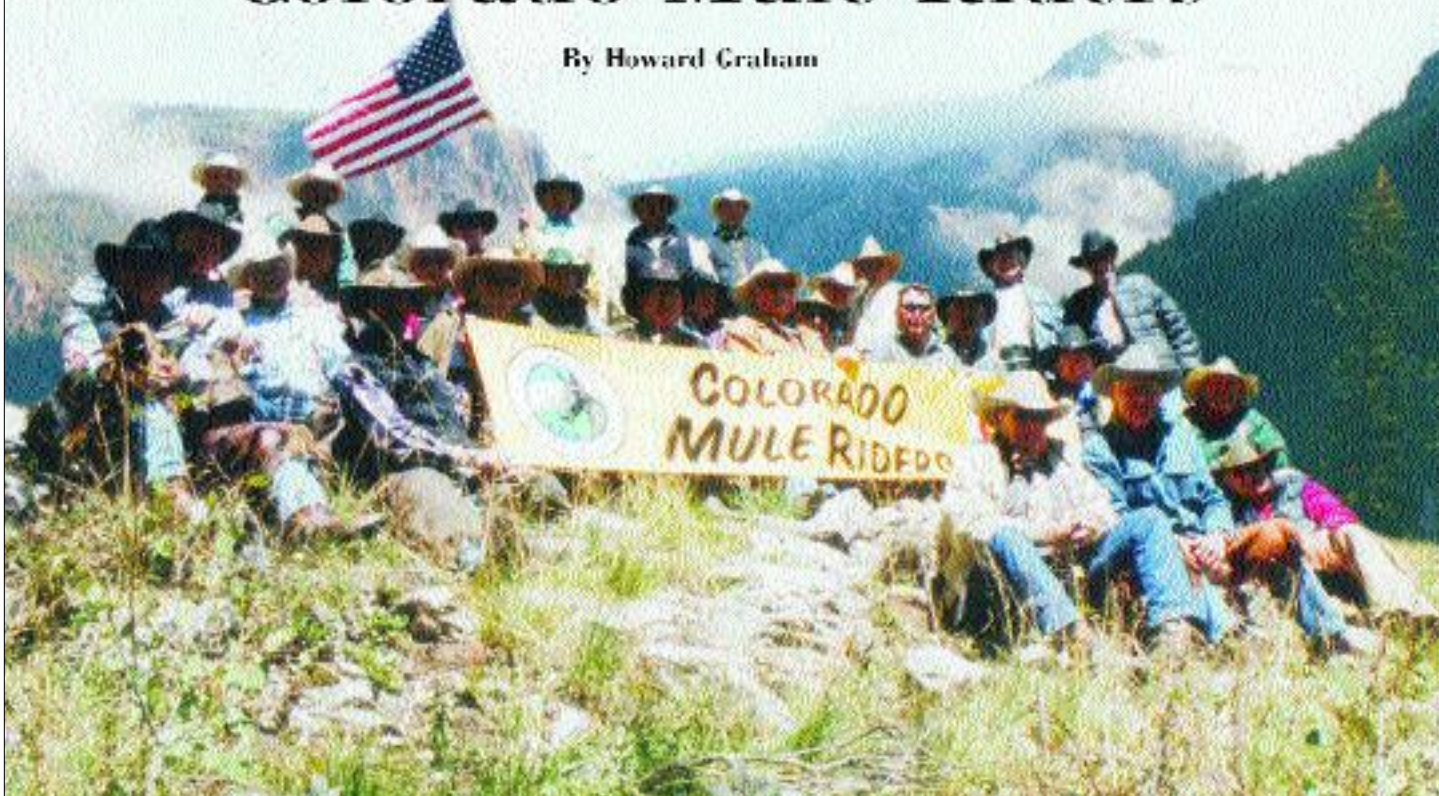


30th Anniversary Colorado Mule Riders

By Howard Graham



Wilderness Trails Ranch on the east side of Vallecito Reservoir north of Bayfield, Colorado was the site selected for the 2006 historic "Ride of the Aspens". President Art Lapham of Colorado Springs, Colorado began the activities on Saturday night with a baby back rib and jambalaya dinner at the Al Kaly Mule Train Tack Room in the Springs.

