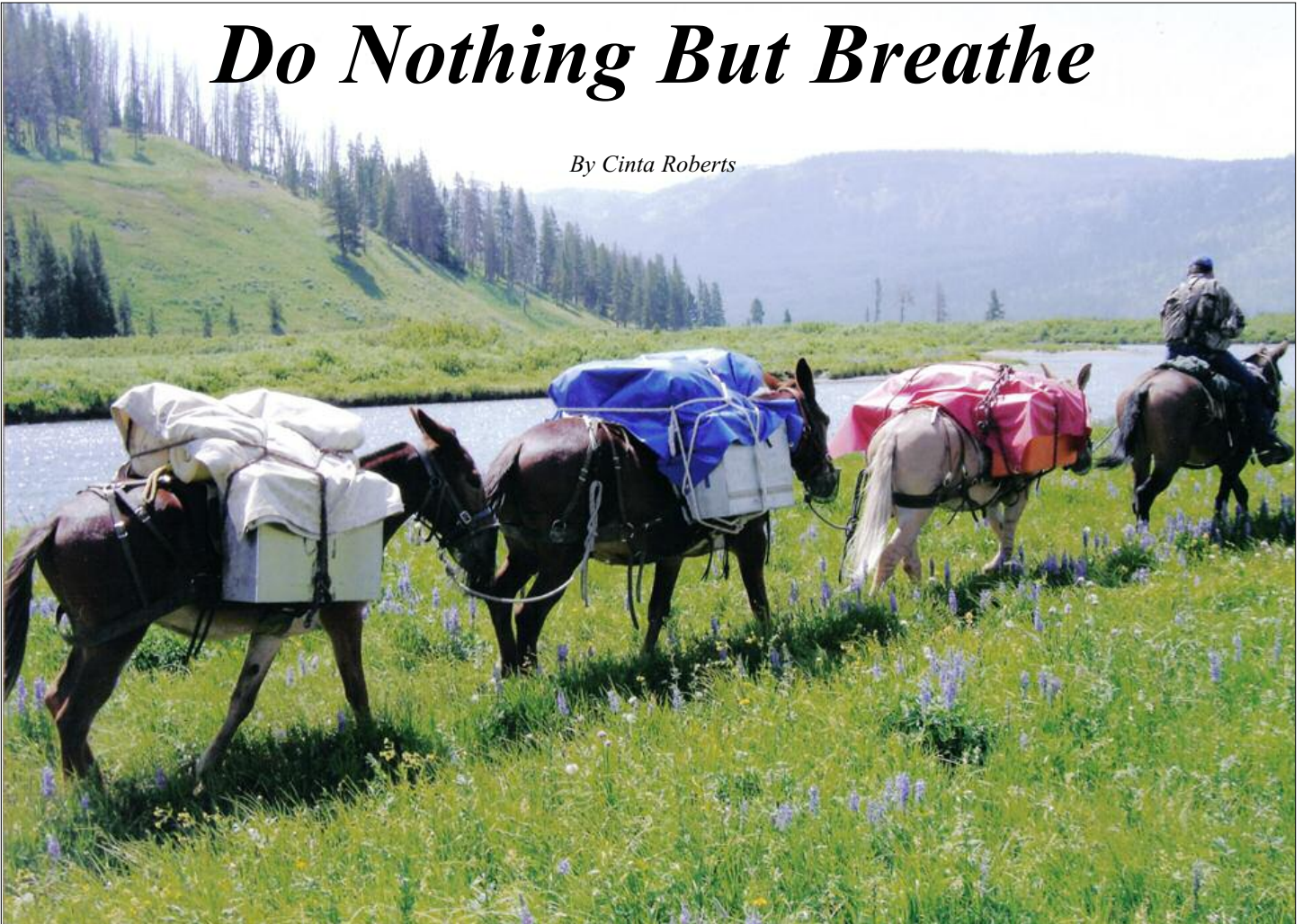


Do Nothing But Breathe

By Cinta Roberts



Robert Roberts on "Bruno" leading "Hondo", "Floyd" and "Rambo" along the Yellowstone River below Hawk's Rest July 2005

My husband Robert and I try to make a yearly pack trip into the backcountry every year. We have been going into the Wind River Range of Wyoming for the past few years and decided we wanted to visit one of our old haunts, the Yellowstone. Over the Fourth of July, 2005 we decided to pack in with six other friends and make a week of it. It was also going to be special because it was one of our first trips with all mules. We've had mules for the past eighteen years and we are now entirely mule owners. (Not counting the Mammoth jack and the breeding mare we own.)

Along for the trip were Robert and I (Cinta), Troy, Julie, Taylor and Ron Clawson, Doug Henry and Bob Coggins. We got off to a rocky start due to one of our friends horse trailers blowing a tire but thanks to the help of some great Wyoming people on a holiday weekend we were back on the road in no time. We arrived at the trailhead that is located in the spectacular Buffalo Valley, packed up

all our animals and finally headed down the trail to start our weeks worth of vacation.

From the trailhead the scenery is something many only see in pictures. Beginning at Turpin Meadows there is a small climb until you crest a hill. From there it is a long drop and breathtaking views looking down into the Buffalo River. Our ride was smooth and pleasant although for those not conditioned to ride fifteen to thirty miles in a day this trip is not for the tender rear-ended. This beautiful country makes us thankful that we live in such a great state that has such opportunities for the outdoorsman and protects this way of life. Unless you live here and experience everyday as country folk you will never realize how important our wilderness and forestlands are to us.

