

2021

Be Wary of the Hind-Leg Kick: Memories of Donkey Driving in the Sandwich Notch Area of New Hampshire

William Geller

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/appalachia>



Part of the [Nonfiction Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Geller, William (2021) "Be Wary of the Hind-Leg Kick: Memories of Donkey Driving in the Sandwich Notch Area of New Hampshire," *Appalachia*: Vol. 73 : No. 1 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/appalachia/vol73/iss1/9>

This In This Issue is brought to you for free and open access by Dartmouth Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Appalachia by an authorized editor of Dartmouth Digital Commons. For more information, please contact dartmouthdigitalcommons@groups.dartmouth.edu.

Be Wary of the Hind-Leg Kick

*Memories of donkey driving in the
Sandwich Notch area of New Hampshire*

William Geller



FOR FIVE SUMMERS, FROM 1964 THROUGH 1968, I TAUGHT OUTDOOR skills to Boy Scouts at Mead Base, a camp at the foot of Mount Israel, at the southern edge of New Hampshire's White Mountain National Forest. The most popular trips of our six one-week summer programs were treks using donkeys. Not many people talk about the era of donkeys in the White Mountains. I have realized recently that my memories of these donkeys can paint a picture of what it was like to use animals. I will begin with the first donkey trip I led, in 1964.

The trip, like most of our trips, started on Monday morning with packing and ended on Friday afternoon. Our base camp is known today as Friends of Mead Base Conservation Center. Then it was called, officially, the New Hampshire Daniel Webster Council Boy Scouts of America Mead Wilderness Base Camp. The old house and tenting sites lie off Sandwich Notch Road. We spent hours on a Monday morning packing the week's food supply. I remember 25 pounds of saltine crackers and pack bags balanced on the backs of four donkeys. The boys were all eager to leave. We would start at Mead Base and head west through Sandwich Notch at the southern edge of the White Mountain National Forest, and climb the old Beebe River logging rail bed to its terminus at the base of Mount Whiteface. We would camp out four nights: near Guinea, Black Mountain, and Flat Mountain Ponds. We would return via the rail bed and Mount Israel to Mead Base on Friday afternoon.

Using donkeys was a quirky practice many have forgotten. William L. Putnam wrote in his book *Joe Dodge* (Phoenix, 2012) that donkeys served as pack animals in the White Mountains as early as 1930. Dodge, the hut manager for the Appalachian Mountain Club, formed the White Mountain Jackass Company in 1929 and by the next year was using 40 small donkeys. The animals, also known as burros, packed in supplies to AMC's high-mountain huts. The tradition continued until 1964.* Horses had done such work during the Ethan Crawford era of the mid-1800s, carrying visitors and supplies to the summits of Bald Peak and Mounts Chocorua, Hayes, Kearsarge, Lafayette, Moosilauke, Moriah, Osceola, Pleasant (now Eisenhower), Washington, and

* According to Putnam's research, also reported in *New Hampshire* magazine, Dodge bought the donkeys from Roswell, New Mexico.

A muleskinner above treeline with a loaded donkey. Donkeys carried loads in the White Mountains off and on in the early- to mid-twentieth century. AMC LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES

Willard. But in the twentieth century, people had taken on carrying gear until Dodge brought in the donkeys.

In hindsight, I understand the donkeys lured scouts to the mountains and made backpacking more exciting. Few of the scouts we led had ever done an overnight backpacking trip before they came to us. No one had been out for multiple days, either, but the scouts arrived ready to learn. With no particular time schedule between sunrise and sunset and short daily hiking distances, they lived in an optimal leaning environment. Their immersion experience started Sunday afternoon when they arrived, moved into a lean-to or tent, and in an assigned group of seven to eight scouts cooked the evening meal and the following morning's breakfast on a wood fire. Upon their return on Friday they used the camp's bathing facility, the Beebe River, and cooked their next two meals.

The donkeys could carry so much more than people that the boys could focus on learning backcountry skills throughout the trip in an area where leaving food drops was not possible. Even though we used dehydrated food, it still weighed more than an 11- or 12-year-old boy could carry. Most scout packs were frameless canvas backpacks. These were rectangular canvas bags about the size of a paper grocery bag with a top flap and narrow unpadded belt webbing for shoulder straps. Perhaps one outside pocket ran along the back. A few side grommets allowed tying something to the pack. The scouts had to carry their generally bulky sleeping bags, too. The donkeys didn't carry pots or frying pans: Each group of seven or eight boys shared in carrying those things.

