

He'd crossed the continent solo on wheels and wings.  
This time was different.

# ON THE HOOOF

PACIFIC TO ATLANTIC  
A 3,800-MILE  
ADVENTURE



Jesse Alexander McNeil

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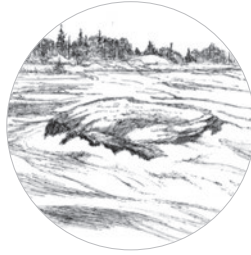
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I'm anxious as hell to get out of this truck. This hired driver's crippling pace is killing me. It wasn't supposed to take two full days to haul this rental horse trailer from Montana. His obsession with speed limits is ridiculous, even riding the brakes on lonely desert straightaways.

It's 10:30 at night, and we still have thirty twisty miles of coastal Route 101 before reaching Gold Beach, our way into the Siskiyou Mountains, where Oregon's Rogue River meets the Pacific. But I can't wait any longer and fumble through my atlas to search for some place closer, just as we're crossing the Winchuck River, a half-mile north of the California border.

On the atlas my headlamp beam finds the Winchuck winding neatly into the mountains.

“Here’s good.... You can turn around and drop us off.”

“You sure? We don’t have much farther.”

“It’s fine.”

The driver wheels the truck and trailer around in a wide arc, stopping along the shoulder, and turns on the hazards. Relieved, I jump from the cab and yank my saddlebags and extra gear from the back of the truck. I carry it all into the woods, then return to lead Pepper, my wide-eyed Tennessee Walker, off the trailer. Traffic hurtles by, headlights blazing.

With that, the driver pitches in, throwing me a bag of hay from his trailer.

“Okay, Jesse, good luck.”

Pepper and I shuffle down a steep embankment. The truck and trailer pull away, leaving the two of us standing alone in a dark forest by the sea.

I set up camp behind tall bushes, hidden from soon-to-be morning beach walkers. By headlamp, I slam an aluminum picket into sandy soil with a plastic hammer, each blow springing back, then attach Pepper’s long rope as she voraciously chomps the grass. The ride from Montana definitely tested her as she’d only been in a trailer for a few hours once before.

Pepper, having lived all her five years on a remote ranch, where she was bred, is as much a novice riding horse as I’m a novice horseman. She and I met three months ago in December, when she hesitantly allowed me to saddle her. Pepper was approachable, with large dark eyes and a silvery-gray coat, and standing just over fifteen hands in height.

After signing papers of ownership, Dan, a horse breeder for three decades, said Pepper and I would learn well together.

Pepper stretches for grass out of reach, pulling hard on the rope. I stare at the picket watching for the slightest wiggle. Satisfied it's solid, I move on to snapping tent poles together.

With the tent pitched and bags stowed, I take Pepper for a drink, guiding her a hundred yards through brush and over driftwood to the river edge. She dunks her muzzle in while I kneel and cup cold water to my mouth. Here the saltwater doesn't mix, with the current too fast for the sea to creep in.

I stand by Pepper and turn off my headlamp. The blanket of stars and crashing waves in the far darkness ground me, like an anchor dug into the ocean floor. Our journey has begun.

I've departed solo from the Pacific many times before, on other long journeys east, but this time is different. I have a partner, a horse. Now there's more at stake and more unknowns, principally that I'm new to horsemanship and she's my first horse.

From here we'll head into the mountains, then desert, and prairie, and onward...finding whatever's the best way to the far-flung Atlantic Ocean. Beyond my stack of maps I can only imagine what's ahead.

Pepper pulls on the rope and me from my musing. We return to camp, and I throw her some hay and whack the picket in a few more times.

From my sleeping bag I shine a light on her as she quietly chews. How bizarre that a lumbering thousand-pound beast can sound like a rabbit. I flick off the light and then think about the only other time I've camped with a horse. It was last November in Montana. I joined friends on a weekend hunting trip. All I could contribute were skills in wilderness navigation and camp craft. The horse they gave me to ride just followed the tails of the others.



I wake early, as planned, and again take Pepper to the river, now seeing the ocean waves a few hundred yards away, beyond a sandy delta. I splash water on my face and soak my hair, already a brown mop under my wool hat. Water trickles down my back as Pepper pulls on the lead rope, wanting to go elsewhere. In a way, I like that about her—the desire to explore—but I yank back, not appreciating her bullishness.