The scenery is hard to describe but it is some of the most beautiful country we have ever been in and we have ridden the Wyoming country all our lives. Quoting John Dofflemeyer; the cowboy poet,

"These are the places that ask nothing of us but to breathe." It is so green and lush and you will be awed by a cow elk and its calf one minute then be surprised by a bald eagle or grizzly bear the next. Much of this country is where the wildfires of 1988 burned through. Although it is still one of the most beautiful places you will ever see in your life it is a shame to see how much was let to burn and how little has grown back in seventeen years and that many of the burned areas have not grown back at all.

After a long day of riding we arrived at our halfway spot in a beautiful meadow up the North Fork of the Buffalo Valley. We unpacked and got all the animals settled then had an easy bite of cold fried chicken to eat around the campfire. We rolled our bags out under the stars and fell asleep to the trickle of the creek, the sound of mule hooves restless on the earth and the breathing of our best dog next to us. An alarm clock of coyotes reminded us in the night that we were in the out-

doors and that made us smile then snuggle back down into our bags for a perfect nights sleep.



Ron Clawson's position during a lot of our trip

Morning brought a heavy frost but sunshine to melt it away. Our coffee pot perked and shared its heavenly aroma with all that drew near. There is nothing like a good cup of coffee in the outdoors. Our mules grazed on tender dew dropped grass and got their fill before hitting the trail once more.

This day brought excitement for a few in our party. We were on the trail for about two hours when a grizzly bear was spotted. It was meandering along the creed bed far enough away to appreciate but close enough to appreciate also. It was the first time seeing a grizzly for some and it was a thrill for them as well as those that had experienced one before.

After a long days ride we finally made it to the Hawk's Rest Valley. It is about an hours ride across the valley to where we make camp. The spring runoff had just ended the week before and it was very boggy but so lush and green that you ride through in awe. The Yellowstone River runs through the valley making for great fishing and even swimming for the tough skinned. There is a large bridge that spans the river near where we camp and also a forest service cabin that is frequented by rangers all summer long.



Bob Coggins on top of Hawk's Rest looking into the Thorofare

In crossing the valley we always hope

that no one is camping in our favorite spot as it is a popular one and there are not many places to camp in that area with enough feed for horses. So when we get near the bridge it is always a relief to see the spot empty. This campsite is the exact one that my parents and I camped in over twenty-five years ago. It brings back a lot of fond memories and it's nice to know that we are making more with new friends and family.

We got our animals fed and set up on their high line then got to work setting up camp and pitching tents. With the great packing gear out there today you can set up a pretty convenient campsite. All I can say is kitchen panniers are a must for any cook packin' in. They keep your cooking items organized, dry and make for a great table. Another great item is the folding toilet seat. It comes in handy for the obvious reasons and I recall one trip that it was the only "pack chair" that we hauled in so there was many a fight for who claimed it first to sit around the campfire.

Over the next several days we spent our time casting our line or two in the Yellowstone or Thorofare Rivers, checking out Bridger Lake and riding to the top of Hawk's Rest for a 360 degree view over Hawk's Rest Valley and up and down the Thofofare River, where we could see the Thorofare cabin that's been there since 1955 and still stands as a home base for Wyoming Game and Fish employees during the summer. We were also able to fit in a nap or two and some

great meals like steaks, Dutch oven potatoes and peach cobbler and omelets. These days also found us feeling a little gritty after a few days on the trail so we all took our turns at braving the cold Yellowstone River in July for a mountain man's bath. A bit cold but well worth the brisk feeling of being mountain clean.

We met a few fellow packers during the week and learned a little from them about the country. One gal that backpacked all summer in the area was a fountain of knowledge about the country, wildlife and plant life. We also had a nice bunch of folks camped down the meadow from us that got a kick out of our most vocal mule, Floyd. He seemed to be saying hello to them every time they would pass by our camp on the way to the water hole.



Taylor, Julie and Troy Clawson at the parting of the waters

As with any trip into the wilderness the day to leave comes too soon. I guess that's what keeps us coming back to these places that own a little piece of our hearts. On our way out we stopped at the famed



Doug Henry and Dory getting a taste of the (Atlantic/Pacific) Two Ocean Pass water

Two Ocean Pass. This is where a small creek pours down off the mountain then splits to the east and west. One makes its way 3,488 miles to the Atlantic Ocean and the other 1,353 miles to the Pacific Ocean. It's quite amazing to think about. We decided to break off from the trail we came in on and take in some new country. Our day ended at Enos Lake where we made camp near another forest service cabin. This spot welcomed us with a bald eagle resting at the top of a big tree. It watched as we unpacked and settled in then it flew off into the still of the evening. It was amazing to cozy up near the fire, stare at the stars, breathe the fresh night air and settle into the warmth of a sleeping bag.

Morning once again brought us blue skies and warm sunshine. Thank goodness for a great guide/husband and the help of a map as the trail became a little confusing at times. A few of the signs had not been repaired in a while but we managed to make our way. The trail out became a little dusty and hot but nothing we couldn't handle. The view of the Tetons was as always, stunning and it gave clue that we were close to the end of our journey. The sight of the trailhead was bittersweet. It meant the end to our fantastic trip but it also meant a comfy seat for the ride home to a nice hot shower and great memories to last us until we make the journey again.

I just don't know how a vacation could get any better. We had fine weather all week long, great company, hard working, good-natured animals, mouthwatering

food and country like you could never imagine. Our fine string of mules made the entire trip with only one pack that had to be reset. They continue to amaze us with their steady gaits, fine attitudes and amazing ability. Without them the trip would just not be as enjoyable and we could not have the chance to "do nothing but breathe."