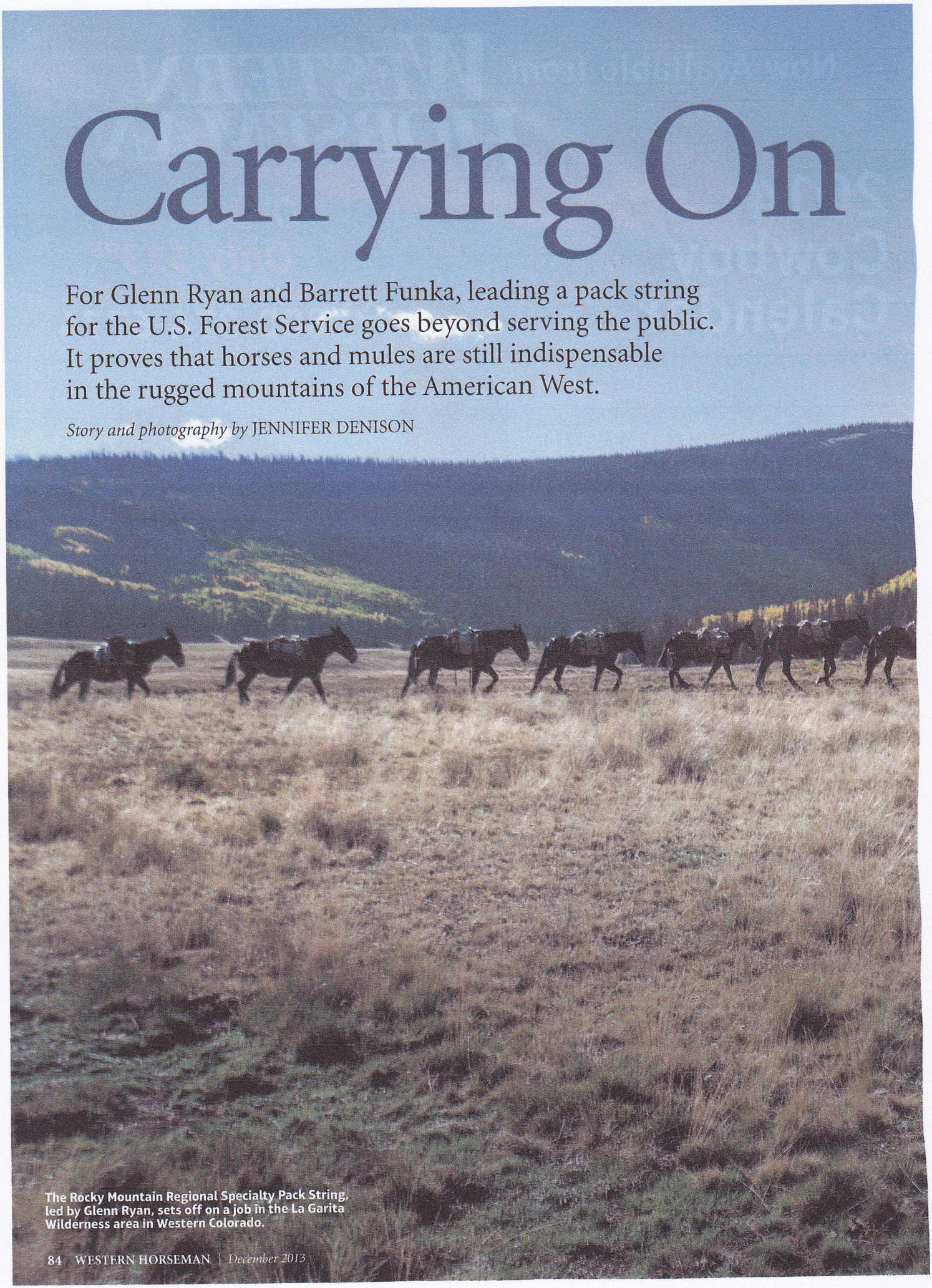
