



Photo by Jorene Downs

Mounted SAR *Learning from History*

By Jorene Downs

The origin of the mounted searcher goes back to the first time someone got on a horse to look for a missing person. In the American Old West, the locals would organize a mounted search with cowboys and other volunteers. Horses and mules were commonly used for riding, packing and pulling; however, skills used 100–150 years ago are no longer common. We can learn from the historic use of the horse (or mule) in the Old West and incorporate that knowledge advantageously into contemporary MSAR. Some of the options for search management are identified in this article.

Riding

The typical MSAR horse might walk at about three miles per hour during a search, but has the potential to carry the rider substantially faster. The MSAR mission might include expediting to the start of an assignment, acting as a mounted courier reminiscent of the Pony Express, or scouting the trail ahead.

Experienced cowboys can track a cow from the saddle and know when to dismount to track from the ground. MSAR can adapt man tracking skills learned on the ground into successful application from the saddle.

In the Old West, the mounted traveler would carry personal belongings and several days' worth of trail supplies in saddlebags and behind the saddle and make camp at night. Contemporary MSAR can do the same thing.

When a horse was the primary mode of transportation, it wasn't uncommon to ride at night. Most contemporary horses and riders have little or no night-riding experience. A mounted SAR team is a very effective and more versatile resource when also available for night assignments.

Travelers in the Old West sometimes rode while leading another horse (referred to as ponying). Additional reliable saddled horses ponied by MSAR can transport other personnel to and from specific locations. If no additional mount is available, the rider has the option to walk and lead a horse transporting a passenger.

It used to be common to drop the reins to "ground-tie" the horse and expect the horse to wait there—sometimes for hours. The searcher who can successfully ground-tie a horse doesn't need to rely on a convenient location to tie the horse during a short dismount period.

Packing

In American history, riders crossed the country leading a few pack animals. Packing is a skill rarely found today, yet the ability to transport gear with a reliable

pack animal can be a big advantage in SAR. This advantage isn't limited to backcountry or wilderness SAR.

The MSAR team with qualified packers, appropriate livestock and specialized equipment can provide a pack train to haul gear or supplies. An appropriately trained pack animal can also be used to transport a litter during a body recovery. Organizations such as Backcountry Horsemen might be willing to assist with pack handling and are a good source for training. In some areas, you can still find pack stations where experienced packers can provide a similar service.

The mount that will both ride and pack is a desirable and a valuable resource in SAR. Panniers—the large bags that carry gear balanced on either side of the horse or mule—are available in an over-the-saddle design. These have an easier learning curve than traditional packsaddles and panniers, and are suitable for most terrain. The ponied horse with a pannier tucked behind the saddle provides MSAR with the option of either transporting a passenger or hauling gear.

Pulling

Before the turn of the 20th century, it was common to find horses and mules in harness pulling various wagons and carts, plowing fields, dragging heavy items like logs to build cabins, using a saddle horn to pull a stuck cow from a mud bog, etc.

On easier terrain, Native Americans commonly used a travois to transport possessions or as a litter for the sick and injured. The same concept can apply to MSAR using a trained horse or mule to pull a litter, which may be on wheels.

Cowboys today still dally off a rope. MSAR riders can perform the same action of wrapping a rope around the saddle horn to create a mobile anchor point to drag heavy weight to clear a trail, relocate disaster debris or, in the right situation, even be part of a technical rescue haul team.

These are just a few of the ways we can learn from history to advantageously apply mounted skills to the SAR world.

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