



High Altitudes and “Cloud” from the Back of a Morgan Mare

By John M. Hutcheson

It was dusk dark. I thought about turning the two Morgan mares loose, as I had on so many nights, with just a horse bell. We were camped on the only water on top of Pryor Mountain and the grass was good. I walked over to where they were finishing the last of the weed-free hay I had packed in, and I spied a red roan stud driving 13 mares in front of him, sliding down a scree slope toward the water. So instead, I tied the mares up short, brewed a cup of tea and turned in. It snowed again that night and the wind got up. I was 62 years old and alone but with two solid, four-legged partners.



Cloud and his band! Film crews have spent many weeks in disappointment hoping for a shot like this. I don't think we would have gotten this close except for being mounted on mares.

I had always wanted to take my own horses West to ride in big country. My high school classmate of 1965, Jim Hallman, called one day and said he was now living in Big Horn County, Wyoming, and he and I planned a trip to do just that. I agreed to bring good, solid-minded, legged-up saddle horses if he would provide the pack string. The Arabs of antiquity chose their desert-bred mares to ride into battle, so I took a page from their book and selected two 12- and 13-year-old Morgan mares, GabCreek Gay Mashanta (Primavera Valdez x Rose Hill LaPapillon) and Althea Moro (Cameron Of Quietude x Misty Morning Dew). I began to leg them up by riding one and ponying the other in the Chattahoochee National Forest in Georgia. I shod them both with borium cleats. I spent hours working and reworking the equipment list for horse packing.

I left Georgia in mid-August and horse-camped and explored in the Black Elk Wilderness in the Black Hills of South Dakota. It was another day's drive on to Basin, Wyoming, to link up with Jim. Once there, we got familiar with our pack stock, worked on our equipment and let our saddle horses adjust to the altitude.

On August 28 we loaded five horses and pulled to the trailhead at Ranger Creek on the north side of the Cloud Peak Wilderness in the Big Horn Mountains. We planned to ride all the way through to the trailhead at West Ten Sleep in the south. Our friend and owner of the pack stock, Ed Stidolph, took our rig back to Basin and would pick us up at West Ten Sleep.

We started off in shirt-sleeve weather at 7,500 feet elevation and began to climb into the high country for what we expected to be a summer pack trip, with visions of catching and releasing a



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1. The morning I left Georgia in late August, the Morgan mares were legged up and ready, having been ridden—riding one and ponying the other—on Jake and Bull Mountain in North Georgia at around 2,000 feet elevation for a month. 2. We turned the horses loose overnight whenever the water and forage was right and sometimes used the high line. The horses nearest the camera are my Morgan mares. 3. Morgan mares at Solitude Lake, Cloud Peak Wilderness, Wyoming. 4. “An army moves on its stomach.”

hundred trout a day on the dry fly. We let the horses graze for three hours before dark, highlined them for the night and grazed them another couple of hours the next morning. We were packing 100 pounds of complete horse feed and had trained all five to come to a nose bag twice a day. We spent the first two nights under the heavens and were able by the second day to bell the mares and turn all the horses loose at night.

But on the third morning, everything began to change. It rained, sleeted, snowed and hailed, and over the next 24 hours the temperature dropped 60 degrees. We called that night “Camp Misery.” There was a foot of snow on the ground by the next morning and Althea colicked. Drastic change of temperature, extreme work, high altitude, change of diet—we’ll never know, but after two shots of Banamine and some rest, she became a pack horse with a light load. Jim was reduced to riding a pack horse that did not neck rein. We had heavy packer coats but no rubber foot gear, so we stayed wet, and thus frozen, from the knee down for the next five days.

We never did put a fly rod together, as the trip had become a survival experience. At our age and being above 10,000 feet, the horses were a serious lifeline for us. Althea recovered and proved herself a superb pack horse, and Shanta got tougher every day, always walking out big.

