



Jonny Fitzsimons and the pack train rest atop the rim of a glacier-carved valley, nearing the end of a 3,000-mile journey.

# MOUNTAIN PASSAGE

Last summer, four friends rode from the Mexican border to the Canadian on a string of Mustangs. Along the way, they filmed *Unbranded*, a documentary about their epic journey. I joined them on a stretch that traversed two Montana mountain ranges, and our adventure was just a glimpse at what they experienced.

By RYAN T. BELL

*Editor's Note:* In the May 2013 issue, the story "Border to Border" introduced the Unbranded crew as the riders prepared for their 3,000-mile journey.



## IF BEARD LENGTH

measures distance traveled, then the shag covering Ben Masters' jaw equaled 2,000 trail miles. It was so overgrown that a beetle could have traveled undetected from the cleft of his chin, up his sideburns and into the blazing-red tufts sprouting beneath his sweat-lined cowboy hat.



"People get sucked onto a path of success, connected to material things," says Ben Masters. "We tossed that off."

Masters brandished the Grizzly Adams look like a badge of honor, and given his success at leading his team of four cowboys, 13 Mustangs, one burro and a crew of cameramen nearly the height of the United States, he could be proud of every follicle.

His companions, on the other hand, were distinctly better groomed. Thomas Glover combed his goatee to match a flowing blonde mullet that would be the envy of an '80s rocker. Wisecracking Ben Thamer was clean-shaven. He sported a shoulder



gun holster and knee-high riding boots, giving off a Han Solo vibe. And the square-jawed Jonny Fitzsimons wasn't that hairy to begin with. Befitting his status as a second-generation U.S. Marine Corps officer, he was dressed for backcountry battle in tan hat, canvas jacket and shotgun chaps.

As they say in Hollywood, the *Unbranded* cowboys had faces for the silver screen. By last summer, five months into their trip, the guys were well practiced at presenting themselves as characters in a movie. But for the stretch ahead, I would take the cameraman's place on the trip. They would be just four buddies riding good horses through some jaw-dropping



backcountry, without the pressures of cameras recording their every move.

### **A Televised Adventure**

I rendezvoused with the *Unbranded* outfit at Mountain Sky Guest Ranch in the Paradise Valley, not far from the northern boundary of Yellowstone National Park. The cowboys had stopped for a layover after making it through Yellowstone's backcountry, a trip that included a ride on the Thorofare Trail—the most remote location in the lower 48 states. The trip's itinerary allowed for 10 days on the trail, followed by a few days of rest. But Mountain Sky wasn't just another stop for Ben Masters; it was a homecoming. He worked there for two summers, wrangling

Montana had experienced an unusually wet summer, so the pack trip encountered water crossings every day.

guests into the Gallatin Mountains. Of all the trails Masters had charted, he knew this section like his backyard.

The locals still remembered him. As we rode up a National Forest Service access road, on a bearing for the Big Creek Trailhead, a parade of cars stopped to greet Masters: the ranch manager, a housekeeper, someone from guest services, even a few wranglers. Were it not pouring down rain, we wouldn't have minded sitting our horses while Masters caught up on old times. We donned

slickers and cocked our hats to keep water from dripping down our shirt collars. It was unseasonably wet for August in Montana, and stormy weather had been the crew's constant companion since Yellowstone.

