

From Sea to Shining Sea

Seeing spacious skies and purple mountain

majesties from the back of a horse.

By Tom Moates

I IN THE 1970s, 28-YEAR-OLD ALLEN RUSSELL WAS A WANDERER. But not the hitchhiking type.

In 1975, Allen rode his American Quarter Horse, King Hoppy Kono, from the Canadian border down along the Rocky Mountains through the entire length of the United States to Mexico – 2,400 miles.

"I felt I was born in the wrong time," he says. "It used to be, people were able to just wander horseback. I wanted to get a feel for what that felt like ... get to know the country I live in a step at a time. I had total confidence that if I started in Canada and kept 'Kono's' nose going south, I'd hit Mexico. It worked, even though I often didn't know where I was."

Allen and Kono's cross-country trip isn't one of the longest rides ever recorded, but in the eyes of the Long Riders Guild, a group of horseback travelers who have shunned modern conveniences and the hustle and bustle of daily activity in favor of the peace and quiet of nature, the length of the trip isn't important.

"A glance at the Equestrian Travel Timeline (www.the-long-riders-guild.com) should reveal more than enough 'firsts' to satisfy anyone," the group's Web site says. "The names inscribed there cannot speak of all the perils they witnessed, the dangers they survived, and the sacrifices they and their horses made for each other. We are about the deceleration of our souls, not the

idle boasting of a lightning-flash crossing of a continent."

Allen and Kono's trip stands out because the trip they made from the northern to southern borders of the United States was done almost completely along back-country routes.

"The primary difference in my ride and most others," says Allen, who is a member of the Long Riders Guild, "is that I rode totally back-country, not along side roads or an established route. From Canada to Mexico, Kono and I rode along roads maybe 50 miles total. Much of the time, we bush-whacked; even established trails often didn't lead where we wanted to travel."

Keep in mind that Allen made his journey long before hand-held GPS devices, cell phones or even the first laptop computer, so getting lost was a lot easier then. Still, Allen says that given the choice today, he would leave the gadgets at home.

"To me, that just ruins the whole thing," he says of taking electronics into the wild. "It seems to me, the point of doing it is to get away from all that. On my trip, if I had broken a leg up on a mountain somewhere, I would have died ... it adds a lot to the sense of accomplishment. You have to pay attention. It's the *real* thing. Today, we live in a world where there are always safety nets."

Allen chose the extremely challenging Rocky Mountain



Allen Russell and King Hoppy Kono

and there are sure traits that pass on.

"A good mountain horse is like a distance runner. Kono had the right conformation, and I paid attention to that. Not really big, very well proportioned: 15 hands, nice neck, not real bulky. Kono was a bay with four black legs and hooves. After that trip, I rode him a million miles leading pack strings around here; he never took a sore step."

Allen knew he and Kono would have to stay on track to make the journey down the Rockies in one season. He started right at the end of the winter weather for Glacier, and he was aware that the northern mountains of New Mexico are known for their early snows.

"I thought we could make the trip in three months," he says with a chuckle. "It took five."

Some long riders travel with one or more pack horses. Allen felt making the trip on a single Quarter Horse was the way to go.

"The more horses you take, the more you set yourself up for failure," he says. "If you have three horses, only one has to go lame to shut you down. Only one has to act up to greatly slow

you down. I'll take one good horse any day and give him the attention and consideration he deserves to keep us going. The reason I went with a single horse is because I wanted to be fast and mobile. If you don't put your horse first, you probably won't succeed."

Aside from more potential for disaster with extra horses, there is simply more upkeep as well. Allen managed to do a little "cowboy shoeing" when necessary on Kono. At night, Kono was hobbled and accessorized with a bell, which was a simple means to keep the horse close, but still allow him to forage a bit.

"When I got to the border, people had found out, so when I got there, I did a ceremonial ride over and back," Allen recalls. His parents were among those who met him there, and they hauled Allen and Kono home.

"I wouldn't trade that experience for anything in the world," Allen says. "I'm a real believer in adventures."

West to East

THAT SAME YEAR, ANOTHER REGISTERED AMERICAN Quarter Horse was ridden coast to coast: this one west to east from Ventura, California, to Virginia Beach, Virginia. Twenty-four-year-old John Egenes had recently finished a three-year tour in the United States Navy, serving mostly on a submarine during the Vietnam War. After that experience, wanderlust and the desire for wide-open spaces compelled him to experience the country horseback.

"Originally, I thought about Canada to Mexico," he says, "but I thought that wasn't really long enough."

Such ambition prompted him to order quality, detailed maps of the whole country. With them, he mapped a general cross-country course to take along a southerly route.

Escaping the confines of a submarine and the military service may have helped jumpstart the desire to get horseback and head out across America. However, the book "Tschiffley's Ride," an autobiographical account of Aimè Tschiffley's 10,000-mile journey horseback from Buenos Aires, Argentina, to Washington, D.C., in 1925, planted the seed in John's mind.