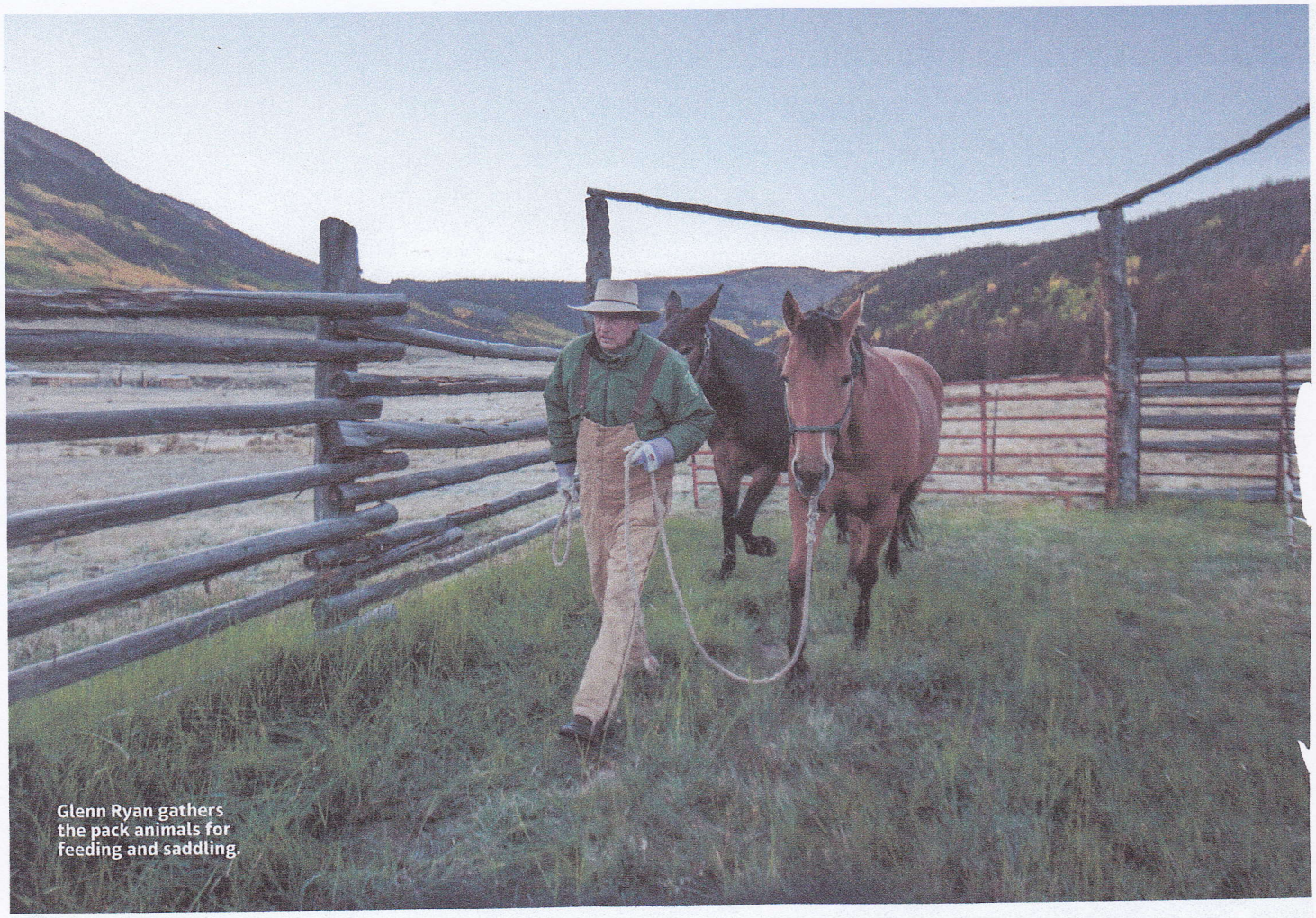
Carrying On