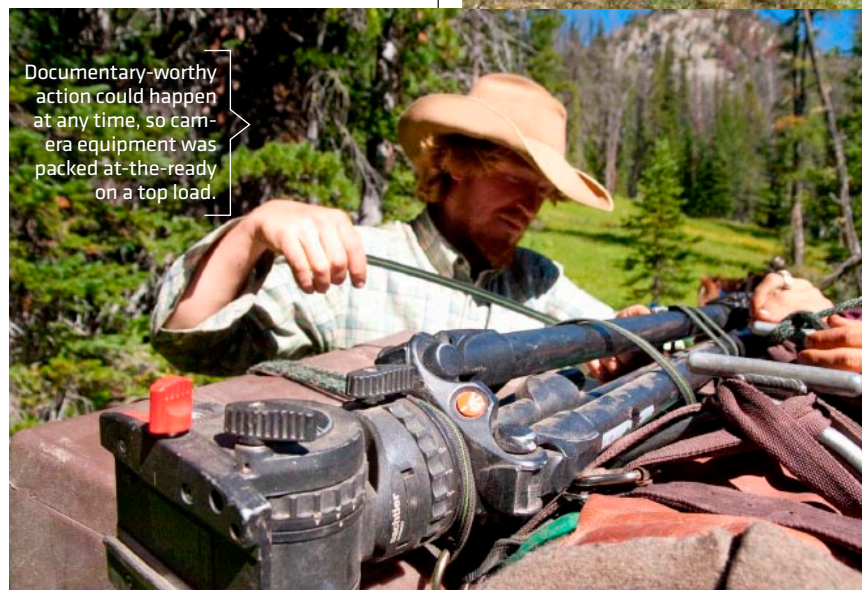
"There's been green grass from border to border," Masters later said. "We couldn't have picked a better summer to go on this trip."

Masters would know, since he rode a similar route from Santa Fe, New Mexico, to Glacier National Park back in 2010. That had been a dry summer; grass was scarce, and his string of Quarter Horses didn't hold up well. The journey left Masters wanting more, and he vowed to do the ride again, this time on adopted



Bureau of Land Management Mustangs. When three of his friends from Texas A&M University heard of the plan, they asked to go along, marking the birth of the *Unbranded* documentary.

By the time I joined the ride, *Unbranded* had caught the imagination of people across the American West. The *Unbranded* trail blog drew thousands of visitors to *Western Horseman's* website every week. Their Facebook page had more than 14,000 "Likes." And a promotional film they'd posted on the crowdfunding website Kickstarter.com had helped them raise \$171,253. That may sound like a lot of money, but to make a professional-grade documentary it was just enough to plant the seed of an idea and give it a chance to germinate. Masters bought \$100,000 in audiovisual equipment. All of it was loaded onto one packhorse. The main video camera sat on the topline for easy access, ready to grab-and-go in the heat of the moment. Because the bag's contents were so valuable, and in need of such care, the cowboys dubbed it "Princess."



Documentary-worthy action could happen at any time, so camera equipment was packed at-the-ready on a top load.

As we traversed a steep-angle mountainside, with Big Creek roaring in the valley depths below, I ask Masters what he thought motivated everyday people to donate money to his project.

"People dream of taking an adventure like this, but for whatever reason they aren't able to go," he responds. "They respected that we were going for it.

Also, they liked our message about Mustangs, and they wanted to support the Western way of life."

### **Mutiny in the Backcountry**

The next morning, the Western way of life entailed fetching runaway horses. We had hobbled our mounts after riding into camp the night before, but after months on the trail, the Mustangs

Each rider had three horses, rotating them so each took a turn under saddle, carrying a pack, with a third day free.

had learned how to travel with their front legs bound together.

"They're always rebellious after a layover," says Jonny Fitzsimons. He was nonchalant about getting left horseless 11 miles into the mountains. "Once we get a day or two of hard riding in, they'll be too tired to run off."

The horses had conducted a perfect mutiny. It was as if they'd understood what Masters had said around the campfire: "Who's up for a 25-mile day tomorrow?" We joked that in the middle of the night a horse must have held up a hoof to his mouth in a hushing motion, and signaled for the others to tiptoe with him across Big Creek. When the camp's early risers awoke, there wasn't a horse in sight. Masters backtracked for a mile and found them standing at the National Forest boundary fence, next to a gate we'd wisely decided to close behind us. Cowboys 1, Mustangs 0.





The Mustangs were in impressive shape, considering they'd walked to Montana from Arizona. Each cowboy had a string of three horses, and it was their responsibility to make the horse-flesh last. Mornings, they daubed salve on anything even resembling a sore. Every six weeks, the horses got new shoes with borium melted over the nail heads for traction, and to resist wear and tear. On the trail, the Mustangs took turns as saddle horse and pack stock, with a free day in between to run loose.

