

Back Country Horsemen of America

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Looking Back

By Rick Adair of Shoshone Back Country Horsemen, Wyoming



If Not Your BCHA, Then Who?

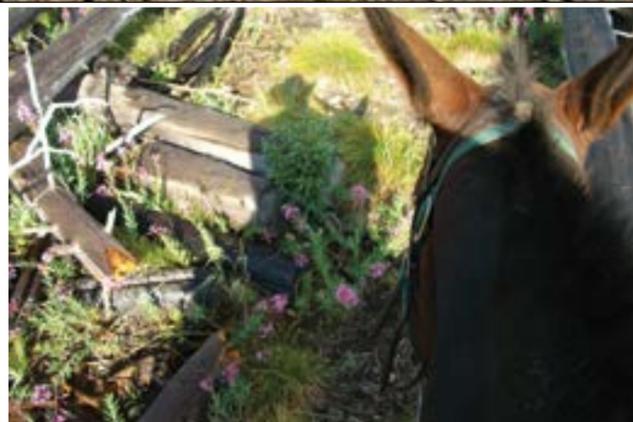
With the beckoning calls going out to help maintain our public lands, the question arises, if we are not able to respond, will those calls go unheeded. Like the proverbial tree falling in the forest and no one is there to hear it, does it still make a noise when it falls? Will there be anybody there to answer the call for help? Our BCHA is at the forefront of assisting in keeping the trails open and the trailhead facilities operational.

A similar request is made yearly to the Shoshone Back Country Horsemen (SBCH) here in North West Wyoming. Our chapter has a long-standing agreement to assist the Shoshone National Forest (SNF) management team in cleaning trails that are in bad shape or

they do not have an adequate budget in place to hire a commercial trail cleaning team. The SNF is recognized as the first national forest in the US and still primarily a horse and foot travel forest.

With this season almost over, our SBCH chapter has already cleaned over 114 miles of trail during 2017. This is a contribution of 1,526 hours, 19,046 miles on vehicles and 255 stock days. In "looking back" at one of our recent trail clearings that the SNF had asked SBCH to clean this year, the trail came with an enduring history. Native American Indians traveled the corridor to their hunting grounds long before our history ever started. Renowned scout, bison hunter, and entertainer Buffalo Bill Cody established his tour-

Top: "Looking Back" is Bob Yeats, SBCH member as he summited Crow Creek Pass. The prominent peak in the background is Bill Cody Peak, halfway point in the trail cleaning venture. Inset photo is a BCHA method of taking a selfie. Thoughts were: something old, something new, me, just passing through, leaving no trace.



ist/hunting lodge on the confluence of the Middle Fork and North Fork of the Shoshone River approximately five miles from the east entrance of Yellowstone National Park.

Crow Creek is located a mile and one half north of Bill Cody's lodge at Pahaska Teepee. Crow Creek Trail is within the North Absaroka Wilderness area and is a hand tool only maintained trail. The trail is approximately 11 miles in length. It starts on the North Fork of the Shoshone River at an ele-

vation of 6,500 feet, following along Crow Creek, climbing to the summit of Crow Creek Pass at 10,500 feet. The vista to the west is a sizeable portion of Yellowstone National Park with views on a clear day extending to the Grand Teton mountain range. To the east is the Absaroka Mountains with prominent peaks appropriately named like Silver Tip and Bill Cody. There are a number of states smaller than the area that can be viewed from the majestic perch going over Crow Creek Pass.

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Back Country Horsemen of America
59 Rainbow Road
East Granby, CT 06026

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59 Rainbow Road
East Granby, CT 06026
(888) 893-5161

Interested in Joining?

Contact BCHA or the organization nearest you for more information.

