

Girls gone Wild-erness

aka

“Shit happens”

By: Laurie A. Bryan

Part of what makes a true adventure is the anticipation of the unknown. Many of my personal adventures over the years have been solo. I joined the SBBCHI as a way to meet folks with similar interests, learn new packing techniques, and to prevent my inner hermit from drifting further into isolation, or “hermittude,” as I call it. When Janine, member of the SBBCHI, presented the idea of an all-girls pack trip into the Frank Church wilderness, I hitched my RSVP to the pack-string with enthusiasm. I was excited at the opportunity to explore new country, learn more about proper packing techniques, and possibly get to know this group of backcountry horsewoman a little better. I was also nervous. Going it alone for so many years, I had no idea what to expect. I feared my inexperience in a group setting, combined with a green broke horse and a stubborn mule with an attitude, might negatively impact the other members.

My horse, Jack, has never ponied another horse. Although he is coming along well for a young horse, he does have his moments of explosive freak-outs. Annie, my newly acquired mule, is a unique creature in her own right and apparently feels I am descendent of the mule eater Indian tribe. I am certain she hates me.

The week before our trip, I “practiced” ponying Annie on Jack. It went better than I expected, but not well enough to alleviate concerns of wreaking havoc amongst the group. I expressed my concerns to our fearless leader and organizer of the trip, Janine. In her positive and encouraging manner, Janine assured me in so many words that no matter how experienced, no matter how many miles a horse and rider may have under them...shit happens. Armed with the knowledge of fair warning, I loaded up horse, mule, gear and dog, and pointed the F250 toward an unknown wilderness.

I met Janine in Horseshoe Bend early Friday morning. Up by 4:00AM, I would have plenty of time to catch the “hard to catch mule.” I actually read a book titled just that, “The Hard to Catch Mule.” It has not helped. I’m waiting for the sequel, “How to do anything, anything at ALL, with your hard to do everything mule.”

Janine was 30 minutes or so behind me. I bought a cup of tea and a sausage McGriddle and waited. It wasn’t that Janine was late, so much as that I am always early. My sense of direction is so poor that I am likely to make several “unplanned detours” before arriving at a desired location. I once drove from California to eastern Oregon... via Utah. I don’t like to think of it as being lost – but rather temporarily displaced.

Janine and I met the rest of our small party at the Elk Meadows trail-head. There are actually two Elk Meadows in this particular area. Had it been up to my navigational skills, there would have been a third.

Janine on the other hand, brought us directly to the correct Elk Meadows. Four other ladies would be joining us: Ellen and Lou Ann, also from the BCH, and two teenage girls, Jessica and Alisha.

Ellen, being an experienced packer, darted around from pack animal to pack animal, tacking them up and making adjustments as needed. I admired her adeptness and energy; especially when it came time to pack Annie. Her energy and enthusiasm was appreciated and necessary, considering that, besides Janine, who had her hands full – Ellen was the only other one that knew what the hell she was doing. Appreciated by everyone that is, except Annie. Ellen's boisterous skill was met by one wide-eyed and freaked out mule. With Ellen on one side, me on the other and Alisha standing behind her, pulling on her tail, for whatever reason... Annie looked like a caged, wild animal ready to blow. It was here that I learned that Annie will not kick – no matter who's standing behind her, pulling on her tail. Ellen paid no attention to Annie's skittish behavior as she skillfully tossed on packs secured by various ropes and knots that I tried in vain to commit to memory.

Packed and mounted, it was time to head out. Lou Ann graciously agreed to pony Annie on her big bay gelding, also named Jack. The big bay was either proud cut or cut late. Still stud'ish, he was not happy towing a barren molly. He wanted to be near his mare, a pretty, yellow-gold palomino named Brandy, ridden by Jessica. Annie quickly learned to stay just out of striking distance of his hind feet.

Ellen rode a sorrel named Pecos, and towed Tucker, a grey gelding. Both horses reflected the skill and experience of their rider. Alisha rode a little chestnut Paso Fino named Stori. The gaited little Paso Fino pranced and fidgeted against the slower pace of the others. Several times Stori was pulled to the ground as Alisha attempted to circle the horse to slow him down. When given his head and the opportunity to fall into his natural gate, the little gelding looked as if he would be a pleasure to ride.

Jack and I stayed far to the back of the train in hopes that everyone would calm down once we got lined out. Occasionally, Annie would glance back at us, possibly confused at this unfamiliar arrangement. Jack was her horse – later that weekend, I would finally become her human.