I had started out riding Frisky, a horse out of Masters' string. The bay gelding was trained by Wylene Wilson, a two-time winner of the Extreme Mustang Makeover competition. In the documentary *Wild Horse, Wild Ride*—a film that inspired Masters to make *Unbranded*—Wilson is the Arizona spitfire who rides her horse into the arena wearing a golden cape. The lady can train a Mustang, and I felt honored to be paired with Frisky.

Too bad my saddle didn't feel the same way. The second day, I noticed Frisky's withers were inflamed. Masters swapped him out for Chief, a dappled gray named



in honor of Masters' grandfather, who was battling cancer. Nothing against Frisky, but Chief was my idea of a prototypical mountain horse. He stood just under 15 hands, with a quick stride and a sassy attitude that attacked steep grades with a vengeance. Having once adopted my own BLM Mustang, I was an easy sell about the horse's virtues. Some horsemen, however, take convincing. And that's the stated goal of the *Unbranded* documentary project.

"A lot of people think they're too wild," Masters says. "A lot of people think they'd be better off going and buying a Quarter Horse or a Thoroughbred, when in reality a lot of these wild Mustangs are really good stock."

### Trail Obstacles

With everyone finally mounted, we struck out of camp mid-morning following a single track that paralleled Big Creek through a narrow mountain valley. Snowball bushes covered the ground, except where ancient rockslides had swept down the mountain slopes. Covering 25 miles in one day was ambitious, but not out of the ordinary. We were making good time until we reached a downfall forest that hadn't seen a trail crew for at least a year. The cowboys took turns cutting our way through a labyrinth of fallen trees.

Already, the trip had seen its share of obstacles and hardships. Should one of

After four months on the trail, (from left) Thomas Glover, Masters, Fitzsimons and Ben Thamer formed a cohesive group.

them forget, a reminder hung from Jonny Fitzsimons' saddle: the braided tail of a horse that had died. One night, back in Utah, something had spooked the horses and they stampeded. In the morning, when the cowboys gathered the loose horses, Fitzsimons noticed that his horse Cricket was missing. He found the horse dead a half-mile from camp. Scuffmarks on the ground indicated that the gelding had thrashed around. Fitzsimons suspected that Cricket had suffered an aneurysm during the stampede. He cut off a length of tail, braided it and hung the locket from his saddle to ceremoniously bring the horse with him to the Canadian border.

In Utah, they almost lost another horse, Dinosaur.

"We rode into a narrow box canyon called Hell Hole," Fitzsimons recalls. "It was rimmed all around by cliffs. We found a thin ledge trail, barely two feet wide, and led the horses up it one at a time. Dinosaur balked and fell over the edge."

The horse landed in a poof of sand on the canyon floor. The cowboys were about to unpack a gun, figuring Dinosaur would need put out of his misery, when the gelding stood up,





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Masters charts the next day's route; the cowboys had to stop frequently to clear downed trees; Eduardo Garcia, a Montana-based chef and admirer of mushrooms, was one of the many characters the *Unbranded* crew met along the way.





shook himself off and caught up with the herd.

Those were the most severe accidents, but the horses had a rap sheet of smaller calamities. One horse dragged down a propane tank, busting the nozzle so that hissing gas incited a horse riot. Another wrapped his lead rope around a highway reflector, somehow projecting the metal pole 10 feet into the air. And the whole string had worked together to drag down a buck rail fence at one of *Unbranded's* layover ranches in Wyoming.

### Tag Alongs

Not having a pack saw of my own to help out, I waited at the back of the traffic jam with my two fellow tag-alongs: Donkita the burro and a man named Eduardo Garcia.

Donkita was from a BLM facility in Utah, where the crew had stopped to get more horses. Two of the original Mustangs hadn't worked out and they needed a few remounts. The facility's manager, Heath Weber, specialized in rehabilitating horses and burros that had been returned to the BLM by their adopters. Failed adoptions are a drain on the system. The problem is that BLM

Fitzsimons fords the Gallatin River. "I think [this trip] shows how much of the West is still wild and open," he says.

adoptions are cheap, attracting first-time horse buyers, effectively matching the toughest students with novice teachers. Or, as Masters puts it, "It's like going to the pound and adopting a bobcat for a housecat."

