

AUGUST 18, 1983

After I'd inspected the drouth country from Mertzon to El Paso, I went on up to Silver City, N.M., north and west of Las Cruces, in case you are unfamiliar with my course. My base camp is at a guest ranch three miles from Silver City. I'm well cared for by a lady that's been willing to get me off every morning at six with a big breakfast and a sack lunch.

The main point of interest has been to drive back in the Gila Wilderness Area to ride horseback and walk short distances into the forests and rivers and Indian ruins. Forty miles from my camp into the area, there's a plat of deeded land that headquarters an outfitter for dudes and hunters. These folks have kept me going, either on a horse or by careful directions.

It was the first time I've ever rented a horse. Lots of them I've drawn or owned, I'd liked to have rented out to the Mexican Army, or maybe for parade horses to help celebrate the silver jubilee of the Proctor & Gamble Soap Co.

The fact that I've had to pay rent on a horse isn't a conflict of interest or a waste of money. Most of the old duds I've been associated with would take a real smart rental agent to get four-bits a day for the right to use them to explore the Grand Canyon.

Included in the horse deal was a guide that I wanted for an audience and also to keep me from overriding this 574,000 acre area. The guide has turned out to be a willing pupil. I've taught him how to tell the difference between a bear track and human footprints. Bears up here have followed so many back-packing trails their pads are waffled exactly like the soles of a pair of hiking shoes. Unless it happens to be some mighty heavyweight hikers, as I showed him, you have to know your bear sizes to tell these present day tracks or you'll end up thinking you are following a big boar bear only to discover you've back trailed a man and wife team from Minnesota, or perhaps a right healthy farm family from Wisconsin.

For the short time this guide has been away from his usual career of being a boilermaker in Los Angeles, he sure has converted over to learning a lot of mountain lore. He spun a story on a grizzly bear hunter that was a right professional job. I never have seen a boiler made, but it must take a measure of oral creative effort from the way this guy performs.

One thing I have learned about dude wrangling is that you sure don't want to work yourself too high in the ranks. The boss and owner is a lady. She does everything from buying the horses to keeping what looked like about 50 or 60 head shod. I cautioned the guide to be careful and not pay too much attention to rasps and hammers and nails. Ambition is a cherished virtue in the flatlands, but up here in these rocks and canyons, a shoeing job couldn't last too long.

The family that owns the deeded land right in the middle of this huge government preserve are all busy not only making a living from the store and the accompanying tourist businesses, but have to fight the federal government off their springs and water rights. Living in the wilderness has turned them into a tough breed that's hard to spook off their ground. The whole family shows a courageous spirit that makes shoeing a rent

horse of fighting off a bureaucrat part of a day's work. After I'd talked to the father awhile, I was carried away by these mountain people, as I'm sure you can see.

I awakened this morning to elk bugling, later to learn that the elk are still up in the high country. Silver City is hosting a school bus driver's convention, so that may explain what I heard. Anyway, that's a different story for a different time. I sure do like the mountains and the people that they mold. It's going to be hard to go back and face the drouth after this short rest up here.