Back in camp, I set out more hay and begin packing the saddlebags, wishing I'd done a few dry runs back in Montana. But the past few months were so focused on learning to simply ride and handle Pepper that packing equipment for the trip was an afterthought.

Now I sort through a pile of gear, figuring where it's all gonna go. Maps, knife, compass, GPS (for distance and emergency), and snacks go in the pommel bags in front of the saddle. Clothing, food, stove, emergency horse grain, first-aid kit, pistol, and extra tack are in the larger rear saddlebags. Then in the cantle bag, atop the rear bags, goes a tent, folding camp chair (that doubles as a sleeping pad), additional tack, and more laminated maps for east of here, along with the picket for Pepper and miscellaneous bits that don't fit elsewhere. I also squeeze in some canned food and a round steel curry comb.

Pepper stands patiently while I fit the saddle. I chose a Tucker Trail Saddle for its comfort, lighter weight, and multiple attachment rings. During a practice ride a week ago, I tossed empty saddlebags on Pepper so she could feel the canvas against her flanks. But this is the first time they're going on her loaded. Beside the bulging bags, I clip three coils of rope, a ski helmet (now used for riding), extra carabiners, and a high-line swivel.

I wrap rope over the wobbly pile and take Pepper for a test walk. We go just a hundred feet when the lead rope tightens in my hand. I turn around to see Pepper's hind legs splayed out, the whole damn load now hanging from her belly.

“Holy shit!”

Frantically, I push up on the saddle and bags, thinking she'll get hurt or fall over any minute. But she just stands quietly, unfazed by the predicament as I fight the friction on the straps. Defeated by the situation, I'm forced to unload the whole pile right there on the beach. I drag the bags and Pepper back to our hidden campsite and start over.

It's obvious now that twenty pounds of extra canned food, clothing, and horse-training books have to be jettisoned. This stinging reality frustrates me, that for all the hurry I felt during the drive to the Oregon Coast I'll need to take another day to mail out the surplus and pack properly.

It's two days later when the packing is finally secured to a manageable size and the excess gear is shipped out. Pepper and I then gallop up and down the shore, embracing a last moment by the sea before turning toward the mountains. A rainstorm brews over the water. Showery columns close in over the building waves. Pepper's black mane blows wild in the stiff breeze. Her winter coat of thick silver-gray hair looks too hot for the temperature in the mid-forties. She flares her nostrils, inhaling the thick salty air while we trample the smooth wet edge of the beach. Though her gait is strong, even I can tell with my limited experience she needs tighter coordination. Like me, she's a novice.

After cutting back and forth over our tracks, I turn Pepper toward a high, dry hummock, and with a firm rein, I slow her to a stop for a last chance to hop off and touch the ocean. But she quickly drops onto her knees, tilting me out of the saddle. I stumble clear, barely pulling out of the stirrups in time, and turn to see her fall on her side. Confused, I reach for the reins to help. Suddenly, she rolls back and

forth, her hooves tearing into the beach and sending sand into the air. Then it hits me—she just wants to scratch her flanks and dumped me from the saddle to do so.

“Pepper! Come on, get up.” I watch her crush the saddlebags I had so carefully arranged.

She ignores my plea and flips side to side a few more times, then leaps up, shakes, and snorts a long sigh of relief. I straighten the bags and briefly pat her, secretly admiring her spunk. We walk to the shore, and I dip my fingers in, touching them to my lips to taste the sea before we go. A little wave slides in, encircling my boots. Pepper skitters back in fear, having been a Montana horse her whole life. I swing back into the saddle, now ready for the mountains.

We ride north up the shore to the delta where the Winchuck flows into the sea, then along the river’s edge and onto busy Route 101. I guide Pepper with gentle heels and rein for a half-mile beside the rushing traffic, then turn onto Winchuck River Road, paralleling the twisty waterway.

Shortly after, a rainy afternoon sets in as we thread between lowland hills with the conifer tops shrouded in mist. Sometimes I ride; sometimes I walk. I’m still not a skilled enough rider to urge Pepper into a speedy trot along such a narrow road.