- National:**
BCH of America
Erica Fearn
59 Rainbow Road
East Granby, CT 06026
(888) 893-5161
FAX (360) 832-1564
efearn@bcha.org
www.bcha.org
- State Organizations:**
BCH of Alabama
1404 Arkadelphia Road
Warrior, AL 35180
(205) 936-9043
chad.bowman@hatchmott.com
backcountryhorsemenal.com
- BCH of Alaska
PO Box 3148
Palmer AK 99645
(907) 360-0480
kaylene.johnson@gmail.com
- Arkansas Back Country Horsemen
3566 Highway 397 S.
Harrison, AR 72601
(719) 337-4474
Jacque.alexander@arkansas.gov
- BCH of Arizona
PO Box 4486
Chino Valley AZ 86323
(928) 445-3809
www.bchaz.org
- BCH of California
13061 Rosedale Highway
Ste G Box 217
Bakersfield CA 93314
www.bchcalifornia.org
- BCH of Colorado
34872 Highway 184
Mancos, CO 81328
www.bchcolorado.org
- BCH of Florida
PO Box 815
Brooksville FL 34605
(352) 796-9272
bchflorida@earthlink.net
www.flbch.org
- BCH of Georgia
PO Box 1471
Blue Ridge GA 30513
706-374-7075
carlosmartel@bellsouth.net
- BCH of Idaho
PO Box 513
Salmon ID 83467
www.bchi.org
- BCH of Illinois
Rt # 2 Box 214
Golconda IL 62938
(618) 672-4841
Mulemaid@shawneelink.net
- Hoosier BCH Indiana
12784 E Rollins Lane
Springville IN 47462
(812) 797-4540
hoosierhorsemen@yahoo.com
- BCH of Iowa
3445 Lima Trail
Missouri Valley, IA 51555
(402) 350-3249
sue.maiwald@yahoo.com
- BCH of Kansas
1409 Lincoln Road
Concordia KS 66901
(785) 243-2494
steve.lindsey@lia_ks.com
- BCH of Kentucky
2068 Pondsville Kepler Road
Smiths Grove KY 40353
(859) 744-0397
jthorses2009@gmail.com
www.kybch.com
- BCH Pigeon River and Beyond, MI, Inc.
6631 E Ashard Road
Clare MI 48617
(517) 296-4475
marietad@frontiernet.net
- BCH of Minnesota
30490 335th Street Way
Lake City, MN 55041
bchminnesota@gmail.com
651-345-9909
www.bchmn.org
- BCH of Mississippi
600 Old Hwy 51 N.
Box 641
Nesbit, MS 38651
(901) 485-2982
jeanne@arcelle.com
www.bchms.org
- Show-Me Missouri BCH
519 Good Hope Road
Marshfield, MO 65706
(417) 425-9969
www.showmebch.org
- BCH of Montana
2130 9th Street W. #109
Columbia Falls, MT 59912
bchmt406@gmail.com
www.bchmt.org
- BCH of Nevada
PO Box 19324
Reno NV 89511
(775) 843-2569
info@bchnv.com
www.bchnv.com
- BCH of New Mexico
PO Box 37005
Albuquerque NM 87176
chairman@bchnm.org
www.bchnm.org
- BCH of North Carolina
102 Arrowhead Lane
Whittier, NC 28789
(828) 577-3462
tomthomas262@gmail.com
www.bchofnc.org
- BCH of North Dakota
2550 Windsor Pl N
Mandan, ND 58554
- BCH of Oregon
PO Box 362
O'Brien, OR 97534
(541) 746-4547
www.bcho.org
- Black Hills BCH of South Dakota
20112 Buckin Horse Lane
Whitewood SD 57793
(605) 645-2296
bhbchsd@gmail.com
www.bhbchsd.blogspot.com
- BCH of Tennessee
570 Sunnyside Road
Sweetwater, TN 37874
(423) 552-3767
TJConnor@hotmail.com
www.bchet.org
- BCH of Utah
PO Box 13195
Ogden UT 84412-3195
(801) 985-1909
www.bchu.com
- Virginia BCH
55 Lost Creek Lane
Buena Vista VA 24416
(540) 570-1910
deborasensaba@gmail.com
- BCH of Washington
PO Box 1132
Ellensburg WA
98926-1132
(509) 276-6226
www.bchwa.org
- BCH of Wyoming
2446 Spriggs Dr
Lander WY 82520
bighorn@vcn.com
www.wyobch.org
- Affiliates:**
Saratoga BCH
PO Box 461
Cambridge NY 12816
859-230-0980

If Not Your BCHA, Then Who?

By Rick Adair [continued from front page]

In accepting this task, we knew Crow Creek Trail had not been cleared of down timber for three consecutive years. This was due in part to two wild fires in the previous decades along with significant bark beetle infestation that fell a sizeable portion of mature pine and fir trees. Brewing the "perfect storm" scenario, the winter of 2016-2017 brought one of the heaviest snow packs in modern history. Consequently, the spring runoff freeing the high country of snow melt had the local rivers and creeks running at near bank levels, thus delaying an early start.