Donkeys were new to me, and these donkeys we worked with had no experience as pack animals. A farm owner had delivered them the weekend before the trip. He left us with a tin of bag balm for any saddle sores the donkeys might develop. My ranger colleague Jerry had worked with a donkey on the previous year's trip. We had only one traditional looking packsaddle, so we made additional saddles from U.S. Army surplus backpack packboards with a belly strap of surplus webbing.

ON MONDAY MORNING OF THE TRIP, WE LOADED THE FOUR DONKEYS WITH duffel bags full of food. Getting them to walk on the first day provided entertainment right out of the old cartoon image of the loaded saddle slipping around to the donkey's underside. Before we started, Jerry told us to be wary of the hind-leg kick. Donkeys could kick straight back and out to the side. They sensed immediately what was coming when the heavy wool blanket went over their backs. We'd follow it with an empty saddle, but they tensed their belly muscles, making it exceedingly difficult to tighten the strap so that the saddle

would stay put. They began moving and kicking; nothing can hold a donkey still, so we learned to load a donkey while the donkey was in motion. The first time the loads went on, they'd try to buck them off, but with diamond hitches holding the loads to the saddle, they stayed.

How we got the donkeys to walk, though, still amazes me. They had no interest in leading the way, but once the line of scouts disappeared into the woods, they moved as long as we tugged on the lead ropes and patted their rumps. Once underway, all was fine. Their antics at starting off stopped within a couple days on the trail. Yet, even a few years into this routine, the animals could surprise us. The third year we had two donkeys, a "jack" and a "jenny," plus two ponies. We figured out that if the jenny led, the jack would follow, but we could not affix a packsaddle to either pony, not even with a travois. So that year, I carried a load AMC hut crew style and the two donkeys carried the remainder.

The donkeys' first night on the trail in my 1964 trip was off the Guinea Pond Trail (an old railbed), which crossed a rocky streambed, the Beebe River (which flowed out of Guinea Pond). The scouts stretched a tether line across a grassy area away from the water and tightly tied each donkey's lead rope to the line to prevent tangles. They kept donkeys tied away from trees to avoid ropes wrapping around trunks. This practice also kept them from feeding on and destroying the trees, and it maximized their feeding radius.

Nearby the scouts worked quietly in four groups with no hatchets, axes, or saws to make camp in a previously un-camped area. Each group pitched two 8-by-8-foot canvas tarps for sleeping, built a cooking fire site in the rocks near the flowing water, and collected firewood for both the evening and morning meal. Jerry and I circulated among the scouts offering encouragement and suggestions and answering questions. We did not provide rope for the tarps, and the scouts managed just fine. Collecting firewood was simple enough, and the scouts learned to distinguish between softwood branches and hardwood. When burned, the hardwood did not blacken pots and left the best bed of cooking coals.

Cooking dehydrated food required everyone's hands. A couple of scouts tended each group's fire. We had no fire grates, so two others in each group held a long dead stick with pots hung from it. Three more scouts stirred with sticks to ensure nothing stuck to the bottom. The challenge was to cook the dehydrated food to the right consistency and not burn it. If a pot's contents burned, then the tending person cleaned it. For cleaning we taught them to use gritty mud, fine sand, and mosses as scrub pads first, before relying on the single soap pad issued to each person.



A trail worker unloads donkeys at Madison Spring Hut in 1940. AMC LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES

The donkeys required no special food; they foraged on the natural grasses. Once a donkey had eaten the grasses within the radius of its tether rope, a scout moved it to a new spot on the line. For water the scouts unhitched the donkeys and led them to it.

At this site the following year the scouts were able to compare the donkey tracks with those of moose. None of the scouts realized moose were in the White Mountains and had never seen a moose, its tracks, or its dung. I hadn't either, until the summer of 1964. Our group found a section of the Algonquin Trail on the nearby Black Mountain ridgeline deeply padded with winter dung of a large unknown animal. Back at Mead Base we identified it as moose dung. In subsequent years we generally saw moose tracks in the Guinea Pond area, but we never saw a moose.

Tuesday morning of the trip, the donkeys woke most of us with their usual reveille call. As soon as a first person was up and moving about 5 A.M. the donkeys brayed. The scouts quickly built their fires and began cooking breakfast. The morning menu included hot cocoa, applesauce, hot cereal, and pancakes or French toast with syrup. No time was set for leaving camp, so cooking, eating, cleaning up, repacking, and removing the signs of a camp spot were done thoroughly as part of the learning experience.

