

PACKING FOR FOOT TRAVEL

THE MANTY PACK

AN IMPROVISED METHOD

FOR CARRYING GEAR

IN UNFORTUNATE

SITUATIONS

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ROCKY MOUNTAIN OUTFIT
COLORADO

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The Mountaineers whom we wish to emulate were, first and foremost, mounted men. However, owning a horse or mule requires time, money, and experience that not everyone has. Because of this sometimes we must make a compromise and portray a less common situation, that of being on foot.

“... harried by horse-stealing Indians, left him in the ne-plus-ultra of mountain misery—“afoot;”— George Frederick Ruxton¹

[NOTE: *ne-plus-ultra* is Latin for “nothing more beyond” — Also *nec-plus-ultra* or *non-plus-ultra*. A descriptive phrase meaning the best or most extreme example of something.]

Travel on foot was usually due to unfortunate circumstances such as losing the stock to raiding Indians, or even resorting to eating them. At these times survival was at stake and only the bare minimum of gear would have been taken. The rest was either cached or destroyed so it did not fall into the hands of the enemy.

“We finally concluded to conceal our merchandise, baggage, fur, and every thing that we could not pack on our backs or on the two mules, and return to our appointed winter quarters, ...” — Zenas Leonard²

Unfortunately documentation for packing gear and carrying it on foot is rather scarce. When forced into these difficult times, how did the Mountaineers carry the gear they needed to survive?

Other articles have been written on the subject of foot travel, and it is not my intention to duplicate their efforts. Instead the focus of this article is about a particular style of packing gear on your back that I have been using for the last couple of years, which I refer to as a “manty pack.” I will provide documentation and reasoning to show how I arrived at this method, and then give a description of how I do it.

First we will start with the back-story.

TUMPLINE

The humble tumpline or burden strap was perhaps the method most commonly used method for carrying a burden among the Native Americans. It could be worn across the forehead, chest, or both. The Canadian Voyageurs often used this method to portage their baggage.



Cornelius Krieghoff - Indian Trapper on Snowshoes circa 1849

When I first started “trekking,” this is the method that I also used. I continued to use it for many years, covering hundreds of miles. While it worked, I always found it to be fairly awkward. I had trouble consistently tying my tumpline. I would make it either too tight which would restrict my breathing when worn across my chest, or too loose, causing my load to hang low. As I hiked along I had to re-adjust my load frequently or shift shoulders. I felt like I was fighting it and there had to be a better way.

Over the years I continued to experiment with other ways of carrying my gear over, but none left a lasting impression. I decided to approach the subject differently after digging into this description left by Rufus Sage in the early 1840s:

“Preparations were therefore immediately commenced for acting upon the only prudent alternative now left. Each man selected for himself a blanket, or robe, which, with such other necessities as he could conveniently carry, was bound in the form of a knapsack and strapped to his shoulders; our animals were then heavily laden with provisions, and the remaining luggage (consisting of arms taken from the enemy, saddles, robes,



Captain Lewis shooting an Indian.

*blankets, knives, &c.,) committed to the flames; the value of property thus destroyed, amounted to several thousand dollars.”--
Rufus Sage³*

Besides the obvious value of this being a reference to being on foot, and a brief mention of what was taken with, I think there are two key details. The first is the comparison to a “knapsack,” and the second is the wording “strapped to his shoulders.” My interpretation of this is that it was worn over both shoulders, as one would wear a backpack.

KNAPSACK

A knapsack is defined as a soldier’s bag, carried on his back and containing necessities of food and clothing. It could be of leather or cloth, often painted for waterproofing. A blanket could be rolled and buckled to this knapsack.⁴

Like most things, the knapsack has evolved over time. The knapsack of the 18th century was carried with a single strap slung across one shoulder. This includes the “New Invented Knapsack” of the American Revolutionary War. There is an illustration in the 1812

edition of Patrick Gass’s journal showing the members of the Lewis & Clark expedition using this style of knapsack.⁵

In 1808 the Lherbette pattern knapsack was patented. It contained a number of improvements over the former design, one of which was using two shoulder straps instead of one. It was adopted by the United States Army and made the standardized pattern soon after. It is thought that the Lherbette pattern was an improvement on an already existing two-shoulder knapsack, so it is possible that style was in use prior to 1808.⁶

I have come across two period paintings that possibly depict this style of knapsack.