Donkita was originally adopted by someone who wanted her for her milk. Most female burros are pregnant when they come in from the wild. When they discovered that Donkita wasn't, they returned her to the BLM.

After the cowboys acquired three new horses, Ben Thamer asked if Weber had any mules. No, but Weber had a burro. Thamer liked the idea and agreed to take her.

"When the movie comes out, Donkita will be the third-most-famous burro in history," Thamer said, "behind the burro Mary Magdalene rode into Bethlehem, and the burro in Lonesome Dove."

Donkita became *Unbranded's* mascot. She milled about camp, chewed on

anything cardboard or paper, lounged in the dust, and tolerated impromptu petting zoos with people they met on the trail. Donkita was also a worrywart. When the pack strings stretched too far apart, she would stand in the gap braying.

My other companion, Eduardo Garcia, had joined the *Unbranded* crew in the Paradise Valley, where he grew up. As a child, Garcia was a modern day Huckleberry Finn, going fishing, hunting, and foraging for wild food in the mountains. His mother had instilled in him a love of cooking, and after attending the Seattle Culinary Institute, Garcia sailed the oceans as a chef-for-hire on private yachts. But the mountains suited him better than rolling waves, so he moved home and started a business, Montana Mex, that sells specialty food seasonings.

As Garcia and I hung back at the end of the trailside traffic jam, with Donkita for company, he told me the amazing story of how he overcame an injury that took his left arm. A few years ago, Garcia was foraging in the mountains when he saw a strange object in the underbrush. He took out his knife and poked it. The





object was an exposed power source. Electricity shot up the knife, burning his left arm to a crisp, collapsing a lung, charring several ribs, and knocking him out cold.

"I shouldn't be here," Garcia said. "That should've been all she wrote."

He came to after 20 minutes and stumbled back to civilization. Surgeons re-inflated his lung, removed several ribs and amputated his left arm at the elbow. During his recovery, Garcia met a man who was a quadriplegic. That man was happy just to be alive, making Garcia realize he could get along with one good arm. Now, Garcia facetiously refers to his prosthetic arm as his "claw," and the trained chef uses it to his advantage, fearlessly reaching into the fire when he cooks.

"A lot of people wearing prosthetics feel sweaty and itchy after wearing it for eight hours," Garcia said. "I don't care. It's my tool and I hate taking it off. If something goes down in the middle of the night, there's no time to strap on the harness. I need to be ready to roll."

With a pistol, bear spray and a butterfly knife all within reach of his right hand, Garcia was indeed always ready to roll. He had been following *Unbranded* ever since donating to the Kickstarter campaign. By following Masters' trail blog, he knew they would

Thamer leads his string through a field of boulders. The riders didn't hesitate to dismount for rough sections of trail.

pass through the Paradise Valley. He showed up at Mountain Sky Guest Ranch and asked if he could ride along for a night. The cowboys were always glad to have his company, especially Thamer, the camp cook, who appreciated Garcia's skills around the campfire.

Garcia also opened our eyes to the bounty of forageable food around us. As we descended the far side of the Gallatin Mountains, he found dozens of porcini mushrooms growing along the trail. The bread-loaf-sized porcini is a delicacy, and Garcia dismounted every quarter mile to knife another one out of the ground. By the time we reached Highway 191 in the gut of the Gallatin Canyon, where Garcia's girlfriend would pick him up, the foraging chef had dozens of fungi stashed in the nooks and crannies of everyone's saddlebags and panniers. On the side of the highway, Garcia gathered his fungi and bid us adios.

### **(Pack) Animal House**

For the cowboys, the *Unbranded* adventure came at a time of transition in their lives. Their hard-partying, freewheeling college days were behind

them. Fitzsimons would soon ship out for Officer Candidates School in the Marine Corps. Glover had a job waiting for him in Houston, working as a construction engineer. Thamer was rethinking his next move, having quit a feedlot rider job in order to go on the trip. And for Masters, well, the *Unbranded* documentary project was his career play.