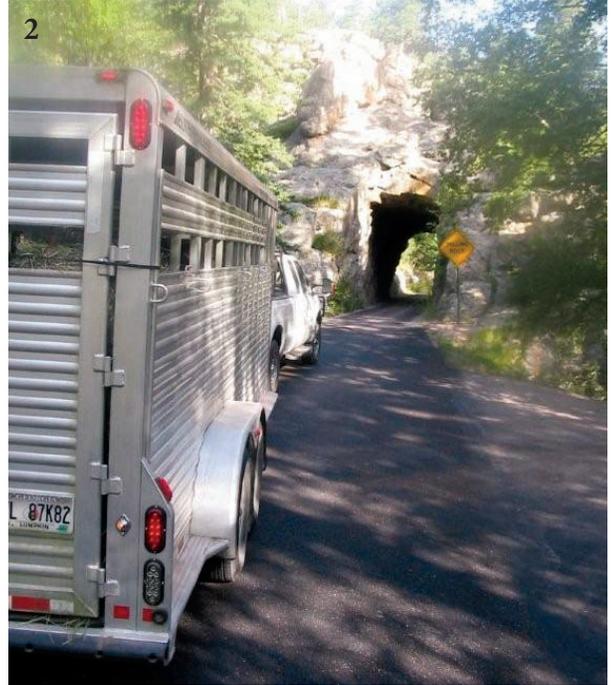
There was humor, too. One night I heard what I thought had to be a bear in the kitchen. I shook Jim and said, “Get your gun, Jim, there’s a bear in the kitchen!” Jim came out of a dead sleep, listened and said, “Well, if it is, it’s wearing a horse bell!” He went back to sleep!! Jim was right—it was my mare being her opportunist Morgan self, plundering. We eventually rode out of there—our only choice was to sit up and ride.

Jim went back to work, and I ventured north to pursue another of my longtime interests, to ride among the Mustangs of Pryor Mountain, Montana. It was an incredible experience to be among the wild horses. Over the next two days I rode and photographed more than a dozen bands, to include Cloud himself and his look-alike 2008 foal.

Pryor Mountain is like an island in the Hawaiian chain—it rises abruptly out of the Bureau of Land Management controlled red Wyoming desert, at around 4,000 feet elevation, and is around 9,000 feet at the top. It is bounded by more than 1.3 million acres of the Custer National Forest to the west, by the Crowe Indian Reservation to the north and by the Big Horn National Recreation Area and the Big Horn Reservoir to the east. There are many ways to climb the mountain. There is the rugged Sage Creek Road from the north, the equally rough Burnt Timber Ridge Road from the southwest, and the attention-getting Sykes Ridge Road from the



View from My Saddle



1. The fourth wilderness area in which we rode. 2. Leaving the Iron Creek Horse Camp, USFS, in the Black Elk Wilderness, I took the “Needles” Highway west and encountered two tunnels. I could not turn around. I folded in the mirrors and actually rubbed the fenders of the seven foot Elite on the granite walls. It was not fun. No signs warned horse campers about the tunnels. 3. Saddle and pack stock grazing the morning after the storm in Cloud Peak Wilderness, elevation 9,000 feet.

southeast. Not only is the mountain isolated and big (39,500 acres), it is also compartmented by the impassible Big Coulee which is riddled with caves and early man sites and separates several of the horse herds from each other. I chose the Burnt Timber Ridge route.

The juniper and scrub brush gave way to evergreens as we went up, and I began to see wild horses. I regretted not having a telephoto lens, so I just eased along and photographed those that would oblige. My mares were by now well conditioned, but they were really drawing in that pungent air as we climbed. Somewhere above the transition line to an alpine environment, I saw a pale palomino foal and thought: “I’ll bet I know who your daddy could be.”

Like many people who are happiest having their hands on a horse, I had watched all of Ginger Kathrens’ Emmy award-winning Public Broadcast series *Cloud: Wild Stallion of the Rockies*. I have a genuine, profound respect for this lady. I was confident that since I was well mounted and willing to ride the remote parts of the mountain, I would see wild horses; but I really had no reasonable expectation that I would find Cloud. The incredible thing is that professional film crews have gone up there for a week and never found him (or any of his band), yet on two Morgan mares I rode right up on him. It was a tremendous thrill.