Vallecito Reservoir

Wolf Creek Pass was on everyone's mind as mule riders assembled at the Mule Train Barn for the trip to Vallecito Reservoir. Most remembered the 2000 trip to Lake Mancos Ranch when Wolf Creek Pass was also the most formidable obstacle.

The trip began at 8:00 a.m. under a picture book Colorado sky. The convoy route was south on I-25 to Walsenburg and west on Highway 160. Alamosa was the lunch and fuel stop followed by Monte Vista, Del Norte, South Fork and the Continental Divide at Wolf Creek Pass. The trip over the pass was accom-

panied by perfect weather and without incident. Pagosa Springs, Chimney Rock and Bayfield followed and the convoy picked up the Los Pinos River as it turned north in Bayfield. At Columbus, the route turned to the north-east on Vallecito Road.

It was just north of Columbus as we crossed into the San Juan National Forest that the effects of the Missionary Ridge fire in 2002 were visible. It is amazing to see what the fire burned but the truly remarkable part is what it did not burn. There were some brave people fighting that fire and the story of their effort will live forever.

A short journey around Vallecito Reservoir and the convoy arrived at Wilderness Trails Ranch.

Rocky Basin

A crisp beautiful morning greeted riders as they gathered for breakfast. Elk could be seen and heard in the meadow at the foot of Grassy Point. A pack lunch was the order of the day and mule riders were on the trail for their first ride by

9:00 a.m.

Monday's ride began on the east side of the horse pasture where we picked up the East Creek Trail. East Creek took us to a large meadow called Bedsprings Park. The ride turned northeast to a small meadow named Beaver Pond and continued north to Sheep Lake. From Sheep Lake we rode east to an area known as Larry's Place which was named for a local man of some notoriety. We next rode through the pack camp, complete with electric fence to keep the bears out of the food tent and began a loop back to the north and east.

Lunch was next in a spot known as Rocky Basin. A relaxing lunch break in the warm sunshine, among the rocks was a welcomed break. The return trip to the ranch began in reverse order, pack camp, Larry's Place, Sheep Lake and Bedsprings Park.

At this juncture we turned south on Bear Trap Canyon Trail, rode past the Notch and turned southwest to Cow Park. After a short break, we continued



Gail Fortney is from Colorado Spring, Colorado. Gail is the only active thirty year charter member of the Colorado Mule Riders.

To Gail's left is the 30th Anniversary President, Art Lapham also of Colorado Springs. Art is a nineteen year member of the Colorado Mule Riders and had the responsibility of putting the mule riders in a beautiful part of Colorado. Art did just that and all activities during the 30th Anniversary went without a hitch.

Art had his hands full with the buzz of the 30th Anniversary, certain to create more activity than normal. Art Lapham was just the man to cause the 30th Colorado Mule Ride to go just great.

Gail Fortney during the awards night ceremony was sure to thank those who have contributed to the success of the Colorado Mule Riders over it's thirty years of existence. Gail did not fail to thank his wonderful wife, Shirley, who has put in many hours over those thirty years allowing many a Colorado Mule Ride to go off without a hitch.

It's members know it takes great people to pull off great things. Gail Fortney, his wife Shirley and President Art Lapham are just those kind of people. Thirty six grateful mule riders reaped those rewards that have come because of one great idea (it's conception), lots of hard work and many more great ideas that have come over the last thirty years.

The reward again this year were many. Another great mule ride in the beautiful Colorado Rockies, good friends, great fellowship with wonderful men from many different parts of the country, and again this year the mule riders got a bonus reward... Looks like there gonna get to do it again in 2007!

aspen. There appears to be no logic to the way the fire burned: some charred, others blackened but alive, and remarkably, areas that show no signs of fire.

Monday night's post Mexican buffet activities were a special time for the Colorado Mule Riders. President Art Lapham presented Gale Fortney with a framed Certificate of Appreciation for his thirty years of service to the organization. Paul Phernetton presented a one of a kind breast collar and breeching decked out in mule rider conchos as a token of appreciation from the membership.

Vista Grande

Tuesday's sunrise was no less beautiful than Monday's, complete with the sound of elk. It was hot breakfast, pack lunch and back on the trail at 9:00 a.m.

