

# *The Splendid Warefaring in the 21st Century*

By Gerry "Lucky" Messmer

## *-Ashley's Return: The Ride-Part 2*

William Ashley made an incredible journey west in 1824-25 to get to Henry's Fork to re-supply his men, Ashley's Hundred, losing one man and nearly losing his own life. Ashley only spent enough time at the first rendezvous to gather pelts from his trappers and pack them onto horses and head out for St. Louis, where he would sell them for a handsome amount of money and enter politics.

Ashley did not have enough horses with him to go straight back to St. Louis, so he borrowed 100 horses from his men and took them and 50 men to Ft. Smith and the Big Horn River, the closest navigable water leading to the Missouri River. At Ft. Smith they would send all the horses and half of the men back, build 23 bull boats and float the Big Horn and Yellowstone Rivers to the confluence of the Missouri River where he would meet General Atkinson and join his flotilla to move his men and furs to St. Louis.

Our group, for the ride, was made up of six men, seven horses and two mules. To understand the team, it is necessary for some brief descriptions. I, Gerry "Lucky" Messmer, am a retired Army Lieutenant Colonel and a lifelong outdoorsman who started trapping at age 11 and continued my outdoor life education as an adult by studying and living in the woods in either colonial or fur trade era gear and spending 65 days in the woods in 2011 over several trips.

Jack "Poncho" Mitch spent his life hunting, trapping, and fishing under the tutelage of his father and was a frequent attendee at the spring and fall NMLRA shoots at Friendship as a young man. Scott "Amish" Staggs also spent his life in the woods and unlike Poncho and I was a lifelong

rider and owning many horses over the years. Both Amish and Poncho are superb woodsmen.

Our next two compadres are Han Asmussen and his son Conan. Han and Conan rode from Canada to New Mexico in three segments starting when Conan was 11. Both are lifelong riders, ranchers, saddle makers, horse trainers and Conan is a professional farrier while Han is a homeopathic doctor. The two of them are the finest riders in the country at using pack animals and traveling with them.

Rounding out our group of six is none other than Dickson Varner, Hall-of-Fame Texas A&M Veterinarian. Dickson was born with a saddle strapped to his backside and spent many years as a rodeo cowboy/competitor before slowing down enough to attend Veterinary School. Between the medical abilities of Han and Dickson we had excellent medical coverage.

As our horses took their first steps away from our makeshift modern camp we entered the world of William Ashley and 1825. For the three of us it would be hard to separate ourselves from our modern lives and blend into the land before us, into a world most only dream of, but we were ready and at this point turning back was not an option. As we stepped off my stomach was in knots thinking about the 2000 miles ahead of us and the three modes of travel, not knowing the perils ahead.

The first day we rode 30 miles through incredible heat, sage, antelope, and the occasional prairie grouse flying up in front of us. As we rode, we all made note of the lack of grass and water. It had been a very dry year and all the intermittent



Photo by Nicole Morgenthau



Photo by Nicole Morgenthau



streams were dry as a bone. This would be the theme for ninety percent of the horseback portion, some 700 miles long.

Our daily routine was to rise in the morning, restart the fire built from dried sage brush and put a kettle of coffee on to boil. We prepped the coffee pail the night before to save time in the morning. While the coffee was heating up each of us made a breakfast of dried oats in our tin cup or small frying pan. Once it was ready, we would add dried fruit, eat our meal, and then start the process of packing while drinking coffee and sharing an occasional pipe.

We would work as a team to pack all the panniers with our gear, weighing each of them to ensure they weighed the same using a period correct scale owned by Han and Conan. Uneven panniers on a pack horse are a recipe for disaster leading to loads falling off at the most inopportune time. For continuity we paired off for the ride with Dickson and Han sharing a pack animal, Poncho and Amish sharing another and Conan and I the last.

Once the panniers were ready, we would then retrieve our personal mounts from their picket, bring them into camp and saddle them up. Our daily use gear was kept on our own mounts in saddle bags, pommel bags or both. Those mounts would wait tied off to sage while we packed the pack horses and got them ready.

While riding, we each carried our own canteens on our horse with bulk water on the pack horses in large copper canteens. Our lunch was a simple one of nuts and dried fruit in a bag that we passed around at our mid-day stop. It was quick, easy, and full of calories for energy.

Everything we packed had a specific purpose and nothing was duplicated. On a long ride like this every piece of equipment and clothing is calculated out for necessity, weight, and ability to pack it. In fact, we even shared spare shirts bringing one per two men based on size.

Every day we started early, usually at first light and then rode until about an hour before sunset or stopping sooner if good grass and water was found. We averaged about 31 miles per day on the ride and, we all had saddle sores by the end of the first week. They were so bad we were using

cream for horses to paste our backsides to sooth the pain and to try to stop the bleeding. It took mine about ten days to stop hurting.

The route we took was close to Ashley's original route; however we would have to ride farther east than he did due to cities along the route, and we would not be able to ride alongside the rivers as they were all private property with homes on the land. We would ride the BLM land and through ranchers' grazing land who were gracious to us and did not have an issue with us traveling through.

Along the way we would meet many of them and be invited to camp on their land and every single time they offered to share a meal or provided us with fresh meat and

water for us and for our livestock. One rancher met us at his gate and invited us to camp on his lawn as it was the best grass for miles, as he informed us. He said, 'just follow my driveway to the house'. That

driveway was 8 miles long! At his home his wife cooked us an amazing dinner of chicken fried steak, asparagus, all the tea we could drink and many other treats. She followed this in the morning with pancakes, coffee, and the biggest plate full of bacon any of us had ever seen.