For Glenn Ryan and Barrett Funka, leading a pack string for the U.S. Forest Service goes beyond serving the public. It proves that horses and mules are still indispensable in the rugged mountains of the American West.

Story and photography by JENNIFER DENISON



The Rocky Mountain Regional Specialty Pack String, led by Glenn Ryan, sets off on a job in the La Garita Wilderness area in Western Colorado.



Glenn Ryan gathers the pack animals for feeding and saddling.

A crudely maintained mountain road, passing over protruding rocks, across flooded bridges and through thick mud, is not the best route for any vehicle, let alone a semi pulling a 27-foot loaded stock trailer. But for Glenn Ryan, lead packer for the United States Forest Service's Rocky Mountain Regional Specialty Pack String, driving in such conditions is inevitable and part of his regular commute to job sites within his region's forests and public lands.

Barrett Funka learned to pack in Montana's Bob Marshall Wilderness with Decker pack saddles, used for their versatility and the way they distribute a load.

Funka demonstrates how he ties a cinch knot on a Decker pack saddle. Each Decker is fitted to a specific animal.

Last September, Ryan received a job packing out supplies for a trail crew that had spent the summer building a sustainable trail to the summit of San Luis Peak, one of Colorado's 14,000-foot mountains, located in the La Garita Wilderness Area southwest of Gunnison. Creeping along at a maximum of 10 miles per hour, Ryan cautiously made the 30-mile trek off the main road toward a private hunting camp where he planned to base the two- to three-day operation. What is normally about a 45-minute trip in a pickup took Ryan and his rig nearly three hours, and then complications arose.

Less than three miles from the camp, the trailer rolled over a soft shoulder on a 20-foot section of tire-sucking mud and sank axle-deep on the right side. Ryan radioed his assistant packer

for the season, Barrett Funka, who was following in the distance with another loaded rig, to park and come help immediately. The priority was getting the half-dozen saddle horses and pack mules out of the trailer safely.

Despite the emotional tension and tilted trailer, the animals calmly unloaded as if nothing was awry. Funka hobbled the mares and placed a bell on each of them to track their location as they grazed in a lush meadow. The mules were loose, but stayed near the lead mare.

After much shoveling, and wedging the rubber trailer mats and small rocks under the semi's rear tires for traction, Ryan made two attempts to drive the rig out of the mud and onto dry road, but to no avail. The third time he pressed the accelerator, however, the tread on the spinning, mud-flinging tires grabbed the mats, and the rig rolled out of the ditch. With the sun setting behind the mountains, there was no point in attempting to get the second rig across the bog, so the packers, with assistance from two trail-crew members who were following in a pickup, strung a high-line between trees,

Ryan brands his animals with a U.S. brand and an identification number.

secured nine mules and three horses to it, and set up camp for the night. Using the trail crew's satellite phone, Ryan called the district forest service office and coordinated getting a load of gravel and a backhoe delivered to the site the next morning so he could get both rigs to camp.

"This is only the second time I've been stuck," Ryan says. "I was told the road was passable, but snowfall from the night before melted, and a portion of the road had been reconstructed. But [the edge of the road] was not compacted enough [to support the trailer]."

If Ryan was sweating the situation it did not show. Having spent most of his life working for the U.S. Forest Service or National Park Service, dealing with the safety of people and pack animals in remote areas throughout the West, Ryan has developed a confidence and calmness that comes from experience, and the flexibility in schedule to delay operations until they can be executed safely.

MAN ON A MISSION

One of only two regional pack strings in the United States, the Rocky Mountain Regional Specialty Pack String was established by the U.S. Forest Service in 1990 to provide packing services for land-management agencies and districts that do not have the equipment, livestock or knowledgeable staff to complete backcountry improvement projects where mechanical equipment is either restricted or prohibited. It helps on projects in Colorado, Kansas, Nebraska, South Dakota and Wyoming. The northern region, encompassing Idaho, Montana and North Dakota, is handled by the Ninemile Pack String, based in Missoula, Montana.

The Rocky Mountain pack string was headquartered in Cody, Wyoming, until 1992, when it was moved to a more centrally located 1,000-acre ranch in Shawnee, Colorado, which the Forest Service had bought in 1977. Ryan has been the lead packer there for 10 years.

Raised riding hunter-jumpers in New York, Ryan headed west at age 19 and worked on ranches and for land-management agencies throughout the West. His interest in managing livestock, preserving public lands and working with the public made him a perfect fit for his current position.

"We have a three-pronged mission: To work with other groups to manage and maintain wilderness and backcountry areas using a traditional pack string; to educate employees and the public on minimum-impact recreational principles, and stock-handling and packing skills through presentations and clinics; and to be ambassadors for the history and legacy of the Forest Service and its pack string at parades, expos and other public appearances," he explains.

The son of a forester, 26-year-old Funka and his two sisters were raised on his family's farm, a logging operation and hardwood mill in Pennsylvania. When he graduated from high school, he headed to Missoula to attend the University of Montana and to learn about packing in the Bob Marshall Wilderness. He packed for Spotted Bear Ranch in the Bob Marshall for four years, and then worked for Hidden Creek Outfitters in Cody, Wyoming, for three years.

Like most packers, Funka is a seasonal employee. During the off-season, he has worked construction and masonry jobs, guided fishermen, trained colts and helped his father care for a ranch in Saratoga, Wyoming.

STOCK THAT SERVE

According to Ryan's calculations, Forest Service divisions have an estimated 1,100 head of horses and mules being used for trail work, range management and other projects on public lands, while the Bureau of Land Management and the National Park Service have approximately 1,000 animals.

Funding for the regional pack string and its services comes from the regional Forest Service budget, which allows viable organizations doing improvements on public lands to receive pack-string services at no charge. Ryan has worked with such organizations as the Backcountry Horsemen of America, the Colorado Fourteeners Initiative, the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation and the Sierra Club.