As was the case on Monday we left the ranch on the East Creek Trail. Three gates and a mile more or less brought us to Vista Grande Trail. At this point we turned north and began a steady climb to Grassy Point. The view from the rim of Grassy Point was great but only a teaser for the view at our next stop.

As we continued our ride to the north it was soon obvious we were headed for something special. It seemed there was no place for the trail to go as we passed through the Notch and got our first view of Vista Grande. At an elevation of 9,800 feet, more or less, it rises above almost sheer rock walls to the canyon

floor. From this vantage point you can see for miles. The Los Pinos River flows through the canyon below passing near the trail head for the Weminuche Wilderness. Runlet Peak can be seen to the west and Granite Peak (12,147 feet) to the north. This spectacular site was also our lunch stop.

When the group left the Vista we headed northeast and bushwhacked our way across a series of narrow finger ridges terminating on a rocky outcrop with an eastern view opposite of the view we had from Vista Grande. At this point approximately 9,740 feet accord-



The Empty Saddle ceremony held in memory and honor of all those departed Colorado Mule Riders. Each name is read from the mountain and all present listen with a reverence.

Manny Iglesias, past president and thirteen year member of the Colorado Mule Riders conducts that empty saddle ceremony high on a mountain top where the names seem to float by the ear on the mountain breeze.

ing to G.P.S., with Slide Mountain

to No Name Park, west to Bear Park and turned northwest on Jan's Trail for the return to the horse pasture.

It was interesting to see the effects of the fire as we rode in and out of majestic stands of lodge pole, spruce, fir and



The Maverick ceremony is held for the first time riders on the Colorado Mule Ride. This ceremony is always held high in the mountains. There the first time rider will get a glimpse of the spirit of the Colorado Mule Riders. On a mountain top the ceremony is something very special.

The ceremony is conducted by Dave Potts, past president and an eighteen year member of the Colorado Mule Riders.

A capsule then is buried on that mountain with every Maverick's name listed along with names of all members.

(11,114 feet) to the southeast, we stopped for the Empty Saddle and Maverick Ceremonies.

The mavericks, first time riders, buried the traditional time capsule with help from the group and everyone gathered around the capsule for the ceremonies. Manny Iglesias conducted the Empty Saddle Ceremony in memory and honor of all our departed riders. Dave Potts conducted the Maverick

Ceremony and the group gathered around the mule rider banner for a group picture under Old Glory.

Ceremonies completed, the return trip was begun. No one had any idea it would turn out to be eventful. We headed southeast and bushwhacked our way steadily down from our lofty ceremony site.

On the course that would eventually take us to Hump Park, the unexpected happened. Amanda our wrangler guide was thrown from her mule. The cause was not known but probably the result of her mule being stung by bees. Amanda suffered a broken and cracked rib as was later determined.

After several minutes of attention and first aid, she was able to walk with assistance for quite a distance through some pretty rough country.

When the ride reached Hump Park part of the group continued on to the ranch and the remainder waited on Amanda. Amanda decided to try to ride back to the ranch when she reached the park and found riding to be no more painful than walking.

From Hump Park, we rode southwesterly to a familiar spot, Beaver Pond. The pack trail took us to Bedsprings Park and back to the East Creek trail. The entire group was united at this point and we turned to the ranch. Amanda was taken by staff to Durango to get medical attention.



The young lady you see in the middle is "Lady-Wrangler-Guide" Amanda. Amanda was thrown from her mule on the way out, breaking a rib and cracking others. She's smiling in the photo taken right after arriving back at the ranch and before being taken to Durango for medical attention. What Amanda was given for pain by her care givers had kicked in by now and she had no problem mustering up this great smile even with broken and cracked ribs.

Amanda was assisted after coming off her mule with medical care and assisted down the mountain by ^{son} Dan Delaney of Las Cruces, New Mexico a five year member. (steph of Amanda) Dr. Jerry Stroh of Tabernash, Colorado, a twenty one year member of the Colorado Mule Riders. Both walked over rough terrain assisting this young lady out until they got her where she felt she could ride out.