"I checked it out of the high school library," John says, "and never gave it back. That book was *the* pivotal thing for me. That's what really sparked it."

John grew up with horses, so a saddle was a familiar place for him. His family raised and owned American Quarter Horses in South Pasadena, California. At the time that his trip was coming together, he had recently acquired and broke "Gizmo," a Leo-bred gelding from the family's stock. Gizmo, whose registered name was The Wayward Note, was out of My Wayward Lady, a mare that John's mother owned and that had been bred by the King Ranch in South Texas. Gizmo's sire was an excellent racehorse of the time, Palleo's Note. The 4-year-old Gizmo just happened to be in the right place at the right time to be chosen to make the trip.

"If I was going to look for a horse," John says, "my first choice would have been a Quarter Horse."

"The horse is very much a part of the intrigue of a trip like this," he says. "You're disconnected ... you're out there alone with your horse. When you live with a horse day and night, you get very, very close to him. Pretty much all the time out

Allen Russell and King Hoppy Kono



COURTESY OF ALLEN RUSSELL

route not just to get away from modern conveniences, but also quite simply to avoid fences. He lived on a little ranch in Oklahoma and had done some day work on quite a few others, as well as taken a few rides around the lands out West, so he was well aware of how criss-crossed the countryside was with fencing. Riding miles in one direction looking for a gate, did not appeal to him, nor did laying fence down and then having to repair it. Neither did sticking to existing roads the whole time. So, when he looked at a map of the country with this trip in mind, the Rocky Mountains with their naturally difficult geography that often passed through the vast open lands of national forests were the obvious route for him.

"There's a real art to waking up in the morning, looking at a mountain range, reading it and getting through it without having a dead end and having to double back," Allen says.

To get started, Allen and Kono were dropped off on a road to the west of Glacier National Park. They rode to the Canadian border and then into Glacier to start their trek southward.

"I was an experienced horseman," Allen says, "but I wasn't an expert mountain traveler."

The first four weeks of the trip proved to be the wettest Montana spring in 30 years. It rained all but two days in the first month on the trail. Kono was sore at first, which slowed

their progress. It was cold and wet, and in the first week, they reached the Flathead River, which was swollen with the water from the recent rains.

"I sat looking at that thing for half a day," Allen remembers. "I eventually built up enough nerve to jump in. It was a quarter-mile wide. Water jerked me off that horse. Kono went across pretty good. He was standing there eating when I got back up to him after hiking back upstream from where I ended up."

The lesson from that day, Allen says, was to dismount and stay on the upstream side of the horse when crossing deep rivers.

Of all the many challenges and achievements on this journey, what stands out in Allen's mind the most is that "I made it with one horse. It says an awful lot for him. And that's over really rugged terrain and two deserts – Wyoming's Red Desert and New Mexico's Jornada del Muerte. When I realized 'Jornado del Muerte,' translated to 'Journey of Death,' I skirted around the edge of it."

For Allen, there was never any question what type of horse he would use for such a journey.

"I just always had been a Quarter Horse guy," he says. "The versatility has sold me on them. They have work ethic bred into them. I always have had registered Quarter Horses because I believe in breeding. I'm a student of bloodlines ...

there, I was just talking to Gizmo. The biggest thing is that you have to be comfortable just sitting around for hours."

John spent quite a bit of time studying old U.S. Cavalry manuals for information on making grueling, long rides. He stuck to what he learned religiously, and he believes it helped keep Gizmo's back from soreing and the horse fit and healthy even in the more extreme conditions they encountered. The guidelines included getting off and walking the horse for 10-15 minutes every hour, not traveling more than 20 miles a day and giving the horse one day off each week.

"Some days, we covered 20 miles in three or four hours," he says. "Then, it is a temptation to go on. But, I just wouldn't. We made 120 to 130 miles a week. It is very difficult ... you have to slow down. It is a very different mindset."

For gear, John used a Canadian Mounties saddle and some original U.S. Cavalry saddle bags he found for \$10 at a tack shop. There was food and a few tools in the saddle bags, otherwise all he carried was a small day pack, a rain poncho and a Colt revolver. He even cut the handle off his toothbrush and rode with only a halter to lessen the burden of weight on Gizmo.

The first leg of the trip, which began in April 1975, took them through California, Nevada, Arizona and New Mexico. One of the team's first tests was crossing the Mohave Desert.

"I followed old roads or went cross country," he says of traveling through that region. "There were no fences, I just followed the geological survey maps. But there was a time I got lost. Usually, I always knew where I was because of those maps. It was very complicated out there. The first third of the ride was spent finding water every day. Gizmo lost a lot of weight ... there wasn't a lot to eat. It was tough 'til we got to Texas and Oklahoma."

In early July, John and Gizmo reached Amarillo. They stopped by AQHA. Then it was back on the trail through Oklahoma, Missouri, Tennessee, North Carolina and Virginia.