The ride in remained, for the most part, uneventful. I snapped a few pictures and took in the beauty of this country. It wasn't far up the trail when we passed the wilderness boundary sign, "Franck Church River of No Return." Really?" "Exactly who didn't return and why?" Somebody might have warned me it was called, "The River of No Return?" I can't imagine it came by that name benignly. I tried to convince myself that it was the river itself that had no return...and not some poor soul who may have given it such a name due to their untimely demise.

The trail meandered gently through meadows, bog and low hills covered in timber. A fire had rendered large swathes of forest in dead-wood. Thousands of charred, grey and black snags stood fragile in this swath of destruction.

Not more than two hours brought us to our designated camping area. A cool, clear stream separated the meadow from the tree line. We crossed the creek and set up camp just inside the tree-line. With horses hobbled, deft hands began to unpack and setup camp. I was amazed at how much gear was being setup for our convenience. Chairs, cots, and roomy tents soon made up the furnishing of our temporary

wilderness home. Janine packed in most of the group items, such as the food, stove and various kitchen supplies. She had neatly organized and packaged the meals in a manner that would make it easier to prepare. Each of us unpacked and setup our personal gear. More accustomed to packing lighter, I pitched my tiny bivy-tent, tossed in the mummy bag and placed my anodized aluminum Dutch oven set with the common kitchen gear. We would be glad later that I had brought it.

Just before dinner, we noticed that Two Ton and Bubba, Janine's animals, had crossed the creek and were looking longingly toward home. Worried that her stock may end up back at the trailer a bit too early, Janine jumped on Lou Ann's bay gelding bareback and headed after them. I had already tossed aside my boots and waded across the creek. I captured Bubba while Janine went after Two Ton. About that time, the big bay noticed his mare was across the creek from him and began to dance around. Janine slid off and opted to lead him across the creek. The impact of sliding to the ground had re-injured an already bad leg. I was already across the creek with Bubba when Jessica came to assist Janine. Thinking it would be easier to ride across the creek – Jessica hoisted her back on the gelding. I didn't see what happened, but apparently the big gelding lunged to get back to his mare, throwing Janine to the ground, knocking the wind out of her and bruising her ribs. Although our fearless leader assured us she was fine, the pain reflected in steel blue-grey eyes beheld a different story.

I built a fire while Jessica and Alisha gathered firewood. Ellen continued to organize, because damn it, that is what she does. Lou Ann tended to various tasks and volunteered to setup Janine's tent while Janine whipped up what she called "Shepherd's Pie." The pie consisted of mashed potatoes, green-beans and various dehydrated spices. When Janine asked who wanted ice cream for dessert, I expected her to pull out a space-aged cooler filled with dry-ice. Instead, ice-cream was served in the form of a small brick of dehydrated, unidentifiable substance (something I have no idea what) with a chalk like consistency. I loved it, and I don't really like ice-cream. It sort of felt like something the astronauts would have eaten.

After dinner, Ellen instructed us on low-impact camping and proper toilet techniques. A hole was dug and placed over it was a plastic toilet ring. This was to be the common "facilities." I grabbed my camp shovel and headed toward a well placed bush. This whole group camping thing is all good – but some things a girl just doesn't want to share.

Later that night, the six of us gathered around the fire, told stories and drank a little wine. I prepared a cup of tea for myself – after all, everyone knows mule eater Indians cannot drink wine.

Morning came and with it, the chill of first dawn. If I can do anything well, it's light a campfire. I took it upon myself as designated keeper of the fire. I rose each morning early enough to have a fire blazing before the others woke. Breakfast consisted of scrambled eggs and sausage.

Ellen had planned a day ride into Bernard Lake. Janine, still sore and shaken from last night's ordeal, would remain at camp. In her quite, calm humor, she assured us she would be fine and to not think of her as she stayed back in camp, wrapped in the comfort of solitude and a good book. I'm pretty sure there might be a little wine involved in there as well.

Saddled up, Ellen, Lou Ann, Jessica, Alisha and I, bode Janine farewell and headed toward Bernard Lake. I decided to not try and lead Annie. I would let her follow along at liberty. It worked out better than I hoped. Annie trod silently behind Jack, only occasionally stepping off trail in search of a “better way.” If the trail got too bad, Annie would get in front of Jack and sort of lead us through an easier route. Conscious of Lou Ann’s gelding, she kept an adequate cushion between us and the bay’s hind-end.

Much of the trail was obliterated by dead-fall and bog. Several times Ellen was forced to refer to her GPS. There were a few areas that were a little touch and go; but nothing our skilled navigator could not see us safely across.