As I began to approach this group, stop and photograph them, and ease a bit closer, Cloud emerged and finally came front

and center. It was like being in the presence of royalty. I once attended the *Queen’s [of England] Own Birthday Parade* and went through the receiving line to meet Her Majesty when I was stationed in Berlin, Germany. That was a true privilege, but for a horseman like me, this was better!

I finally just rode around the Mustangs to the left and went on up the mountain for four more hours to reach the top. It was important to find water, and I knew where it was thanks to the 1:24,000 USGS maps I had bought. We made it and got the horses watered just before dark. I cooked chili in my coffee pot because I could not find the stew pot. I found it when I tried to get into the sleeping bag—right where I had cleverly packed it, so it wouldn’t rattle.

It was a long night with very high wind. There were lots of dead trees and tree tops in the grove where we sought shelter. To quote the famous packer Smoke Elser: “always look up when you tie your horse to a tree.” More than one old cowboy has lost his life or his favorite pony to a dead fall.

The next morning it was colder and the wind was still up. Snow was blowing and more bad weather was coming. I got loaded and stepped into the saddle, rode a mile to the east and began to count the wild horses on top of the mountain. They were running in multiple bands, but in the same area. I counted them three times to be sure, and there were 33 head. One band stood together sil-



View from My Saddle



1. At the entrance to the wild horse range Pryor Mountain, Montana, at which point the Morgans were hardened up and pretty tough. 2. We started off in shirt sleeves at Ranger Creek on the north of the Cloud Peak and rode all the way through to West Ten Sleep in the south. We were three days into the Cloud Peak Wilderness in northeast Wyoming when the temperature dropped 60 degrees. This picture of Gab Creek Gay Mashanta was taken the morning the weather began to change. 3. Our summer pack trip became a winter survival experience. Especially at the age of 62, we would have been in trouble if afoot, but with the Morgans all we had to do was sit up and ride.

houetted by the rising sun. It was the perfect “photo op,” but the wind was blowing sideways to the ground and Shanta was feeling good enough to pitch. I decided to leave the camera sheathed and just revel in the glory of all the horses and tend to controlling my own stock. Five hours later I was back down at the trailer.

For the record, all the wild horses I saw were in good flesh and sound. We know by DNA that the Pryor Mountain horses are descended from the pure Spanish horses. They are not horses that ranchers just “turned out.” The mountain’s namesake is Sergeant Richard Pryor of *the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, from which, according to one theory, on the expedition’s return east, the horses escaped.

The Pryor Mountain herd has been managed by nature for some 200 years before federal agencies came into existence. There have been years when no foals have survived. Mountain lion depredation, severe weather, lightning strikes, an extreme environment—cold, wind, and minimum water—all ensure that natural selection is at work to the “nth” degree. And on more than one occasion, foals have been trampled and died in the BLM “roundup” when the bands are forced off the mountain by helicopter. My personal view is that, at least on Pryor Mountain, the BLM should leave the horses alone, regardless of what their EIS studies indicate about carrying capacity.

The next week I went south to LaPorte, Colorado, and picked

up Jim White, the brother of a longtime friend, and his saddle horse. I rode Shanta, and we used Althea as the pack horse to go into the Platte River Wilderness west of Laramie, Wyoming, up Douglas Creek. We had perfect weather, and I finally got to catch and release Brookies on the dry fly while wearing my spurs, with my own Morgans looking on.

Four long hauling days, and I was back in Georgia with two very fit Morgan mares, having ridden in four different wilderness areas and driven a 6,000-mile loop. As I write this, the mares are doing their best to get as fat as possible. ■

John M. Hutcheson is a retired Colonel of Infantry with 30 years active federal service. He grew up as an exercise rider in an operation that had several hundred horses for sale at any one time. John has on several occasions made solo trips into wilderness areas, to include the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR). John has been a Morgan breeder since 1996 when he acquired the Primavera Valdez son Primavera Brio. He enjoys starting stud colts and is currently looking forward to riding a colt for Polly Smith this spring. John says, “The happiest hours of my life have been with horses, as they are such good judges of character. Like soldiers, they recognize good leadership when they see it and they can size you up quickly. One of my favorite sayings is ‘The Horse Knows If You Know.’”