The Alfred Jacob Miller painting is somewhat of an anomaly as it appears to be a later painting, and is the only one of his works that I am aware of that shows a knapsack or canteen. I believe it, along with the Rufus Sage quote, and the fact knapsacks with two shoulder straps existed for over 15 years before the first rendezvous, show this method of carrying gear could have possibly been used, especially among men who may have had any kind of prior exposure to the military.



Alfred Jacob Miller - A Narrow Escape - Nebraska Art Museum, Date unknown

So looking back at the Rufus Sage quote, what does it mean when the blanket or robe was “*bound in the form of a knapsack*”? Does that just mean a square shape with two straps worn on the back?

HORSE PACKING

If we stop and think about these men and their day-to-day lives, one thing that should be obvious is that they would have known how to pack and unpack a horse. I personally believe that panniers were used a lot less frequently than you see today. Instead goods packed on horses and mules were probably more commonly baled up, or mantied, and slung over a sawbuck packsaddle. Looking at the below Miller painting we can see a picture of what a bale would have looked like. According to his accompanying notes “*In the foreground a female is cording a bale of dried meat.*”¹

I believe it would be logical to use a bale as the base for packing man as well. With the addition of two shoulder straps on the bundle, it could be made similar to a knapsack like Sage described.



Cornelius Krieghoff - Indian Trapper on Snowshoes - 1858



Alfred Jacob Miller - *An Indian Camp*, ca 1858-1860

Of course this is mainly conjecture on what they could have done. Being on foot was not common, and we are only left with generic statements about the struggles while travelling on foot, not detailed descriptions of how it was done.

"... the next morning we cut some of the Elk meat in thin slices and cooked it slowly over a fire then packed it in bundles strung them on our backs and started" — Osborne Russell⁸

"When we reached it [Ft Laramie], a man came out of the gate with a pack at his back and a rifle on his shoulder; others were gathering about him, shaking him by the hand, as if taking leave. I thought it a strange thing that a man should set out alone and on foot for the prairie. I soon got an explanation ... Growing tired of this, he made up a pack of dried meat, and slinging it at his back, set out alone for Fort Pierre on the Missouri, a distance of three hundred miles, over a desert country full of hostile Indians." — Francis Parkman⁹

"In this situation we remained for five or six days, when Mr. Stephens proposed that each man should go on foot, with a trap or two on

his back, his blankets, together with what we could pack upon the two mules, and commence trapping on these creeks. This proposition was objected to by some of the company" — Zenas Leonard¹⁰

HOW I PACK

With the above hopefully I have laid out a foundation for carrying gear on your back using a bundle or bale mantied up with two shoulder straps, knapsack style. Next I will explain how I pack my gear. When approaching these problems it is important to put yourself in the mindset of a Mountaineer. What materials do I have on hand to solve this problem? It can be difficult to approach these problems with out letting our modern ideas influence us.

When I head into the mountains I carry fairly minimal gear. It generally consists of a 7x9 oilcloth tarp, 1 or 2 wool blankets, a red wool shirt, a buckskin hunters hood, extra pair of moccasins, fire starting kit, a small tin kettle, a tin cup, and a small bag of dried food (jerky, corn, rice, fruit, &c.). This usually weighs between 20 and 25 lbs depending mostly on whether I take one or two blankets, and how much food I bring.



The first thing that I do is lay my tarp out flat. I then fold my blankets in half lengthwise, then in half and half again. This makes them just the right size for my back. I place the folded blankets in the center of my tarp. The rest of my gear is organized on top of the blankets. I use my canvas saddlebags to keep loose items together, and then I can also use it when going off for a day hike.

Just like when packing a horse you want to make sure your weight is distributed evenly. I generally place the heaviest stuff in the middle, and the lightest stuff on the bottom. More rigid items like the kettle work best in the center, with items like moccasins or spare clothes on the outsides so that the lash rope can be cinched down tightly.



