



“Can’t be done.” That’s what Don and June Mulford heard.

The year was 1959, and the Pacific Crest Trail stretched a poorly marked 2,400 miles from Mexico to Canada. More concept than footpath, the trail was an oft-broken, high-ridge track disappearing regularly from map and terrain.

The year began with Alaska and Hawaii still territories, not states, and with the PCT unconquered. Only recently has it come to be accepted that **Martin Papendick** thru-hiked in 1952, covering what he could find of the Pacific Crest Trail. But in 1959, as far as anyone knew, no one, hiker or rider, had transited the PCT in one year.

By year’s end, Alaska and Hawaii were states and a northwest couple, Don and June Mulford, corralled the constant refrain voiced by forest rangers, friends and horsemen – “Can’t be done” – saddled up and dragged their pack train 20 miles a day across the meadows and high passes of California, Oregon, and Washington.

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the Mulfords’ historic thru-ride, but there have been no anniversary celebrations. Don and June Mulford have not even a footnote in PCT lore.

If the PCT has a bible, it’s the venerable, three-volume *Wilderness Press Guidebook*. The 2007 sixth edition proclaims: “In 1988, **Jim McCre** became the first ‘thru-equestrian.’” For years the Mulfords and their feat have been lost to history. **This is their story.**

“June, if we can encourage even one other couple to take the trail we’ve taken, we will have done them a favor they’ll never forget.” Don Mulford, September 6, 1959.

Don is gone 19 years. June, 81, still lives in their home on a quiet, tree-shaded lane in Vancouver, Wash. Neighbors know her as an officer and regular at the **Vancouver Emblem Club**, the 100-member women’s division of the **Vancouver Elks**. Recently, in a muted lavender sweatshirt, sitting on a worn, crochet-covered couch, June reminisced about their ride, spilling tale upon tale like oats into a feedbag.

“And Don’s horse **Traveller**, a big strawberry roan, he liked to chase bears. He would tree ‘em. Just like a dog, he’d go after ‘em.”

During a pause, June handed me two brittle, yellowed folders. “Don’s Trail Journal.” Days later, turning over the last of the 180 pages, I immediately called her. June confirmed what I suspected – In 50 years, I was the first to read it.

“The wind was blowing so hard that it would almost lift you out of the saddle.”

“Many are the hours that we have ridden in silent awe, as we look on nature’s wonders. No sound breaks the stillness, except the dull thud of the horses’ feet, an occasional bridle chain tinkling and the creak of saddle leather.”

“As luck would have it we got our shoes fixed today, the same as the horses.”

June sprinkles her stories with “gollies” and “whatnots.”

“Gollies, I was 16 when Don and I eloped.”

It was November, 1943, and June, an Elma, Washington, high-school junior, called herself in sick and hid out with 24-year-old Don for the three-day waiting period. Married. No more school. In that era, married girls were banned.

“If a girl got married, she might teach the other girls bad stuff!”

Don and June were married 48 years.

June married into a “crazy” dream. In 1934, while hunting, Don had met a **Civilian Conservation Corps** crew.

“What’s this trail you’re building?”

“It’s called the Pacific Crest Trail.”

For a decade they ranched along the Washington’s Cowlitz River. Then, in June, 1958, a cattle buyer laid 100 Ben Franklins, \$10,000, next to June’s still-warm apple pie. The Mulford herd of prize-winning, registered polled shorthorns was sold.

“There’s still a box of ribbons and whatnot, somewhere in this house,” June says.

Giving Trail History Its Due:

The 1959 PCT Thru-Ride of Don and June Mulford

By Barney “Scout” Mann



They bought a 16-mm Bell & Howell windup movie camera and 54 rolls of film, then readied their mounts. The 1959 *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* reported: "It took two hours to load the cattle, 20 minutes to van the horses and two minutes to lock up the ranchhouse."

Next stop, PCT. Forward ho!

On April 19, 1959, on an empty scrub sage plain seven miles east of Tijuana, Don handed over the keys and title to their '47 Dodge stake-bed truck.

"Sell it for us," he told the **Wetmores**, an Otay Ranch couple the Mulfords had met just the day before. Don reached through the strands of a slack barbwire fence into Mexico and then, with four horses, he and June rode off.

The mountain ranges roll out of Don's journal at a swift canter: Cuyamacas, Vulcans, San Felipes, San Gabriels, Tehachapis, Sierra Nevada and the long volcanic reaches of the Oregon and Washington Cascades. Nothing came easy. One of their horses, **Brownie**, broke a leg before they started on the trail and had to be put down. Another, **Cannon Ball**, died of lockjaw after 250 miles on the trail. Don's saddlebag thermometer recorded 103-degree, horse-lathering heat and 20-degree, feed-freezing chill.

Deep in the Sierra, the Mulfords found themselves nearly out of feed and grub. The Whitney crest stood between them and re-supply.

For three days they butted heads with the Sierra battlements. They were thrust back by snow at 13,777-foot-high Trail Crest, within lassoing distance of Whitney's summit. June made do with saddlebag dregs.

"Pancakes and coffee. Three times a day."