A couple hours into the ride and our second mishap would occur. The trail ascended through pines and dead-fall. Ellen remained in the lead followed by Jessica on the palomino mare and Alisha on the little Paso Fino. Lou Ann followed Alisha, and I took up the rear on Jack with Annie close behind. Brandy, the palomino mare, took exception to Stori’s closeness and let out a swift kick. The punch grazed the little chestnut’s shoulder and landed squarely on Alisha’s left shin. Profanity, of which the likes mother-nature and all the creatures of the forest had never heard, spewed from the young girl’s mouth as she clutched her stricken leg in pain. Everyone quickly dismounted, secured their animals and surrounded the fallen soldier. Ellen retrieved the first aid kit and went to work applying Neosporin and gauze. I grabbed for my roll of purple Vet Wrap and commenced to secure the dressing. My mom, being a huge proponent of Vet Wrap and witch hazel – would have been proud. Alisha’s leg was cut and swollen, but not broken. We would not be able to practice our litter-making skills today. I have to shamefully admit, I was a bit disappointed. Seriously though, as I glanced around looking for a good place for Life-Flight to land, I thanked God we did not need it and that Alisha was not seriously injured. I offered to escort her back to camp, but true to cowgirl fashion, she refused and said she was going on to the lake with the rest of us. Jessica, offering comfort to her young friend broke down in tears. Alisha assured her that it was not her fault and, as Janine would attest, “shit happens.”

We arrived at Bernard Lake without further mishap. Ellen laid out a lunch of summer sausage, some cool little cheese things called Mad Cow – or something along those lines – and crackers. I opened a can of Beanie Weenie’s that I shared with my dog, Shade.

The return trip to camp proved to be a unique experience for all of us. I have spent a lot of time in the mountains and deserts. While nobody can ever experience all that mother-nature can conjure up, I figured there wasn’t much that would surprise me, even if I hadn’t experience it directly. I was wrong. Our little party rode back in pretty much the same formation: Ellen in the lead, followed by Jessica, Alisha, Lou Ann and myself. I kept Jack and Annie a good 50 yards behind. This gave me not only a good perspective to take pictures, but was an excellent strategic position to protect the group from cougars and serial killers.

The trail wound through the center of a huge swath of dead-wood. A fire had carved a path of charred devastation for many miles. When I first heard it, I thought it was thunder. I looked behind me to find that the sky was gray, but didn’t exactly look like a sky of pending storm. It had a strange, surreal look. Again, the eerie sound loomed in the distance; similar to thunder, but not as rolling and booming as

thunder sounds. It sounded like a cross between lightning striking and high powered rifle shots. I yelled ahead to Lou Ann, "do you hear that?" "Is that thunder?" Lou Ann looked around and glanced at the sky and back at me, "must be a storm coming." The sound came again – closer this time. Jack began to dance nervously. I turned and faced the oncoming sound. It was like nothing I had ever heard and I will never forget that sound as long as I live. It came closer and closer. Then it hit me. It was not thunder. It was the trees – the sound was the cracking of the trees in the wind. I yelled as loud as I could, "We have to get out of here NOW!" but it was too late. The deafening wind drowned out my already weak voice. I lost track of everyone. I could not tell if they were out of danger or in the middle of it. All I knew was Jack, Annie and I was in a world of hurt. I could barely control Jack. I was sure he would buck me off so I slid down and grabbed hold of his lead. It was a cluster of chaos. I darted in one direction and a tree blew over a mere few feet from me, blocking my path. I whirled to run the other way and another tree blew over and blocked that exit. I heard Alisha yell – "WATCH OUT FOR FALLING TREES!" I prayed the girls were through the worst of it. In all the confusion I totally lost my bearings and was uncertain which way to run for a clearing. It was then I saw a flash of black. It was Annie. The little mule very calmly trotted up next to Jack – head down and ears facing backwards, she veered off with a glance toward us as if to say, "Follow me." I led Jack as we trailed after Annie to a clearing and to safety. You could still hear the trees falling – the wind was howling and one of the girls was screaming. It was Jessica. She sat on the ground, her head in her arms, rocking back and forth. I thought she must have been terrified. I did not know that she had dislocated her leg when bailing off her horse. I heard Ellen yell, "We need to stick together...don't separate!" Ellen, Lou Ann and Alisha gathered around Jessica as she bravely popped the leg back in place. I crouched between Jack and Annie – I could not accept that we were out of danger and found comfort in the closeness of my horse and mule. I hugged Annie and thanked her over and over for leading us out of hell.

