

Wanted: a sure foot and a keen eye The packers, freighters and their horses

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Before the arrival of the railroads in 1895, all freighting and packing work was done using horses and mules. Not only was there ore to be freighted out; but millions of pounds of food, camp supplies, building materials and mining equipment had to be hauled in to meet the needs of the fast-growing community in Carpenter Creek valley. Kaslo was only 20 miles (32.18 km) away, as the raven flies; in actual fact, it was 60 miles (96.54 km) of trail that zig-zagged around obstacles, took wide detours and forded swiftly-running, boulder-strewn streams.

Packing quickly became a vital business. Wagon roads were built, and by 1892 freighting

business between Kaslo and Sandon had begun. One year after the initial "Payne" discovery, 16 mines were in production, with six shipping out high-grade ore by horse. With the announced intention of both the K&S syndicate and the CPR to push the rails through, the future of the community was assured. In 1894, 8.8 million pounds (4,082,400 kg) of ore was carried out by horses to K&S railheads at McGuiggan, Zincton, and Whitewater, or to CPR shipping points on Slocan Lake.

On the return trip, the animals were loaded with freight of every description- food for people, feed for animals, mine rails, steel cables, drill steel, coal oil, dynamite, whiskey, wine, rum, beer, tobacco, doors, windows, pipe, picks, shovels, axes, saws, stoves, mine cars, horseshoes, nails, spikes, blacksmith coal, hammers, clothing, blankets- in short, everything the growing city needed. Much of this equipment had to be specially packed, loaded and balanced, and it was a skill the packers and freighters were proud of. Indeed, packers lived by their reputations for getting goods through safely and without damage.

With the arrival of the rail lines in 1895, packing and freighting work increased, as men and as many as 800 horses moved an astonishing 19.2 million pounds (8.7 million kg) of ore from the Sandon area mines to the railways, in sacks weighing 150 to 170 pounds (68 to 77 kg) each. The load for the horse or mule varied, according to the animal, but the average was about 200 pounds (90.72 kg). Because most producing mines were near, or above, the 6,000 foot (1,828.8 metre) level, along thin and treacherous trails, good horses and mules were treasured for their strength and sure-footedness, and more than one horse in the Sandon camp became famous for its abilities.

Of course, sometimes these animals were loaded beyond reasonable limits. One story was told of a 400 pound (181.44 kg) compressor cross-head being loaded on "the best and strongest pack mule in the camp" for a four-mile trip up steep trails from Sandon to the Ivanhoe mine. Four big men were sent along, to take some of the weight off the animal every time it stopped to rest. Finally, after hours of brutal struggle, the men and animal staggered into the compressor house yard, "but before the cross-head could be unloaded, the poor beast collapsed and died". (account from Window in the Rock by Gene Petersen)

In addition, many horses were used to haul the ore-trains underground. Using a primitive system of a candle in a tin can, known as a "bug", hanging around the horse's neck to light the way, the horses pulled trains of loaded ore cars to the mine portals, then hauled the empties back underground. Once again, many stories are told of specific horses in the Slocan camps who demonstrated remarkable skill in their work.

Of all the "horse stories" in Sandon, however, one stands out, as it demonstrates the value the men placed on their horses, as well as the love they felt for them. On the morning of May 3, 1900, when fire swept through Sandon, only one building was left standing in the downtown core the next morning- a large livery barn, filled with horses. Unable to guide the horses out through the raging flames, firemen and miners had fought desperately, side-by-side, in a determined effort to save the animals. Somehow, in the midst of all the devastation, a minor miracle was performed, and not one horse was lost. Many of the horses' rescuers were themselves homeless by morning, but no doubt none of them felt it was a wasted effort.

Gradually, with increased automation and the advent of vehicles, horses were used less in the mines or on the pack trails, and the specific skills required of the animals and men became forgotten. From the 1890s, when four or five pack trains would pass through Sandon daily, the number dwindled until, by the late 1920s, the pack trains were virtually gone. Today, the only reminder of the packers and freighters and the long trains of hardy animals are a few rusty horseshoes still scattered on the high mountain trails.