At the boundary of Siskiyou National Forest, the pavement turns to gravel and the grade steepens. Rain intensifies into a downpour, rivulets of chalky runoff streak across the road. Fat drops fall off the brim of my brown Stetson as I search for a place to camp. Pepper follows, soaked to the bone. Eventually we find a grass clearing beside a drainage ditch with enough forage for her and tent space for me.

I pull the bags and saddle off Pepper and whack the picket in the ground with a heavy rock, finding it much easier to use than the plastic hammer. I then attach the red thirty-foot nylon rope to her halter as she grazes and move on to setting up my gray dome tent with double vestibules that cover my gear and saddle.

I sit inside, my bulky boots jutting out the door, and watch the wind bend the treetops. The offshore wind blows harder up here on the ridge. The rain patters a familiar thrumming on the nylon over my head. I've spent countless months—probably accumulating to years now—in tents of all shapes and sizes, usually alone. In a tent, I am home.

On my last journey—bicycling across Canada—it rained a lot. I'd pedal all day, often bare-chested to keep my shirts dry, every inch of me drenched. When the day's miles were over I'd set up under trees, or if I was lucky, a covered dugout at a baseball field in some small town. Then I'd kick back and stare at my bicycle, thinking of all the miles I just rode. Now I stare at Pepper. A different mode to cross the continent, this time without pedals.

Traveling long distances gives me the freedom that average workaday life doesn't. It's invigorating to be disconnected from the mundane—bills to pay, the electric leashes of cell phone and Internet, and the continuous bad news. So, it's become a pattern that every couple of years I take off on a long trek, to recharge and find grounding. To re-align with what's important. I travel away from my coordinated life to re-establish it again—and refine as necessary.

And discover what's next.

To maintain the “work hard, play hard” experience, I have to dig deep into self-motivation. From Alaska commercial fishing to carpentry to real estate ventures, I become consumed by every endeavor in hopes it will mature into a good return—something better than just wage

income. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. But I try for my work life to mirror my long-distance adventures.

**C**racks of thunder separate me from sleep. I wake to rain and gusting wind straining the tent. From my warm, dry sleeping bag I shine a headlamp beam through a tent vent, sweeping the spotlight until it hits Pepper, head low and tail tucked in, dripping wet.

“Good girl, Pepper. Good girl!” I shout over the pounding rain.

I'm grateful she's calm. This is only the fifth time I've tied her to a picket, and yet I can imagine the thunder and lightning frightening her enough to tear it loose. Then in desperation I'd be searching the soaked road for her fast-dissolving tracks, praying she doesn't run into the forest where she'd be gone for days, if not forever.

I settle back into my sleeping bag but can't shake the thought of this still happening, and so every couple of hours I wake to shine a light out of the tent. Each time I'm relieved when the beam finds her.

Come morning, in a steady rain we continue up the gravel road. I dismount and lead us onto a trail that climbs over Packsaddle Mountain and fords the Smith River, the most direct route east. But after only a few steps, thick brush hinders our way showing the trail hasn't been used in decades. Still, we push through the wet branches until the underbrush clears in a mature forest. We find the old trail again and I swing back into the saddle.

A mile later the forest ends at a dense swath of manzanita shrub, growing thick after a clear-cut. Again the trail disappears. So, I dismount and lead Pepper, searching for a way through. Quite quickly, though, she nudges me from behind, wanting to take the lead.

“Take it easy, Pep.” I tug on the rope.

But again, she pushes up close, this time knocking my hat off with her nose.

“Back off, Pepper!”

I know she’s nervous and confused, but she just needs to follow and carry the gear. As we weave deeper and deeper into the maze the branches are awful—stiff and sharp, and nearly impossible to push aside. My arms and hands take a lashing as Pepper leaves broken limbs in her wake. The sun breaks out of the clouds. Steam rises off the leaves.

I take my best guess as to where the trail goes—turning left, then right, then left again—but soon feel defeated by little progress. With Pepper still crowding me, I step aside.

“Have at it!”

She slams into the manzanita, but after only ten feet, she gets stuck too. In retreat, she spins around and scratches the hell out of the saddle and bags, and we now face each other, sweating and trapped. I finally lose it.