On June 20 and 21, SBCH members set out on the mission of clearing Crow Creek Trail at least to where snow drifting would prevent further access of the high country. This was still weeks before forecasted peak of high water in creek crossings was to occur. After the first day, we saw that the previous goal was as lofty as the distant mountain pass itself. It was a three-mile day that had most of us licking our wounds. On the way back out to the trail head that evening, two adult grizzlies bears were roaming right above the trail. Ironically, the grizzlies were tame compared to crossing the swollen creek from a warm day's hefty snow melt. White water rapids up to the belly of our stock made for an interesting conclusion of day one.

Day two on the 21st was less gain than day one. Not only did we not make the snow line, we had not cleared to the half way mark on the trail. In unspoken thoughts going back down the trail after a full day's work, we all knew the crossing this time would be dangerous. Sure enough, the water was up to the flanks on our stock causing them to get pushed down stream all the while struggling to maintain footing in the large river boulders. Further attempts of clearing this trail would have to wait until the water crossing subsided.

With one small exploratory expedition in early July, we made another full court press on July 25 and 26. Our goal this time was to make the summit by the 26th. In order to maximize work time, this was an overnight trip with pack stock. Camping was right off the trail in one of the few mountain meadows. At the end of the 25th it began to rain. The rain was not quite hard enough to force on rain gear, but wet enough to soak us by the time we reached our make-shift camp that evening. There is cooking in the rain, then there is nothing more somber than cooking and eating in the rain. A close second is going to bed in the rain and knowing that the only thing to greet you in the morning would be putting on cold wet clothes from the day before. Day two on the 26th left the survivors hastening to reach the pass in order to make it back to camp, pack up, and make it back to our trailers before night fall. Rain was once again forecasted. Thinking we were so close, but not knowing what lay ahead further up the trail, we had to stop once again for private life commitments. Our GPS readings told us the "crow flies" distance to the pass, but not the trail distance with the upcoming switch backs.

The man hours spent so far on this trail was well beyond what anybody could have planned for and the goal

still several miles from the pass into Yellowstone National Park. With other trails on the schedule to be cleaned, our dedicated chapter came through once again. Crews were divided and a call went out for all-hands-on-deck. Once again on August 10 and 11, we set out on our mission. With five pack animals in tow, five volunteers made it back into the meadow to throw down camp and get on with the job of cleaning the trail. The last several hard fought miles did not come easy. Now at over 9000 feet elevation, running a hand saw was very exhausting, so was walking from one downed tree to another. Several times, the final switch backs left us thinking we were closer than we actually were. Then like a light at the end of the tunnel, we crested into one of the most rewarding sights and efforts that we ever put forward. The view at the top of this wilderness paradise made us all quickly forget our sore muscles and calloused hands. The only disappointment on the trip, we had only a few moments to enjoy the view before we had to depart to make it back to camp by dark. Before this day was over, we would ride over 16 miles, plus clean the final segment of trail before getting back to our camp and awaiting pack stock.

In pulling camp and riding down the totally cleared trail on the 11th, there was plenty of time to reflect on our achievement. Was it worth it? Without any doubt, yes it was. The next person to ride this trail will hopefully appreciate some unknown stranger's efforts to keep this wonderful trail open. In conclusion, here are some of the numbers for this one formidable effort. The SBCH had 17 members contribute a total of 35 men/women work days on Crow Creek Trail, in all totaling 309.5 man hours. Fifty-one stock days were recorded along with 1,403 miles of hauling mules and horses to the trailhead.

Makes you proud to belong to a great organization does it not? In concluding, from where this recap of Crow Creek trail started, if not your Back Country Horsemen, then who would do this? Let's all make sure the legacy continues by recruiting the next generations into our great organization.

The SBCH has been assigned trail cleaning for the Crow Creek Trail for 2018 by the SNF. We hope to clean this trail yearly for a few years to keep it from getting in the shape it was in 2017.



The crew finally made it to the top. Bill Cody Peak is in the back ground. We had already cleaned this portion of trail on previous trips trying to get to the top.



The weathered, downed sign indicated that we had finally reached our goal, Crow Creek Pass, entering into Yellowstone Park. The journey was over.



The stock is getting itchy feet, knowing that the trailhead is getting close as we finalize this episode of cleaning trails in the SNF. Only those that see the trail between a set of mule ears can understand the significance of this pic. This pic is dedicated to all the mule riders out there.



Silver Tip Peak, showing the magnitude of downed trees that we had to deal with.

Photo below: Packing up camp on the final day and packing out. Our saw training class cautioned us to prevent "mission creep", staying within our certification of being Buckers. The leaners will be on the ground this winter with us being there next summer to remove them.

