

The Splendid Warefaring in the 21st Century

By Gerry "Lucky" Messmer

-Ashley's Return: The Concept - Part 1

This is the story of three men and an idea that came to fruition in the form of a truly epic journey. From the first step we had no idea what we would face, both challenges and the generosity that would be shown to us along the way. This is the story of the recreation of William Ashley's Return from the Rendezvous of 1825 that would forever change the course of the fur trade era and in 2019 would change our lives.

After 95 days living on the ground and enduring incredibly rigorous conditions, we found the ending of our journey to be bittersweet! It was hard to part ways; many words went unspoken. This journey was exceptional by all accounts, so life changing, and such a feat that I dubbed it "primal survival"

On our journey we would experience the absolute breakdown to that primal level of knowing what you did and did not need and what you could go without, which is about everything. The modern comforts of heat, AC and showers drift away by the hour as you adjust to the conditions of the day and live minute to minute. We would get excited at the thought of sleeping on soft sand, the respite of a breeze to take away the miserable, angry, relentless mosquitos, the comfort and warmth of our wet wool clothing and the companionship of a good horse.

During the sojourn we would endure hot, harsh and dryer than normal conditions on horseback for 700 miles in Wyoming, two days without water, a tornado, 80 mph winds and torrential rain on the Big Horn and Yellowstone Rivers for 400 miles, then unprecedented flood levels on the Missouri River during our epic 900-mile float on the Keelboat Muskrat. Along the journey we would see black bear, coyotes, antelope, elk, water moccasins, rattle snakes, wild mustangs by the hundreds and catch fish for dinner. Most importantly, we would encounter the generosity and support of many folks that helped us in some way. With these great Americans we would break bread, share our story and forever be grateful to them, they became known as our "angels".

The concept for the expedition gave birth in the mind of Jack "Papa Jack" Mitch in 2016 and stayed unspoken for a year. Jack, like many of us had watched men ride into rendezvous, from a couple days up to a week, but none had ever recreated leaving the rendezvous. Jack's dream, before age caught up to him, was to ride out of a rendezvous.

Papa Jack finally decided to test his idea in June of 2017 in Idaho, high up in the mountains above Montpelier over a cup of hot coffee. Not sure what response he would get, he ran the idea past me. He wanted to recreate riding out of a rendezvous and specifically, recreate Ashley's return from the 1825 fur trade rendezvous that was held on Henry's Fork. All I could say was, "I'm in." From that point on we were committed, and it became one of those things we never wanted to look back on and say, "We should have".

For both of us the timing would be right. The day Papa Jack asked me I was on day three of my terminal leave from the Army as I was retiring after more than 31 years of service. The following year Papa Jack would be retired from his own business. A few weeks after this encounter Papa Jack brought the idea up to Scott "Amish" Staggs and without hesitation he was in. As a self-employed business owner Amish determined he could take the time off. This would complete the trio of men who would accept the challenge and tackle 2000 miles by horse, pirogue/bull boat and keelboat.

We had no idea what we were in for, what Ashley's route was, or the gear and training we would need to be ready. All we knew is that we had committed to this 2000-mile journey in all period correct clothing and gear, hand sewn and true to 1825. The main difference for us in 2019 would be our inability to freely hunt for meat as Ashley and his men were able to do. We would have the extra burden of carrying food with us.

This journey would be a real test of our mettle, of our ability to function as a team while individually enduring the hardships. Many people asked us why we were doing this journey and our response was, why not? Jack, Scott and I all talked at length about the journey and at the center of all the conversations was our individual ability to do something of this magnitude, to simply prove it to ourselves and no one else. This would be 2000 miles with no support, no trail vehicle following us as so many people do, no one carrying our extra food in a cooler or our spare clothes, this would be out in the wild on our own and the only support we did receive, that was never expected, was from local residents, much like the help the trappers received from local Native American tribes.

In the beginning we divided tasks up. I took on the ride portion, working to determine the route and making lists of gear we needed. Papa Jack took on the water portion as an experienced and skilled canoer and kayaker. We also



began looking for other folks to join us. As it would turn out no one wanted to do the entire journey with us. Many folks were outright scared of the water portion, while some were willing yet too old to make the journey and others could not take the time off from work. I think in the end folks knew this was going to be a real challenge with extremely high risks and not something they wanted to face for their own personal reasons.