Next the tarp is folded up from the bottom, then in from the sides, and finally the top is folded down over it all. This layering acts as a shingle and will allow rain to run off of the pack when it is worn. A 20 foot length of $\frac{1}{4}$ " hemp rope with a back-braided loop in one end is used to tightly lash the bale together.

Lashing is done by first making a loop around the top end of the bale. Then create a loop around the middle, and then the bottom. From here run the rope around underneath and tie it off at the top loop. This is harder to describe than to do. If you happen to have access to a computer there are a number of videos on YouTube when searching for "*manty bale of hay*" that show how it is done.





Bill Gantic and the author while on a 12 mile in November 2012

After making the bale, all that is left is to add the shoulder straps. There are many materials that could be fashioned into shoulder straps, such as hair on buffalo rawhide, leather belts, or re-purposed horse tack such as stirrup leathers, surcingles, cinch latigos, &c. I use two of my old burden straps -- one is of half-tanned buffalo with the hair on, the other is of bark-tanned leather. These just happen to be what I have on hand, and show how things can be cobbled together. I loop them over the top rope on the bale, and then tie them off at the bottom rope, making sure to leave enough slack for my arms to go through.

On the outside of my pack I keep my canteen, small sack of trail food, and sometimes a hatchet. It is convenient to have these things on the outside for quick access on the trail.

A side note about pack frames

I am aware that through history, the use of pack frames has existed in some form or another. It is not my intention to dismiss them or those that choose to use them. However my personal thoughts on the subject are that I believe they tend to reflect using modern experience and thinking and adapting it to using historical materials. I strive to put myself in the mindset of a mountaineer out in the field. If I was forced to go afoot, would I stop over to build a pack frame? Does the extra weight of that justify the benefits? From my experience, I have found it to be unnecessary. If a pack frame works well for you though, by all means continue to use it. There are compromises that sometimes need to be made, and the fact that we are out on foot rather than on horseback is already one of them.

CONCLUSION

Getting out on the ground wearing buckskin is truly one of the great things in life. For me it is a way to take a step back from the fast pace of modern society and relive a simpler time. For the times when I do not have access to a horse, being on foot is the next best thing.

Even though being on foot was described as “mountain misery,” it does not mean it has to be miserable. It has now been over two years since I first started packing with this method. Compared to my experience with the burden strap, I have found this method of carrying gear to be much more comfortable. I have been able to go greater distances with less fatigue. I find the bale is rigid enough to ride against my back with no need for a pack frame, and the blankets provide adequate padding.

I believe this subject is a perfect example of the “experimental archaeology” side of things. It plays an important part of living history by giving us the ability to speak from experience when educating the public.

Carrying your burden on your back really makes you stop and appreciate each and every piece of gear you take. It's best for each item to have multiple uses. My suggestion is to keep track of what items you bring and never use. Or step out of your comfort zone occasionally and leave an item at home and see how you do without it. Experience will show you what you really need.

I encourage you to pack up your gear, strap it on your back, and hit the trail. Perhaps our paths will cross and we can share a campfire.

In closing I will leave you with two sketches made by Harold Webster-Bullock around 1874-1880. Although nearly 40 years past the prime of the rendezvous period, these two sketches depict a very similar style of carrying the load.



Harry Bullock-Webster - Going home with the tongues --very cold--but oh! so happy, circa 1874-1880



Harry Bullock-Webster - Summer travelling--on the Latla Trail, circa 1874-1880

FOOTNOTES

1. George Frederick Ruxton, *Life in the Far West*, p.150
2. *Narrative of the Adventures of Zenas Leonard*, pp.32-33
3. Rufus Sage, *Rocky Mountain Life*, p.322
4. *Webster's 1828 Dictionary*
5. Patrick Gass, *A Journal of the Voyages and Travels of a Corps of Discovery*, p.245
6. Robert J. Moore Jr. & Michael Haynes, *Tailor Made, Trail Worn*, p.269-272
7. Marvin C. Ross, *The West of Alfred Jacob Miller*, pl.153
8. Osborne Russell, *Journal of a Trapper*, p.166
9. Francis Parkman, *The Oregon Trail*, pp.71-72
10. *Narrative of the Adventures of Zenas Leonard*, p.33

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