"Sadie" the pack mule you see in the photo carries medical supplies on every ride just for a medical emergency like this one. "Sadie" is owned by Harold Dewalt ^{son} of Nathrop, Colorado. Harold, owner, operator of Deer Valley Ranch at Nathrop uses "Sadie" in his operation all summer taking guest riders out into the mountains at his operation. "Sadie" is normally not led by anyone, she is turned loose and finds herself a spot among the mule riders somewhere in the string. "Sadie" has become an icon on a Colorado Mule Ride.



*"Sadie", crossing the Pine River, carrying medical supplies in her packs, she is often referred to as **The Ambulance.***

Tuesday night after dinner we heard an interesting history of the National Western Stock Show in Denver from our guest rider, Bill Rossman. Bill is the Superintendent of the Mule Division for the stock show. It was a treat to have Bill on our thirtieth annual ride. He is a kindred spirit and rides a good mule he calls Thistle.

Games Day

Another beautiful day dawned as riders gathered for breakfast. This is the day traditionally set aside for Games Day. Hal Johnston, Randy Gibbs and Dean May with help did an excellent



Bill Rossman was the 30th Anniversary guest rider of the Colorado Mule Riders. Bill is Superintendent of the Mule Division at the National Western Stock Show in Denver, Colorado. Bill will have been a part of the Mule Show at the National Western twenty years come January.

The National Western Stock Show puts on one of Americas premiere mule shows held every January in Denver. This year the National Western celebrated it's 100th birthday. Bill Rossman was very much a part of that 100th celebration putting on another wonderful mule show before thousands in attendance.

If you think you might want to participate in the mule show at the National Western, Ben Tennison, editor of Western Mule Magazine says, "if you can't get along with Bill Rossman, you can't get along with nobody". The Colorado Mule riders thought the very same thing of Mr. Rossman. Bill Rossman was a wonderful Colorado Mule Rider guest.

job of setting up and running the timed events. The morning schedule included the key hole race, trail course, poles and the flag race.

Following lunch in the dining hall, the group reassembled for the afternoon events. The barrel race was first followed by the potato race and the egg race. This had to be the best and most competitive egg race between the mavericks and our guest we have seen. The entire day was competitive but fun and entertaining. A very close and spirited pony express race which included a tie for third place turned out to be the last event. Skies clouded up and rain began



HAROLD DEWALT HIGH POINT WINNER GAME DAY 2006

Harold lives in Nathrop, Colorado, a past president and sixteen year member of the Colorado Mule Riders.

Harold was awarded the traveling trophy during the Thursday night awards ceremony by president Art Lapham.

to fall as the races were completed.

The remaining games were postponed, as was the scheduled trap shoot competition. Rain continued to fall through the night but did not dampen spirits.

Wednesday nights' activities included an interesting talk on the history of the Four Corners' region (Colorado, Utah, Texas and New Mexico) and its early inhabitants by Frank Tikalsky, PhD., a professor of Sociology and Anthropology. This was followed by a very successful live auction of five super gifts donated for fund raising.

A Chilly Start

The morning was overcast and damp. A steady rain overnight had stopped in the early morning hours but the dampness added to the chillness in the air. The plan for the day was to get an early start and return in time to complete the games and trap shoot. Mules were tacked up and loaded on trailers for a short ride to the Weminuche Wilderness trail head on the Los Pinos River just north of the reservoir.

The first section of the trail was across private land but generally skirted the west side of ranches that border the river. Grassy Point was the most prominent landmark to the east, and to the west the ridge line was some 1,500 feet above the trail.

Three miles out we entered the Weminuche Wilderness. Snow and ice

could be seen near the tops of the rocky peaks across the river. The trail was near the river and began a noticeable although slight climb that is accented by the speed and sound of the water flowing over rocks. The skies were overcast and occasionally the sun made an appearance but it was much colder than most anticipated. We continued to ride northeast and the Notch and Vista Grande, landmarks of Tuesday's ride, were in full view. Vista Grande is spectacular from below as well as from the top. Runlett Peak rises to the west and Granite Park (12,147 feet) could be seen to the northeast across Lost Canyon.

A small meadow and camp site near the river marked the midpoint of our ride and lunch. The meadow soon smelled of wood smoke as a number of riders gathered around a fire built in the camp pit to warm up. According to Alan Gillman's G.P.S., we were approximately 1,600 feet lower than Tuesday's lunch site and four miles to the northwest.