“What the fuck are we doing?”

Pepper, winded and standing with leaves in her mane, looks like how I feel. I then notice an open zipper on a rear saddlebag, freed by a sneaky branch tip. The cookware is gone...and the coffee press too. Now things are serious, with the future of hot coffee in jeopardy.

I backtrack twenty feet, then thirty, looking under the branches. But with the foliage so damn dense and all the zigzagging we’ve done, the camp dishes could be anywhere. Frustrated, I finally abandon the hunt, deciding to pick up replacements in O’Brien, the next town in three or four days. But now without metal containers, I can’t heat any food or drink.

I check the map. The terrain to the north and south falls steeply away, forcing us to retreat from where we came, twisting and turning back through the manzanita until we’re spat out again in the old forest.

Exhausted, I take us all the way back a mile to the road and make camp by a stream, falling far short of the day's miles I wished for, and ironically losing equipment on Packsaddle Mountain.

Still, this new challenge with a horse is exciting. Horses have always been an enigma to me—domestic animals with wild hearts. Sometimes I feel the same, probably more often than not.

It was two years ago that this journey was hatched while on that long bicycle trip across Canada. I was in the heart of Manitoba on the thirty-fifth day after departing the Pacific, alone, driving hard on the pedals, pushing my whole body into a wicked headwind. My eyes teared and lungs heaved. With the pavement achingly passing underneath and deadening prairie ahead, I shifted my gaze right. There, a beige horse stood quietly against a fence watching my progress, chest and leg muscles poised to run, mane blowing in the wind.

“Now *that's* what I should be riding!” I yelled across the prairie.

For another two hundred feet we stared at each other while I ground the bicycle wheels forward. Eventually the horse turned away, and I did too. But I never forgot seeing that strength penned in—not for the rest of the way to the Bay of Fundy, not when I was pitching fish in Alaska to buy a horse of my own, nor through that long winter when I trained myself to ride Pepper. There was something scary but riveting in that wildness that wanted to be released—and I wanted to throw a saddle on that energy and cruise the countryside, like a Western portrait of pioneer life.

But venturing into this continental journey by horseback hadn't come easy. Training was awkward, with both of us green, impressionable, and nervous of the other—even more so on the icy Montana roads and snowy fields, each fearing what the other might do.

Besides that November hunting weekend in the Crazy Mountains, I'd had only one other experience on horseback. Fifteen years ago, in Australia during a year off from college, I swung into a saddle thinking it would be easy. Minutes later I was gripped in a full gallop, frozen by the immense power beneath me as my horse chased another horse. Then an abrupt turn threw me off, and the lead horse's back hoof smacked me in the gut as I headed for the ground. An outline of that hoof bruised my stomach for days. Still, that impression of good luck was good luck after all—for not having my head in the way.

Regardless of the constant Montana cold, Pepper and I kept at it. The days stretched to weeks then three months, until mid-March, when we loaded into a truck and trailer, bound for the Oregon Coast and an early start on the best traveling weather.

Tackling such adventures with little preparation—and often skill—appeals to me. Little compares with living a slice of life not yet lived, then learning as it happens. I imagine traveling by horse will feel just the same, while transcending the present.

**In** the morning we set off again, this time staying on the twisty Forest Service road. After an hour and a half we intersect with the trail we'd sought the day before—a mere two hundred yards from where we were stuck in the manzanita maze, high on a hill. A bullet-pocked trailhead sign directs us onto a worn path.

We cross the rest of Packsaddle Mountain with ease and descend to the rocky Smith River, one of many rivers threading through the steep ridges of the Siskiyou Mountains. I sink in my saddle to duck under the branches and see speckles of whitewater punch through the green



undergrowth. I tie Pepper to a vine maple to scout the rest of the way alone. As I leave she paws the ground.

“It’s okay, Pep.” I walk back and pet her. Though it’s our third day, she’s still uncomfortable being alone in the forest. I back away, and she paws again.

“Pepper, cut it out! Whoa!”

Hesitantly, she stops. She needs to learn to stand quietly—and this might as well start now.

At the riverbank I see the current’s not as wild as it sounds, but far from easy to cross. Where the map shows a trail there are actually rapids, deep and wide, Class II leaning to III. I curse myself for not knowing better. Of course, the spring runoff in the mountains is gonna swell the rivers.