Finally, at lower Trail Pass, they made their escape.

Inexorably, they rode north, the trail faint, often vanishing. The refrain punctuated Don's journal. "Again there was no trail signs to show us the way...These trails will all be abandoned if more people don't use them."

Though a half-century past, one incident still puts June's knickers in a twist.

Don wrote it down this way: "Near Jordan Hot Springs, we were surprised by a three-foot diamondback rattlesnake right along a narrow section of trail. The horses were spooked and June was spilled from her horse. She said, 'I wasn't bucked off, I just dismounted rather rapidly.'"

On one point both emphatically agree: June came up out of the dust with three horses' reins firmly in hand.

July 19: "We have a lot of fun, when people we meet, ask us where we are going, or where we rode in from. I just say, Canada or Mexico, and grin."

August 7, Crescent Lake Organization Camp, southern Oregon:

"The camp was all girls, most of them in bathing suits, and some of them very beautiful. I was ready to make camp for the day, but June thought we better keep going. Actually, I was so flustered, by seeing so many pretty girls at one time, that I was afraid I might fall off my horse."

Sept. 14, Washington Cascades: "We ride along sections of trail in the fog that would scare a person if the fog suddenly vanished and you could see how far down it really was."


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Photo captions, page 12 (title page): Leaving Tuolumne Meadows all packed for the trail.

These pages, l-r: Don and June at the Mexican border, Monument 252 in the background, ready to ride out with Steamboat, Maverick, Red and Cannon Ball. • Don at Canadian border marker. • Typical trail scene, Mulfords with five horses, riding two, packing two and resting one. Taken near Big Bear, California early in the ride.

All photos scanned from the collection of June Mulford.



The Mulfords are ready to start a showing of their PCT film in the early 60's. When June saw the photo during our interview she pointed to the man standing at the far left and said, "he's going for the one empty seat," and after all these years June still recalled exactly where that empty seat was. They planned only one showing that night and ended up with two standing-room only crowds.

Photo from the collection of June Mulford.

Sept. 16, June's birthday: "After feeding the horses I brushed the new fallen snow from my jacket and entered the tent. June looked up from her job of trying to patch the air mattresses and said, 'It is no use, they are beyond repair.' This was the third set of air mattresses we had worn out since we left the Mexican border April 19th."

Sept. 16 was also the day they crossed Lower White Pass, Red Pass and Fire Pass in the Cascades. "June's horse has been down twice in the last two days, once on slick rock and once on slick clay," wrote Don.

Finally, after five months and a week, under skies anxious to release a burden of snow:

*"We reached the Canadian border at 10:30 on this day
September 25th 1959."*

The first thru-ride of the Pacific Crest Trail was complete.

How did their feat disappear from history? The Mulfords went to Hollywood for three months immediately after the ride. They were featured on network television. June's old press book yields a half-dozen TV-Guide pages, painstakingly centered, hand-glued.

"Art Linkletter was such a nice man," she recalls. "We appeared on his 'House Party' show and he had coffee with us afterward."

"High Road to Danger," a syndicated TV show, made an episode on their ride. Even after returning home to the Northwest, there was continued TV coverage. A January 1961 TV Guide records their appearance on Portland's KOIN *Red Dunning Show*. The Mulfords even made a 90-minute movie and showed it around 12 western states for 10 years.

How did they disappear from history? As Don said, untended trails disappear and so does untended history. Forty-five years have passed since the Mulford's last TV appearance.

Today, June Mulford's challenge isn't making 20-mile trail days, it's negotiating a two-story house. She fights arthritis, not snowy Sierra crests. But as we talk, June fires off a smile each time we return to one topic – their horses. Like legends of old, this record is incomplete without calling each one more time to the saddle: **Steamboat, Maverick, Traveller, Cannon Ball, Red, Brownie, Silkie Sullivan, Hoppy** and the mule **Handy Andy**. Two of the nine – Steamboat, a 14-hand chestnut mare, and Maverick, a big palomino gelding – made it the whole way.



Don and June at send off party. By trail's end they'd drop 30 and 20 pounds, respectively.

Photo from the collection of June Mulford.

In 1959, Don Mulford was a man of his times. He was well broken to the bit of not sharing his feelings. But witness his closing journal paragraph.

"We have been asked if living so close together didn't get us to fighting. I would say that it did the opposite. We worked together all the time, for a common goal. I have the greatest admiration for June and the way that she held up her end, and asked no favors, never asking to make camp until I had found feed and water for the horses, even if this took another six or eight miles of riding."

Don is gone. The hearty voice that once called so lively, "Here Traveller, boy," is stilled. But Don may get his wish. Wilderness Press has agreed to include the Mulfords' feat in their next *Guidebook*. In September, their story was featured in the *Sunday Portland Oregonian*.

Today, the once-faint PCT track is a well-marked and well-traveled 2,650 miles. And soon, maybe one of you, maybe one more couple, will take to the trail. 🐾

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To read the *Oregonian's* version of this article and view a slide show, go to Oregonlive.com and type "**Across the snowy crest**" in the search box.