"Some of the things we do pack are tons of gravel for trail work, building and fencing materials, culverts for drainage, scientific equipment, and food and camping supplies for volunteers working on improvement projects," Ryan explains. "Most of the projects are done on Forest Service land, but we have done some work for the National Park Service."

When Ryan started his job, he was in charge of buying new pack animals. While he wanted a uniform string of black mules that would show well at public appearances, disposition was his primary criterion.

"Disposition is important for what these mules do," he says. "They have to be surefooted and able to haul heavy loads in rough country, and then go to a parade or

Ryan and Funka secure a load onto a pack mule. Balance in size and weight are important factors when placing a load on an animal's back to ensure it travels securely and comfortably.

expo where there will be crowds of 50 to 60 people surrounding them. They must be able to work as a team, but also think for themselves."

Through purchases made from private owners and one donation, Ryan put together his current string of nine mules and three light-bay saddle horses. Though they aren't as uniform in size and color as Ryan would like, he trusts them and has established a respectful bond with them. He simply has to shake a grain bucket and yell, "Yo mule," and they come running up to him. They also respond to their names.

"Not everyone believes in giving treats, but I have to be out in the open with these animals, so they get a treat when they come in to be caught, when I put on their halters and when they load into the trailer," he says.

Because Ryan is selective in the stock he buys for the program, the animals require only a little round pen work before they are ready to go into the string.

"I like to buy mules about 3 years old, so I can start them how I want," he says. "I sack them out, hobble them, brush them, and teach them to stand tied and to ground-tie," he says. "Then I make sure they can be saddled and will tolerate ropes around their legs and under their tails.

"People think I'm a good mule trainer, but I'm actually a fraud. I just buy good mules [that are easy to train]."

Pretty much a self-taught packer, Ryan can tie an assortment of knots, such as a double-diamond and barrel hitch. But his primary emphasis is developing good horsemanship skills, which also includes working with mules, to enable him and the packers he trains to safely get from point A to point B.

Ryan rides only mares, because the mules are more apt to lock onto and follow a mare. His main mount is Sly Fancy Cat, a granddaughter of High Brow Cat that he also has shown in ranch versatility and ranch roping. His wife, Alice, who has volunteered with the pack string for six years, rides "Finnigan," a halter-bred Paint Horse. They also have two other stock horses, Quincy and Leah.

Ryan is a student of traditional California-style horsemanship. All of the horses on the ranch are ridden in slick-fork saddles and rawhide hackamores with mecates.

"I prefer hackamores to bits because I don't have to worry about pulling on my horse's mouth when I'm leading the pack string and turning around a lot," he says.

On other outfits, Ryan spent years packing with sawbuck and modified Decker pack saddles. A sawbuck, which is commonly used to haul panniers and light loads in the Southwest, is a simple wooden tree with side bars that rest against the horse's ribs and have a crossed wooden fork on each end. A Decker, developed in the Northwest, does not have wooden forks, and instead has metal D rings on the front and back. A wooden panel fits along the horse's rib cage to distribute the load evenly on the animal, and the tree can be adjusted in many ways to fit the animal and load. The modified Decker is similar but has different-shaped D rings that prevent panniers from slipping.

Now, Ryan uses strictly Deckers.

"I think [the Decker] is more humane for the animal, is easier to adjust, and distributes the weight of a load more evenly on the animal," Ryan explains. "A Decker is also more versatile and efficient. You can carry panniers or manties, and you can have two people loading the animal at once."

Each pack animal in the string has a designated and individually adjusted saddle and lined canvas pad, and leather halter with chain lead. The tack is regularly cleaned and oiled to make it last.

"There are a lot of things in packing I can't control," Ryan says. "But the condition of my tack is one thing I can."

BACK AT CAMP

Just before dawn, Ryan and Funka headed to the corral where they had put the stock for the night when they arrived in camp. They each grabbed a halter and lead that had been neatly placed in a row on a fence rail, and caught the animal whose name is engraved on a metal plate on the halter's cheekpiece. Becky, Bruce, Jimmy, Joey, Lena, Patty, Rory and Skid were the mules on the roster for the day. The mules and saddle horses were then tied to the trailer,

where they received their morning ration of senior complete feed after grazing on certified weed-free grass hay all night.

"We like to give them a complete feed three times a day if we can make it back to the trailer at noon," Ryan explains. "Most of the time they get two scoops [about four pounds] morning and night.

