

Aparejo Packing in the Sierras

This particular packsaddle was designed to carry heavy and bulky loads.

By MARY JEFFERSON

ONE TYPE packsaddle you're not likely to see any more is the aparejo (pronounced ah-pah-ray'ho). The aparejo originated in Mexico, and Mexican packers used it extensively in the 1850s in California packing freight from seaports to inland mining camps. There was a time in the 1800s when long strings of mules coming out of the Sierras were common sights; these trains were often outfitted with aparejo packs carrying wood to the charcoal kilns of the Cerro Gordo silver mine and to the northern towns for cooking and heating.

In years past, the aparejo was often used in the eastern Sierras by commercial pack outfits for extremely large loads and bulky objects, like lumber. During the 1940s, it was in use every summer in the Sierra Club High Trips. Two stoves were used by the club, each weighing over 200 pounds, and two mules with aparejo packs were used to move the stoves from camp to camp. In those days the High Trips had groups numbering as many as 200 guests plus 12 packers and a commissary crew. The load was considerable, especially because the equipment then was made of heavy metals and not of the lightweight alloys back-country equipment is now fashioned from. The packer who hauled the

stoves had one string of five mules; two carried the stoves atop aparejos and the other three mules had regular sawbuck packs suitable for carrying kitchen equipment.

The sawbuck sits on top of the mule, but the aparejo blankets a pack animal's back and evenly distributes the load. The pad (which is the aparejo) is made of leather and stuffed with flat grass. It is wetted down before use, and as it dries, it molds to the back of a mule. Two boards are placed near the top of the pad, usually 4x4s in lengths equal to those of the pad. A cinch about ten to twelve inches wide is placed over the wood platform and is attached by latigoes to a similar cinch running under the mule's belly. An exceptionally wide breeching fits close under the animal's tail. After the pack is secured, the load is placed on the boards, and a tarp is thrown over the load and lashed down with an aparejo hitch.

Not too many outfitters are left who know how to pack an aparejo. Two men from Owens Valley who packed them in the eastern Sierras were Fred Moore and Tommy Jefferson. Every year Tommy would single out two green commissary boys to help him load the stoves in camp. He would instruct them that they had to be careful

not to drop their end which was the fire box and made of cast iron. Tommy would take the oven end, alone, and they would lift together. The boys' end weighed about 158 pounds and Tommy's end weighed only about 60 pounds; it'd usually take about two weeks for those boys to finally catch on.

Along with packing the stoves each summer, Tommy and Fred packed other individually heavy items. The first time I met both of them was in September 1953. We all rode up the Mt. Whitney trail from Whitney Portal on the eastern slope of the Sierras. We rode to about the 13,000-foot level of the pass to pick up parts of an air compressor left by the trail crew. The drive shaft went on one mule, a huge air cylinder on another, and various other parts were loaded on the remaining three mules. The heaviest load was about 450 pounds.

One mule lay down on the trail and refused to get up; the load was unpacked, and after he was on his feet, the load was repacked. We continued to the pack station where the critter pulled the same routine again.

Equipment wasn't the only load Tommy and Fred and their mules packed. Before helicopters were able to fly at high elevations, injured or ill persons were put into wire stretchers and placed on top of an aparejo for a ride to the nearest first aid. Rescues of this kind were made at least once a summer.

In 1972, after eight years of owning and operating Mt. Whitney Pack Trains, Tommy sold the outfit and the aparejo packs. To my knowledge, they aren't used any more; a part of the old west has died.



• Fred Moore uses an aparejo to haul mining equipment; the aparejo was used for handling bulky, heavy items.



• Fred Moore (left) and Tommy Jefferson (center) ready a mule for a trip into the Panamint Mountains.