I return to Pepper, and together we walk north along the river’s edge to find a better way across. The foliage is still wet from a short rain last night, soaking my jeans where my waterproof chaps don’t cover. When I can catch glimpses of the river, it’s still wide and fast. Eventually, finding no new options, I turn us around. As we retrace, I see Pepper does as well as a machete for clearing underbrush.

We then explore south among towering redwood and Douglas fir on hilly ground. I lead Pepper up a soft, squishy incline to survey our surroundings.

Suddenly, the rope rips from my hand. I turn to see Pepper flipping backward down the slope. Snapping sticks and flapping saddlebags shatter the silence. Hide and hooves blur. She somersaults a full rotation and lands hard on flat ground. I leap down the hill, and race to her side as she dizzily raises her head. She looks at me, wide-eyed and confused, then thrusts her neck upward, readying to stand.

“It’s okay, Pepper. It’s okay, easy... easy... relax...” I force myself to remain calm, holding back the fear that she might’ve broken a bone.

She lays her head back down and closes her eyes. I'm stunned—it's like she understood me.

I run my hands over her, searching for blood and gashes. But before I can finish, Pepper slides her hooves under her body, and in one swift move, lurches up and stands. I jump back to avoid being hit by her lumbering limbs. We then stand together, frozen by the incident. I stroke her sweaty neck, consoling her with whispers as she stares straight ahead. I'm hesitant to let her move, my hand on the lead rope, like a first responder holding a spinal case. But then she breaks from her trance and turns toward a tree ringed with grass, pulling the rope from my hand.

As she grazes, I examine Pepper's body and limbs, brushing off dirt and leaves as I inspect. She doesn't even have a scratch or a limp as she moves. The only damage I find are a few separated seams on the saddlebags and a giant dent in the ski helmet, rendering it useless. So much for my only attempt at hauling along safety gear for myself.

I also discover that one of the rubber "boots" Pepper wears as an alternative to iron horseshoes tore off her back hoof. The rubber bottom is gone, but the upper neoprene ankle gaiter is still attached with frayed stitching.

Near the top of the slope, mired in mud, I find the rubber bottom sunk deep in a hole—the step she took that threw her off balance and tumbling down the hill.

Thankfully, the bags and saddle buffered her fall, like a hockey player wearing pads and mask. If the fall had been worse our nearest help is eighteen miles away, where houses line Winchuck River Road.

While Pepper grazes around the tree trunk I take off her other rear boot so her hind legs are balanced. I then sit on the bank, eat a Snickers, and take stock of what happened. If the accident had been worse

and she was suffering from a hyperextended limb or injured muscle, I have Dormosedan, a sedative, to inject. I've never done it but the vet showed me how—smack in the needle, deep and fast into the side of her neck, and press the plunger. I also packed bute pills—"aspirin for horses"—and gauze pads, duct tape, leg wraps, and iodine.

If the situation was truly irreversible, like a broken shoulder... I have my Ruger .357... and would do what's necessary.

I move us again up the hill, this time side-sloping, now knowing what's fine for me may not be for Pepper. She saunters behind, like her aerobatics never happened. At the top of the knoll I stare up at the monstrous trees reaching for the sky, the conifer branches gently swaying. From here I can see that any farther south will be a nightmare, rugged steep ground laced with logs and mossy boulders. Pepper's tumble was child's play compared to what could happen ahead.

I turn us around once again, still determined to cross the Smith.

Back at the river we have a drink. Pepper eats shoreline grass while I study the map for a missed opportunity. Stumped with what to do next, I lead Pepper back up the slope to more grass and tie her on a long lead to graze. I retrieve another Snickers and a pewter flask of Bushmills. A beam of sunlight warms my face as I pull a swig. The sun, now high and bright, pierces through the leafy canopy, dappling the forest floor. I stare at the speckled ground, my fingers resting in familiar dents from past trips.

The nearest trails and gravel roads are far beyond tall ridges, miles and miles away. It'd be truly simpler and safer to return to the ocean

and start over, taking a different Forest Service road five miles south.