We set out with the donkeys that morning to Black Mountain Pond, which was under the exposed cliffy face of Black Mountain, the predominant south ridge of Sandwich Dome. The trail was full of dark muddy sections without boardwalks. The boys leading the donkeys threw back the lead ropes and hopped across hummocks; the donkeys walked straight through the mud holes. All went well until one donkey sank into a hole and could not pull up a hoof. The donkey stood still and sank a little deeper. A bunch of us tried to lift it out, but we sank to our knees. Then someone thought to remove the packs. Once unloaded, the donkey calmly freed itself.

After the usual non-cook lunch at the pond near the shelter, the scouts made camp again, this time in a setting much different from that of the previous night, and then enjoyed a swim in the pond. The primary challenge here was a safe fireplace site; they had no rocky streambed in which to build. They pitched tarps in the woods on the low ridge behind the shelter. The pond's beavers seemed to like the scouts and joined them in the water. Adding to the fun was a rowboat with a hole in one end; they learned how to sit with the hole out of the water. Of course we were all skinny-dipping and air-drying. During my five summers in this area we never encountered another person or group.

The scouts really liked this site, so in subsequent years we spent two nights here and climbed Sandwich Dome without the donkeys. During a previous week the scouts opened up the overgrown, steep, and unused trail from the pond to the dome's Algonquin Trail, which was on top of Black Mountain. The dome, with its magnificent view into the core of the White Mountains, provided a mountain climbing experience that I hoped generated confidence and fueled dreams of climbing other mountains.

Amusing as the donkeys and mud were, we realized each summer's combined visits were having a negative impact. Even though the scouts cut no trees, our camping here five times in 1964 had worn the earth and visibly thinned the nearby forest of its breakable firewood. The following year we camped at the opposite end of the pond. A year later, we used a beaver meadow area west of the pond, and the subsequent year we stopped using the Black Mountain Pond Trail and moved out of the area entirely to what we called Ghost Camp. Walking the donkeys on the old railbed seemed nondestructive.

The donkeys had no trouble reaching Ghost Camp via a bushwhack route we kept camouflaged. The campsite was in a hardwood grove on the banks of a nice stream with a big "bathtub" and access to the dome via a bushwhack. The camp name stemmed from the many ghosts' eyes we felt watched over

us each night. Abundant in the standing trees and on the ground was foxfire fungus; some scouts produced “glow art” with it for a subsequent evening. The only indicators of our presence were a long 3-foot-diameter beech trunk table with pulp wood sticks for seats on either side and an oven.

The donkeys influenced the building of the oven and the baking activity. The scouts carried in pulp sticks to create a waist-high log crib with a log top covered by a layer of sand and two lines of large stones between which they built a fire and on which they set a discarded logger’s rusted metal drum on its side, the oven. Thanks to the donkeys’ backs the after-supper baking included corn bread, and chocolate, vanilla, and buttermilk cakes; all heavily garnished with berries picked in the local area.

In 1966, my third summer, we added a second donkey trip to replace the camp’s survival skills week program, and we incorporated some of its activities in the donkey trips. During my first two years experts who came and worked with the scouts included an edible wild plant and berry specialist, Curt Schneider, and the area game warden, Dave Hammond.

As we moved through the woods each day on the donkey trip, we helped scouts identify edible wild berries, plant tubers, and plant greens. We talked about the saying “anything that walks, crawls, or swims is edible.” Ghost Camp area was diverse and enabled us to spend a morning collecting food for the midday “edible wild food buffet” that included such items as starflower root, Solomon seal root, berries, frog, snake, chipmunk, and salamander. The scouts usually challenged me to eat a salamander and a leech. The salamander was crunchy with a fishy flavor; the leech I swallowed whole.

On Wednesday morning the scouts packed up again and headed to Flat Mountain Pond area for our last two nights on the trail. By this time the donkeys knew the routine and the scouts knew how to handle them. Invariably late in the afternoon around swim time someone would ask, “Can we ride the donkeys?” The area had some open spaces near the pond and shelter. The donkeys were good natured and let scouts sit on their backs—but most of the time would not walk around. Given their pronounced spines they offered uncomfortable seats.