Along our journey our encounters with folks were simply incredible. We called these folks our "angels". They would call ahead and inform the landowners along the route of our presence, and they would be on the lookout for us. I am convinced we could have made the journey with nothing but water and we would have easily been fed daily. The generosity of these angels was simply heartwarming. We cannot even begin to explain kindness shown to us along the way. America!

On day 7 we had ridden along Pacific Creek and arrived at Pacific Springs. Pacific Springs is a marsh in an otherwise desolate and dry landscape just west of South Pass. On the property there is an area that has excellent grass and was used for many years by settlers heading west, the old cabin still standing. We walked our horses out onto the grass and we all sat in the saddle while the critters grazed in green glory!

After a couple minutes I looked down at the ground and was amazed at what I saw. The grass was rolling like waves under our feet! I looked at my trail pard Conan and asked him if he had looked down? He did so and we passed the word around, nobody moved. Now what? Here we are

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*Photo by Nicole Morgenthau*



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halfway across this green plush field that was nothing more than floating sod. The spring had flooded the field and in a rare phenomenon had raised the turf with 4-5 or more feet of water below. These mats of "floating grass" are called "fens" and are very rare in Wyoming.

We decided we would each pick a path to attempt to make the cross. Dickson took off and let his pack mule Curly go so he could make his way. Both arrived safely on the other side breaking through the sod along the way in three feet of water. I had chosen to move off to my right on my horse Bubbles. We made about 20 yards before she broke through in about 4 feet of water up to my knees. I calmed her down and we stood there for a moment before I gave her some spur and she leapt out of the marsh taking me safely to dry land.

Han had let his pack animal Yuma go as well so she could find her own way. She had real bad luck and had broken through in an area that was so deep it was over her head. With her packs on she was about to drown in the water. Conan jumped off his horse and ran to her aid pulling the packs off her while Han kept her head out of the water. Han and Conan tried pulling her out to no avail. Then Dickson threw them a rope and he tied it off to his saddle horn and he put his horse Wishbone to work pulling her out. In an instant Wishbone lost his footing and went down landing on top of Dickson pinning him in the mud. We all rushed to Dickson's aid relieved he was ok.

Back to Yuma. This time Amish and I went to help her out. She had about given up and was so weak she could barely keep her head above water and was about to go under for the last time. Amish grabbed the pack saddle and started pulling while I pulled on the lead rope. We were able to

get her to slide up onto some solid floating turf to give her a break. Just as she seemed rested enough to try again the sod broke and she went in again. This time though, she was able to touch the ground and leap to safety.

After a few minutes of rest, Han checking out Dickson for injuries, and repacking Yuma we were back on the trail having lost about 2 hours of time.

On day 11 we came upon a small lake in a bowl with a ridge around it. As we approached the lake was full of cattle watering accompanied by 40-50 antelope and 50 elk. We moved slowly as we approached but the elk and antelope still scampered off. We rode by the cattle letting our horses drink their fill and then headed over the ridge. As we crested the ridge we came across another incredible sight before us. In our view were 6 or 7 different herds of wild mustangs moving about. You could tell each herd from the other by the dignified bell mare leading them and the stallion sheepishly off to the side.

All totaled we estimated somewhere around 200-250 mustangs in our view. It was a beautiful sight to see and sitting on top of a mustang myself all I could think about was would my horse long to be with her relatives? Alas she was happy with me, and we rode through them without incident. Just in case that evening we used all three of our bells hanging them on the mares as our early warning that a stallion was in our pack string while they were picketed out.

On our 15th day after 35 or more miles, we happened on a ranch originally known as the Hayes Ranch. We had met one of the hands who introduced us to the ranch manager. We needed grass and water in a bad way, and they gave





*Lucky Sleeping.*

overabundance of trees and shade. As he mentioned this, we were riding past the Branding Iron Saloon that had an outdoor overhang area, so we turned around and asked permission to show our horses in the shade.

They graciously granted us permission, so we stopped, tied off the horses and Conan went to work shoeing. We spent about 6 hours there taking care of the horses that needed shoes. For me, I spent most of the time asleep trying to recover from whatever was making me sick. The folks we met at the Branding Iron were a lot of fun. We must have told our story to dozens in those six hours, to people that really enjoyed the history.

Once we were done with the shoes and ready to move on one of us got the bright idea to ask if we could ride through the bar on our way out! The manager called the owner who said, "why not". So, after saddling up, Han, Conan, Amish, and I rode in one door, past the pool table and the guys shooting pool, past the folks having dinner and to the bar where they handed us all a drink on our way out the other door.

us permission to camp on the ranch. This was one of the highlights of our trip meeting the family and camping on the ranch that Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid would come to for fresh horses. The barn they went to originally stood about a half mile from where we were camped. In the morning the dad dropped off his 6 and 8-year-olds with their horses to ride with us. They were some fine young riders and rode about 8 miles from our camp to their house chatting the entire time.

Our final day we rode into Lovell, Wy. Along the way we were stopped by a family that had been looking for us for two days. We pulled up along the highway in the grass and spent time with them and their son who was dying to meet us. They came bearing cold drinks and snacks. It was a very nice visit with some great folks. Once again, the generosity was overwhelming.

July 25th, our 20th day of the ride we had six horses that needed shoes very badly. We were riding into Greybull, Wyoming on a day so hot you could fry an egg on the pavement. I was sick as a dog and half asleep in the saddle as we rode. As we rode through town Conan was remarking about how miserable it would be to shoe six horses out in the sun. The Greybull area is not known for an

We made our final camp, retrieved trucks and trailers, and made sure everyone had their gear back. It was a somber evening. We had completed 700 miles in 22 days and had become a team, friends, great friends, and we were not ready to part ways. For Han, Conan, and Dickson it was back to their ranches and their work, for Amish, Poncho, and I it was on to Ft. Smith to build a bull boat and start the next phase of William Ashley's journey. MB



*End of the ride.*