I wander back to the river. The current flows fast, churning into choppy rapids downstream. On the far side, a faint line of stepping stones emerges from the water's edge. From mossy rock to mossy rock I meander upstream, ducking under low-hanging branches that block my view. A few more bounding leaps and I land on a large, round stone near the middle of the river. I take another gulp of whiskey and read the current for a while.

Then...there it is. It doesn't look easy, but maybe, just maybe, it could work. I rehearse the moves...*I'll jump in here, swim over there, float, and then grab that branch. If I miss, I swim for those other branches just before the rapids.*

The chances are good—or at least, good enough.

I clamber back up the riverbank.

“Well, Pep, we've got a way across!”

She turns her head, startled from resting hipshot, one back hoof turned up.

I untie two coils of rope and square-knot them together for a fifty-foot length, attaching one end to her halter. Then I pull off Pepper's two front boots so they're not lost in the river and strap them to the saddle. My clothes are next, as well as my boot insoles. I then lace my boots back on for better traction on the wet rocks. Buck-naked and optimistic, I lead Pepper back to the river.

I hop from one mossy rock toward another but don't stick the landing. Water rushes into my right boot, and suddenly I realize how damn cold the river really is. Goosebumps pop up across my arms and chest. I give in and recklessly slosh on.

The river rides up my legs as I near closer to the large, round stone I'd stood on, the frigid water already numbing my skin. Pepper

follows. I climb up and stand on the stone as a breeze blows through, chilling me more.

The current's running cold and fast. I watch the flowing black silk collide into the boulders downstream, erupting into chaotic whitewater. Pepper waits beside.

Still, I have some doubts about plunging in. But the time is now. I either cross here or back-track a long, long way—it's thirty risky feet or twenty-two miles of retreat.

My heart pumps faster and faster, goosebumps cover my whole body now. I coil the rope and rehearse the moves one last time, looking where I need to jump.

"Okay, Pep... here goes!"

My boots slam in, cold water splashes up. I sink to my waist and slip on the bottom. The brutally numb current pushes hard to knock me over.

"Whoa! Whoa!" I yell at Pepper, not wanting her to move.

She's insurance—my anchor. If the current's too swift to swim or—worse—I trap a boot between rocks, I have a thousand-pound horse that will hopefully drag me from my mess.

I lean upstream, toss out a couple yards of rope, and step in deeper—it takes my breath away. I slip again in my clunky boots, banging and sliding. Knowing I have to move quickly, I dive into the main current, swing my legs around downstream, and turn onto my back. My stint as a raft guide kicks in, triggering me to reach for boulders underneath to slow my rush downstream—but I never get a grip.

"Whoa, Pepper! Whooaa!"

I hope she's not walking away, or worse, following me, and bringing the length of my rope even closer to the rough rapids downstream.

The rope links us like mountaineers. The frothy whitecaps close in, the riverbank a blur of gray-green, the water pushing me where I don't

want to go. I turn onto my chest and madly swim for the east bank, kicking harder and harder. The rope tangles around my right arm as my left hand hits a submerged boulder, so I push off to gain yardage. I'm guessing the river's waist deep below me, but far too swift to think of standing. I keep kicking, though my boots feel as if they're filled with concrete.

Finally, I slip under one of the branches I aimed for and into calm water, the rope swirling around my waist. I stand in the shallow water.

"Yeah!"

I look upstream to see that Pepper's only moved a few feet forward as she stares at me. I walk up the shore, coiling the rope as I go, and step onto dry rocks in the sun, my back warming.

"Okay, Pepper. Come!"

Without hesitation, she steps into the fast current, the water rising up her legs and soaking her belly and the bottom of the saddlebags. In seconds she clambers up next to me—easily trumping my sophomoric effort.

"Good girl!" I stroke her neck.

This is her first time crossing a river—at least it was with me.

*There's no going back now.*

I tie Pepper to a tree and unload my clothes, pistol, and food bag. In the sun, I shed the waterlogged boots and make a peanut butter and honey tortilla rollup, then unpack the Ruger from its plastic bag. I pop open the cylinder and spin it. Guns haven't been that important to me, at least not on previous adventures. But when traveling on horseback over rugged terrain, having one feels necessary.

During our brief training over the winter I never did have