John says that one of the biggest points to understand about a horse on a long trip is that he will lose some weight no matter how much he is fed. This can cause a saddle, which fit the horse at the beginning of the trip, to lose its fit in a week or two. Great care must be taken to watch for back sores.



John Egones and The Wayward Note

"I was very much aware of what was happening with my horse's back," John says. "By the time he was done, he was hard as a rock!"

Fall was setting in as John and Gizmo made the Blue Ridge Parkway in Virginia. The towering centuries-old hardwoods with their dazzling display of colorful autumn leaves were a stark contrast to the desert southwest John and Gizmo had seen that spring. By the end of the trip, John was ready to be done.

"Gizmo and I were in the papers every day," he says about arriving in the East, "but all I wanted to do was finish the ride. And Gizmo ... as soon as someone would say, 'Hey, how you doing?' he would stop. He became trained to it."

On November 1, John and Gizmo reached the Atlantic



Ocean at Virginia Beach, the point he had chosen simply by looking at a map when planning the trip. In seven months, the pair had covered 4,400 miles.

"The first time Gizmo balked at *anything* on the whole trip," John says, laughing, "was at the ocean that day. It was like he was thinking, 'You want me to cross that? But I can't see the other side!'"

It took a little coaxing, but he finally got the gelding into the surf, and the coast-to-coast trip was officially finished. But now, pretty much penniless and on the opposite side of the continent from home with his horse, John was faced with a new challenge — how to get back to the West Coast.

It just so happened that John ran into some Quarter Horse owners near the beach, and they invited him to stay at their place. After living on baled peanut vines and steady traveling for the last few days, Gizmo was pleased with the arrangement. These folks, as it happened, were preparing to go to the AQHA World Championship Show later that month in Louisville, Kentucky. They had an extra space in their trailer, and he and Gizmo were able to catch a ride at least that far.

At the World Show, John met a horse trainer from San Bernardino, California, who had an extra slot in his trailer

and welcomed the extra driver along on the haul back.

Afterword

AFTER RETURNING HOME, GIZMO'S REWARD FOR SUCH A phenomenal performance was a year of turnout in a grassy pasture with a herd of horses. Gizmo lived a healthy life until 1992, when he had to be put down for health reasons related to aging. John, now 58, recently moved to Dunedin, New Zealand, completed a master's degree in music and lectures at the University of Otago.

As for Allen and Kono: "Kono continued on for many years as my main mountain horse in my outfitting business in Montana. He was an amazing horse and never once let me down."

Kono went to Oklahoma to spend his later years in a pasture. He died in 1994 of old age. These days, Allen, now 61, is concentrating on his professional photography career and trains American Quarter Horses on his ranch west of Livingston, Montana. ■

For more information about Allen Russell's work, visit www.photoshelter.com/user/allenrussell. Visit www.johnenegenes.com for more information about John Egenes.

What's a Long Rider?

WHEN THE AVERAGE HORSE ENTHUSIAST THINKS OF TAKING a long ride, maybe a 30-mile day trip comes to mind ... or perhaps, a weekend trail ride. Or maybe even a *rally* long trip, like a two-week vacation, riding and camping among some of the amazing natural wonders to be enjoyed all over this country. There are, however, those adventurous souls to whom the meaning of "long ride" is in an altogether different category.

The Long Riders Guild was formed in 1994 to create a central point to gather information about every continuous horseback trip of 1,000 miles or more ever taken. Before the guild was organized, all the great equestrian adventurers, and the documentation of their accomplishments, were scattered around the globe. The guild set out to preserve the details of these amazing voyages of the saddle and the horseback trips they accomplished. The endeavor is an effort to inspire new generations of long riders and to preserve an entire chapter heading in history that previously blew about the historical landscape like leaves in a November breeze.

It is an ambitious task to be sure, but to date, the Long Riders Guild already can boast being the largest repository of equestrian travel knowledge. The group has documented almost 300 equestrian trips from the

1600s to the present. The guild even includes information in its database about journeys currently under way and a heads-up on some in the planning stages. Since the organization's inception, it has confirmed more than 822,000 miles that people and their horses have logged on long rides.

There are too many amazing journeys documented on the site to mention here, but some of the more notable ones are Temple and Bud Abernathy, who rode 4,500 miles from New York to San Francisco in 62 days in 1911, at ages 11 and 7 and traveled without adult supervision; Gene Glasscock, who rode his Quarter Horse, "Cactus," 12,000 miles from the Arctic Circle in the Yukon Territory of Canada to Quito, Ecuador, in 1984; and Hugo Gasseolis, who rode 11,000 miles from

Madariaga, Argentina, to New York in 1993.

Of the scores of long rides, many American Quarter Horses are among the ranks of the tenacious horses who carried their riders into and through the unknown.

Aside from the enormous online database, the Long Riders Guild Press has gathered the largest collection of equestrian travel literature in the world. Many of these are autobiographical accounts from great long riders in history and are available through horsetravelbooks.com.