After the wind died, we again took to the trail. Once in the meadow and out of danger, the sounds of hell came once more. Jack whirled to confront the evil, but to my surprise, and relief, did not take to bucking. I realized then that through the whole chaotic ordeal, he did not once explode and try to buck me off. Sure, he was scared – what animal wouldn't be – but he did not buck. I had gained back a lot of the confidence I had lost a year earlier in my ability to control him. As he danced nervously to the beat of falling trees and howling wind, the lead-rope fell to the ground. I reached down to retrieve it when Jack's head swung back and collided with the side of my own head. The impact threw me back and almost knocked me out of the saddle. Still well behind the group, I worried I might pass out and topple off my horse. Luckily, the stars quickly cleared and the ringing subsided. I touched my swollen cheek and chuckled at the thought that I may have cheated death from trees falling on my head, only to be knocked unconscious by my own horse.

Back at camp, we found that the micro-burst had passed through our camp as well. Janine had taken cover in her tent. Ellen and Lou Ann's tent had blown over and was sitting on its top. We recalled our adventure to Janine while Ellen changed Alisha's blood-soaked bandage. Lou Ann made a comment that she had forgotten to French-braid my hair before we left. I reached up and discovered I had lost my hat. I envisioned it had become part of the dead-fall scenery and was thankful my head was not still in it. Nobody seemed terribly excited to go back for it.

Our last super in camp may have been a challenge had I not brought my Dutch oven. We had run out of propane on the first day. Alisha and I prepared the Chili Janine had brought for dinner. Twice baked potatoes warmed in a bed of coals as the spicy aroma of Chili simmered in the aluminum DO.

Gathered once more around the campfire, the girls chatted and reminisced over the day's events. While no longer considered a card carrying member of the mule eater tribe, I still seldom drink wine and opted to turn in early. Janine, probably in much more pain than she let on, also turned in early.

I snuggled into my sleeping bag to the sounds of those remaining around the campfire. More stories were told, and life in general was contemplated and perceived through the eyes of two very wise and worldly teenage girls. Alisha began to sing; her voice possessed a pleasant, melodic quality. Occasionally Jessica would chime in with an equally pleasing sound. This unexpected bedtime entertainment might have lulled me to sleep had it not been for the second act to follow: "The Ellen and Lou Ann comedy team."

The cool night air carried the rustling sounds of bedtime preparation as Ellen and Lou Ann settled into their tent for the night. Lou Ann is one of the most unintentionally funny people you will meet. Normally quiet and somewhat mild-mannered, she seems to have a natural talent for interjecting humor with perfect timing. "Ellen, I think we are sinking toward the center. Why are we are sinking toward the center?" "We aren't sinking to the center Lou Ann." "Yes we are Ellen, we must be in valley or something. Are we in a valley Ellen?" "Yes Lou Ann, you are sleeping in a valley. Go to sleep. Oh, and Lou Ann, don't reach for your camera bag or your backpack in your sleep." "Why not Ellen?" "Because, I laid my gun on them." "You what? You laid your gun on my bags? OMG, it's pointing at my head! Ellen, why is your gun pointing at my head? I thought I was your best friend, Ellen.." "You are my best friend Lou Ann." "Is it loaded Ellen?" "Yes Lou Ann, it's loaded." "Will it go off Ellen?" "Only if I pull the trigger Lou Ann." "Goodnight Ellen..." "Goodnight Lou Ann."

Morning came again much too soon. We hustled around, repacked our gear and practiced leave-no-trace camping techniques by spreading and covering mounds of horse poop. I felt more confident in my packing abilities and required Ellen's help only to attach the sling ropes. With renewed confidence in Annie, I tied her lead onto the sawbuck and let her follow at liberty.

We crossed the creek and headed back toward the trailhead. The group going out did not exactly resemble the same group that had come in just three short days before. Brandy and Stori no longer pranced and fidgeted. The bay gelding seemed content with his mare traveling ahead of him. Jack, normally chary and hard to hold when going down-hill, allowed me to drop the reins and snap pictures as he kept a steady, calm pace. Annie following close behind, keeping us lined out and moving in the right direction.

We had lunch back at the trailers. Janine and I split the last two unidentifiable bricks of ice-cream. Unable to convince anyone to go back with me to find my hat, we loaded up and pointed toward home. Ellen suggested we stop at Kirkland's hot springs on the way home. Soaking in the healing waters was indeed heaven on earth. I could feel the water sooth away every cut, scrape and bruise on my body. As I lay soaking in the hot springs, I reflected back on our journey and what I had gained from it. I gained a

little knowledge of packing, tying sling ropes and weight balance. I discovered that if you want to be an aspiring horse whisperer, you must first learn to stop shouting. I learned much about human interaction, both with each other, as well as with their animal counterparts. Mostly, I learned that no matter how experienced or prepared one might be, "shit happens."

Pictures of the trip

<https://picasaweb.google.com/108394335163429684873/GirlsGoneWildErness#>

The End