Lunch time was accompanied by an improvement in the weather. The sun made an appearance and generally warmed things up for the remainder of the ride.

When we arrived at the ranch, Hal Johnston announced the games were cancelled because the arena was too wet. That did, however, allow extra time for trap shooting and horseshoes.

Thursdays are always big events in every mule ride and number thirty was no exception. A traditional steak dinner was followed by the awards ceremony. President Art Lapham presented the Roberts and staff a plaque of appreciation for hosting the Colorado Mule Riders. A special Hard Luck trophy was presented to Amanda for her accident on the trail and a cash donation from the riders to help her with family expenses while she recovers.

President Lapham thanked all the officers, committees and members for their help in making the ride a big success.

President Lapham, with help from Hal Johnston and Torry Krutzke, presented individual plaques to each rider in recognition of their participation in the 30th ride and placement in games day events, horse shoe competition and

the trap shoot competition. Harold DeWalt of Nathrop, Colorado was the "All-Around" winner and was presented the traveling trophy and a decal for his trailer. The competition was close with only four points separating first from third. Congratulations to Harold!

President Lapham thanked Paul Phernetton for his work on the silent auction, raffles and the live auction. He also offered thanks on behalf of all the mule riders to all those who contributed items for the auctions and raffle. These were all a big success and loads of fun.

Gale Fortney was recognized for his many contributions to the Mule Riders over their thirty year history. Gale is the only active charter member of the five who are living. Gale first thanked his wife Shirley for her many hours of work on behalf of the organization. He then noted the first ride had nine riders and was at Lost Valley Ranch, the rest is history. The guest rider on the tenth was Dick Spencer, editor of the Western Horseman and he was followed by Randy Whitte, editor of the Western Horseman, for the twentieth annual ride. Ben Tennison, editor of Western Mule Magazine and now a member of the Colorado Mule Riders, was the guest rider for the twenty-fifth and Bill Rossman for number thirty. Gale thanked all the members for their efforts in making the Colorado Mule riders a success for thirty years. Gale says the members always "Get It Right" and that accounts for thirty years of success.

Vice-president Gene Stille concluded the night's activities by presenting President Art Lapham with a gift in appreciation of his service in 2006. Gene gave a brief description of the 2007 ride which will be held at Deer Valley Ranch at Nathrop, Colorado and the activities were concluded.

Wolf Creek Pass

The group that gathered for breakfast was a little smaller as a few of the riders left late in the night or early in the morning. Although there was a light rain the temperatures were warmer than Thursday morning. The news from Wolf Creek Pass was not so good. There was snow pack above 8,000 feet and two feet expected at the summit. Because of the potentially bad road conditions on

the pass, it was decided the group should travel together until everybody cleared the pass.

The convoy was very loose until we reached Pagosa Springs. At this point we re-grouped for the ascent on the pass. The reports proved to be accurate and the trip to the summit was an adventure. Blowing snow that sometimes made it difficult to see the vehicle in front of you and poor traction on the snow pack, made for an interesting trip. Everyone was afraid to slow down or stop. The convoy stopped briefly at the summit and then started down, less three trailers, two at the top and one with seven mules that did not make it under their own power. Guess being last in a convoy has no upside. All ended well as we met a wrecker pulling the truck and trailer to the top after we had unhooked and started back down to see if we could help out. The weather on the east side of the pass was much better and all ended well.

Conclusion

The 2006 Ride of the Aspens is history marked by a time capsule buried high in the San Juan National forest in the shadows of Granite peak. Thirty-six riders representing ten states from Oregon to Georgia made the historic ride.

Have you ever tried to take a photograph of the mountains? There is just no way to capture it on film to share with someone who has not been there. Best example I can think of to describe the Colorado Mule Ride, you just have to be there.

If you would like to apply for the 2007 Colorado Mule Ride contact:
Gale Fortney
5019 Half Moon Drive
Colorado Springs, Colorado 80915
Call: 719-596-5248



About The Author: Howard Graham an eleven year member of the Colorado Mule Riders, lives in Carbon Hill, Alabama along with his lovely wife Barbara. Besides serving as past President of the Colorado Mule Riders, Howard writes the Yearly Ride Book and works with the first year riders. Howard is a gracious and frequent contributor to Western Mule Magazine.