"This is a story about a group of guys and horses who were stuck in their holding pens," Masters says. "We freed each other by going on this trip. People get sucked into the path of success, and they become too connected to material things. We tossed that off."

When the four guys cut loose, they did so like it was their last run through the paddock before the yoke. Thamer had warned me the first night that *Unbranded* was like a pack-trip version of the John Belushi movie *Animal House*. Swap togas for trench coats and the comparison wasn't far off. Their trailside banter was a regular comedy routine. Their best act was the centaur-versus-Pegasus debate.

Fitzsimons: "What would you rather ride on this trip, a centaur or Pegasus?"

Thamer: "Depends, is the centaur my buddy? If not, he might grab me with his arms and throw me off. Wouldn't even have to buck. But if he's friendly,





"Mustangs are built for mountain travel," Masters says. "They are very sure-footed and their feet are as hard as rocks."

when the trail gets roughs, he can be like, 'Grab my hands and hold on!'"

Glover: "Would it be wrong to kiss a female centaur?"

Fitzsimons: "A centaur could cook and shoe himself. But a Pegasus could fly ahead to camp."

All morning, Fitzsimons mulled the question over, piping up with random thoughts.

"Do centaurs eat human food, but still [poop] like a horse? They probably just eat salad."

Finally, he crafted the ideal scenario: "I'd want a centaur that could forage for food while I rode, just like Eduardo. I'd call him Centuardo. Then I'd want four-pack Pegasi."

But for every hilarious moment, the cowboys endured hours of isolation in the saddle. Because of the trip's logistics, they were spaced out by the distance of their pack strings, making conversation difficult. And after spending five months on the trail, normally scenic landscapes started to look quotidian.

"My biggest challenge is keeping my mind occupied," Glover says. "You get to the point where you run out of topics to think about."

To combat the doldrums, the cowboys carried books with them to read in the saddle. And when they crested a divide, they powered-on their cell phones and checked in with girlfriends and family. They were also happy to chat up anyone they met on the trail. There is a camaraderie among backcountry users that doesn't exist on front-country trails, where heavy traffic makes people jealous of their privacy. But anyone willing to travel at least 10 miles into the backcountry likely shares a similar outlook on life.

In the Lee Metcalf Wilderness Area, Fitzsimons and Thamer learned that you never know who you might meet on the trail. We had just descended a gnarly pass along a boulder-strewn trail when the pack train encountered three hikers—a middle-aged man and two young men. The cowboys recognized one of them as a friend of theirs from college. There they were, thousands of miles from home, in Montana's back of beyond, and they see a friend with whom they'd attended a Christmas party just last December.

"It blows my mind," Fitzsimons says. "I can't wrap my head around it. Makes the world feel small."

### Viewfinder

Over the next two days, we traversed three mountain passes, climbing a total of 20,000 vertical feet. By this point in the trip, the cowboys had seen so much



Because quality, digital video cameras are portable and easy to use, a documentary project like *Unbranded* is possible.

spectacular country that the grand vistas blurred together. But our final precipice stood out as exceptional, even to them. To the south we could see the ski runs of Big Sky Resort, and beyond it the monolithic Sphinx Mountain. Below us, a glacier-carved bowl carried snowmelt on its long run to the Madison River, which in turn flowed into the Missouri River, then the Mississippi and finally the Gulf of Mexico.

But the most remarkable feature was the section of trail ahead of us, across a cirque of fallen rock. Like a ribbon of floss, the trail climbed over a saddle between two molar-shaped peaks. Thinking like a cinematographer, Masters envisioned a shot of the *Unbranded* pack train climbing the divide. It was cinematic gold, but he didn't have a cameraman.

"You film it," Masters told me.

We made a plan that I would stay back with Chief and the pack animal toting Princess. Masters set up the camera and showed me which buttons to press, then the cowboys rode off. Thirty minutes later, I watched them through the viewfinder plodding up the trail, small specks against a rocky backdrop. I followed Masters' instructions, zooming in tight and then panning out to take in the landscape. The wide-angle lens opened up, the cowboys shrunk from view and were swallowed by the mountains. 📹

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