Thursday was a day the donkeys remained in camp alone while everyone went off on a map-and-compass course. Mount Whiteface was one destination and another was the Flat Mountain area. Before starting and every time we changed direction, the scouts oriented their maps to obtain a bearing. If any pair’s bearing was not similar to the common bearing, then everyone repeated the exercise.

Even though we were at Flat Mountain Pond two to four nights a summer, by 1968 we knew it was time for another area. On a compass exploration to Flat Mountain, we found an extraordinary spot that the scouts immediately liked. Among ledges we followed a water flow through what looked like a knife slice in the granite, into a cave, climbed a waterfall, and exited a hole at its top. The donkeys returned with us the following week when we built a sleeping platform with a view for 35 scouts on the sharply sloped granite ledge using no tools or rope, only old rail spikes and dead and rotted trees.

Leaving the donkeys alone at a campsite while we took a half or full day's excursion never occurred to me as being potentially dangerous for them. In today's environment I think about bears, but back then with all the eyes we had looking for and finding animal signs, and stopping to talk about what we were looking at, I don't remember ever seeing bear tracks or scat. One thing for sure was that the donkeys would bray loudly multiple times as soon as they sensed we were close to camp.

On Friday a sharp, good-looking, smiling group and four attentive donkeys moved easily as one back down the railbed and took the Wentworth Trail to the top of Mount Israel, where we stopped for a long lunch before descending to Mead Base. From here the scouts traced their week's journey and could see the peaks that awaited their feet at some future time.

I always wondered if any other camps were using pack animals during those years or after. My first observation of their presence elsewhere in the White Mountains was in August 1995 in the Wild River valley on the logging railroad bed of the Wild River Trail. An outfitter in the Gilead, Maine, area had a group of families with children and llamas. Their tent camp sat between the river and the trail some distance upriver. I was pleasantly surprised at how the soft llama hooves barely marked the trail and how hard it was to find where they foraged.

Editor's note: William Geller's article about this camp's sixth week, when they led backpacking trips to Mount Washington, appeared in Appalachia, Winter/Spring 2020.

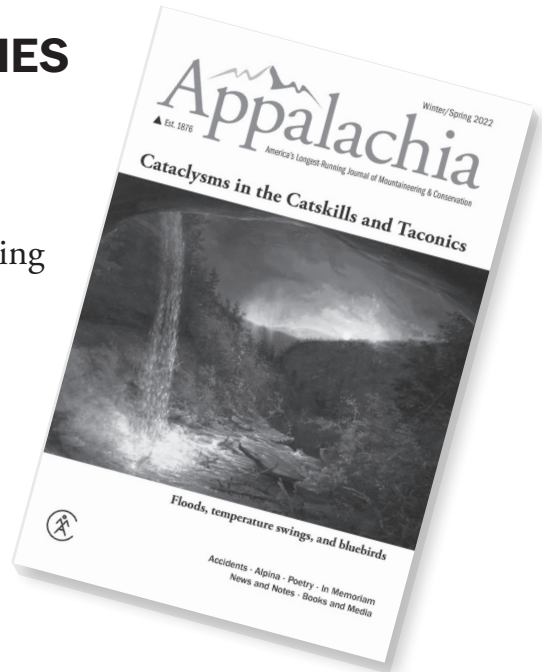
WILLIAM GELLER, a retiree who explores in the outdoors in every season, lives in Farmington, Maine. His research and writing are available at his website Mountain Explorations, sites.google.com/a/maine.edu/mountain-explorations. "Ranger Bill" would enjoy hearing from anyone who went on a trip with him. Contact him at geller@maine.edu.

"I started reading Appalachia for the accident reports, but I kept reading for the great features."—Mohamed Ellozy, subscriber

SUPPORT THE STORIES YOU LOVE!

Start or renew your *Appalachia* subscription today, and keep reading America's longest-running journal of mountaineering and conservation.

Visit outdoors.org/appalachia for a special offer: 36% off the journal's cover price. That's three years of *Appalachia* (6 issues) for only \$42. Or choose a one-year subscription (2 issues) for \$18—18% off the cover price.



Inside every issue, you'll find:

- inspired writing on mountain exploration, adventurers, ecology, and conservation
- up-to-date news and notes on international expeditions
- analysis of recent Northeastern mountaineering accidents
- book reviews, poetry, and much more

Subscribe today at outdoors.org/appalachia or call 800-372-1758.



Subscription prices valid as of September 2021. Prices and offers subject to change without notice. For the most up-to-date information, visit outdoors.org.