William Ashley left Henry's Fork on July 2, 1825 with a large number of hides, horses and men. He headed north crossing the Green River and coming to the Sweetwater River he followed it north to Ft Smith, Montana. While in the now Riverton, Wyoming area, he sent men west to retrieve a cache of hides that met up with him later on. At Ft. Smith he would send half the men back with the horses and proceed to shoot 23 buffalo and build bull boats. Of what size and configuration, we may never know. Once completed, Ashley and 25 men then proceed to float down the Big Horn River to the Yellowstone River to the confluence of the Missouri River. Here they would camp for a week while waiting on General Atkinson and his flotilla, upon these boats they would board, load hides and continue to St. Louis.

Our journey would begin on July 6, 2019, 4 days later than Ashley and we would arrive at our destination on

October 8th, four days after Ashley arrived. Our journeys were mirror images in more than just that one way! In fact, we camped at Ft. Union the exact same calendar week that Ashley and his men had camped waiting for General Atkinson and his flotilla to arrive.

Early on we determined that no electronic devices would be used, and if so, only for logistical coordination or emergencies. We did have one fail-safe beacon we turned on at night for one to two minutes that would record our location. This was important because that beacon was connected to 911 should we need a life flight, ambulance or other assistance for a catastrophic injury. One push of a button and help would be on its way. This capability was not optional in discussions with our families, so along it went!

Other considerations we had to contend with were our inability to secure passage through the property of two Native American tribes. One tribe would not allow us to make the last 20 miles through Bad Pass to Ft. Smith, so we had to stop short on horseback. The next problem was a very different Missouri River. The river of today is no longer a mile wide and 3 feet deep, but rather 300 yards wide and 50 feet deep with a steady 7 mph of unforgiving current. Only one stretch of it looked like during Ashley's time, but I'll save that for later.

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To give you a small idea of the logistical requirements of this trip, my truck, which was used for moving our horses, gear and us between start points, drove more than 10,000 miles in 95 days! This does not include the vehicles of the others on the ride portion or those that joined the canoe portion or those that drifted on and off of the Keelboat Muskrat.

Our gear for the horseback portion would require three pack animals to carry it for 700 miles. The gear that we hand made for the journey included, saddles, bridles, halters, a buffalo epishemore, pack saddles, saddle bags, pommel bags, dozens of hand sewn food bags of both cotton and oil cloth, moccasins, shirts, pantaloons, breeches, breech clouts, leggings, rifles or trade guns, horn, bag and

accouterments, powder, shot or ball, a good fire-starting kit, sewing kit, and a bedroll. We would also have to source, buy and carry dried food for six men for 30 days.

While sourcing or making our gear, we began the daily routine of physical training, both man and beast. Bubbles and I started off with 5-7-mile rides, increasing weekly until we were able to do 35 miles in a day. This would prove to be imperative as we would average about 25-30 miles a day on the ride. Papa Jack and Amish would do the same in Indiana. Fortunately, they live close by each other

and could ride together working their critters up to the physical stamina required.

In the summer (June/July) of 2018, Jack and I hauled our critters to Colorado for a rendezvous where we would ride and train together in Colorado. In that short week Harley and Bubbles bonded well and played off each other's strengths.

In March of 2018 Papa Jack and I also met in Idaho at the ranch of Han and Conan Asmussen, father and son team, where we would spend 4 days learning how to load pack animals and working on our saddles to make sure all the rigging was solid. We did one overnight ride in some tough terrain that was quite a confidence builder. Han and Conan are superb horsemen and packers, probably the best in the country, not to mention Conan is a farrier. After long conversations with them, they agreed to do the ride portion with us. Later we would add a veterinarian to the trip, Dickson Varner to round out the talent pool for the ride.

This training session was invaluable as it set the stage for Jack and me on what we would need to make the trip. We went home with long lists of gear, training requirements and the idea that we really needed to minimize gear and pack very tightly and make every bit of space count. With renewed vigor and confidence, we were ready to continue preparations for the undertaking.

In my next section Part II, The Ride, I will take you through our 700-mile ride from start to finish, great stories of the trail and the events that occurred across the wide-open spaces of Wyoming, some of the people we met and the hardships we endured. ^{MB}

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