"Most people riding in the backcountry know about certified weed-free hay, but they don't always realize that not all grain or supplements are certified weed free. We feed Purina Equine Senior and it is [weed-free], as are steamed oats."

While the animals ate, the packers groomed and then saddled them. It can take more than an hour to get a dozen animals ready to go.

"People have the perception that our job is a nice trail ride every day," Ryan says. "They don't realize that it sometimes requires driving in over an hour, unloading the animals, brushing them and saddling them before we can even start."

Packers also ride in all weather conditions, and often set out at dawn and return after dark. Trail conditions vary from gradual inclines on well-groomed trails, such as the trail through the La Garita Wilderness, to steep, slippery, narrow slopes.

When the packers reached the San Luis trailhead, the trail crew had already divided their supplies into equal loads of between 60 and 80 pounds each. Trail crews that have not worked with packers do not usually know how to prepare their loads, so the task becomes the responsibility of the packers.

"When you pack, you have to think in pairs," Funka explains. "You want loads of equal weight, shape and size on each side of the animal."

The packers pulled out the green manties and ropes and began wrapping the loads in the canvas covers as intricately and as tightly as wrapping a Christmas gift. Then they secured the manties with a rope tied in a series of tight slipknots. From there, they each hoisted a load onto each side of the pack saddle and secured them with a box, barrel or double-diamond hitch. Garbage-bag-wrapped buckets of waste, propane bottles and other items fit nicely in panniers.

When Ryan packed in supplies for the crew in June, he had more than 20 loads. Packing the crew out required only 17 loads, or two trips in and out.

As the packers made the seven-mile ride back to camp (one of the shorter treks they made this year) with the loaded pack string, they frequently looked back at their animals, making sure they were following in a line and that the loads had not shifted.

Unlike the romantic photographs of pack strings in wide open meadows, Ryan pointed out that the reality is that they are usually negotiating tight timber trails.

They arrived at camp at dusk, unpacked the animals and placed the loads near the crew's trailer to be hauled off. Then they unsaddled the animals, turned them out into the corral and fed them. It is a routine they have down to an art, and they enjoy it.

"It's hard to explain why I like it," Funka says. "It has to do with caring for the animals and being in the backcountry. Packers are traditionally known for being

grumpy, so people are always surprised that we like what we do."

ON THE ROAD

From June to September, the pack string works hard on regional projects, staying on the road two to four weeks at a time. No job is too little or too large, and Ryan has yet to refuse any offer.

"A lot of people can't comprehend what we do. We're always going someplace different," he says. "Some jobs last a day, others a week. We may come out from a job on a Friday night, drive most of the night to get to another place, and then get up at 5 a.m. and groom the horses for a parade. It's constantly a different experience."

Ryan and his string attend up to 10 parades and horse expos each year, educating the public on the Forest Service and the 193 million acres of public land in the United States.

"I always ask the crowd why they think the Forest Service uses pack mules instead of horses," Ryan says. "I usually get responses like mules are more surefooted and intelligent than horses. But really it's because, according to government packing regulations from the 1960s, beer, wine and spirits can't be carried by pack horses. It's a joke, because the rule also implies mules, but it's a good way to get the crowd laughing."

In November, Ryan hauls the animals to Montrose, Colorado, where they winter on private pasture until spring. Then around March he hauls them back to the Shawnee ranch and begins shaping them up for packing clinics for employees of land-management agencies.

"At one time the Forest Service looked to hire young men who could ride, pack and shoot," Funka says. "Times have changed, and now most employees don't have horse or packing experience, and they don't understand the importance of using pack animals in areas that prohibit motorized vehicles, such as ATVs and helicopters."

With budget cuts and fewer people interested in learning packing and the tradition behind it, Ryan works year-round lining up work and public appearances to keep the pack string a viable operation. From 2004 to 2011, the string spent an average of 60 percent of its time on projects, carrying approximately 3,900 mule loads of materials and equipment for 93 projects over a span of 435 days. Ryan also spent about 35 percent of his time giving speeches to college students and staff about leave-no-trace methods, packing and stock handling. The remainder of the time, Ryan taught one- to five-day training courses to agency personnel and volunteers.

Unlike most Forest Service employees his age, it's a role Funka would one day like to assume or create in another region or district.

"Competition for jobs is fierce, because there aren't that many available," he says. "I would like to stay involved with forestry, as long as caring for stock is part of it. It's just something guys like Glenn and I were born to do. I don't consider us cowboys, because we don't gather and rope cattle. We're packers, through and through."

JENNIFER DENISON is senior editor at *Western Horseman*. Send comments on this story to edit@westernhorseman.com.