

Backcountry Horsemen take pride in maintaining Bozeman-area trails

By **TREVON MILLIARD** Chronicle Staff Writer

Crusting blood stains Walter Becker's thumb as he saws at a 40-foot Douglas fir lying across the Spanish Creek Trail. At an even pace, he pushes the 4-foot saw away from his chest, then pulls it back. One, two. One, two. Sweat begins to build on his wrinkled brow below the rim of his brown-corduroy cowboy hat. He's 78, but, as he saws, his back is straight and his wide stance rigid. Sawdust sticks to his sheepskin vest and the dark-brown chaps covering the front of his black jeans. Burned into his belt is his name, "Wally." His lips are tightly pursed, as they always seem to be, but more so as he works. Even his smile is gritty as he takes a break and sits on a dry gray log cut years ago. He might have cut it. Who knows. The group he and Ron Rassley, 71, started in 1985, the Gallatin Valley chapter of the Backcountry Horsemen, has been clearing this trail ever since.

The volunteers actually tend many trails, including the East Hyalite Fork Trail, Falls Creek Trail, Indian Ridge 444 and the 401 trail that starts at the same point as Spanish Creek.

But Spanish Creek is their baby, the reason the group was established and where it all started in 1985.

"At that point, the trail had been closed to horses for 15 years," Becker says. "Nobody took care of it. It took three days on horses to go three miles on it."

Becker and Rassley usually come out on their horses every Monday and Thursday to clear trails, they say. The group's president, Dan Marsh, 52, usually makes it once a week if he's lucky.

"Those guys that are retired can do this twice every week," Marsh says. "I give my hat off to them. I don't know how they keep up with it. After this, I'll need a week of rest."

The volunteers do most of the work on their own with little help and no funding, says volunteer Kay Tate. Any costs come out of their own pockets.

Last year, the horsemen didn't receive any donations, and if they tallied up all the time they put into just trail repair, 1,078 hours, and multiplied it at the going rate for this type of work, \$18.77 per hour, their labor alone would equal about \$20,000. And that's not counting gas and other expenses.

The Backcountry Horsemen have about 100 members, but the same 10 or so come out every week, Rassley says.

"Last year, we started with 10, and by summer's end only two were doing the work," he says, "me being one of them."

They just wish more people came out to help, members or not, Tate says.

Hikers passing by rarely offer to take a saw for a minute or two, she says. They sometimes say, "Thank you," but that's it.

"The next generation just wants to hike and bike," she says. "They don't want to work."

The U.S. Forest Service doesn't do much in way of clearing trails either, Marsh says.

"The Forest Services are hurt on getting crews on the ground," he says. "With these forest fires, the crews go to that."

On Saturday, while the sixperson team saws and throws stumps into the underbrush, their horses stand silently in the woods, tied close together between the trees. Passing hikers rarely notice the horses standing a few yards back, camouflaged by tall thin tree trunks and pine needles.

For this trip, Becker and the group use pack and saddle horses. They travel with saws, crowbars and their shared devotion to horseback riding.

As Becker sits on an old log for a breather, he recalls growing up in the Gallatin Valley. His family lived on 160 acres of land with 2,500 horses and 250 head of cattle, he said.

"In the teens when the banks went broke, people left and couldn't take their horses," he says. "They told my dad, 'I can't take care of my horses. You take em'."

The horses roamed the open land, but the people never came back to reclaim their horses, so Becker's dad branded them as his own, he says.

"My dad was 3 years old when Montana became a state," he says. "The Indian kids played

with my dad."

While talking, Becker dips his hand into his pocket and draws out five or so keys and a nail clipper tied together with a short piece of green yarn. He clips one nail and put the keys back in his pocket, but never stops talking.

When Becker was 4, he would ride overnight with his dad to White Sulphur Springs to see his uncle, who was a shepherd.

"When we'd stop, my dad would take his coat off and lay it on the ground," he says. "I would just keel over. I'd fit on that coat."

Becker couldn't reminisce for long, knowing work was getting done and he wasn't doing it.

"I guess it's time to pick up our toes," he says.

Chick Hale, 81, on the other hand is more attune to leisure. He sits on a log, cross legged, with one hand on his knee and the other holding a pipe in his mouth, a pouch of tobacco in his shirt pocket. His small handsaw sits in the crevice of a half-cut log.

He grew up in Pennsylvania, often riding his Appaloosa at full gallop through the cornfields, he said.

"To keep the stalks from hitting my feet, I'd take my feet out of the stirrups and put my legs on the horse's rump," he said. "That's where I got cracked ribs, concussions and all sorts of things."

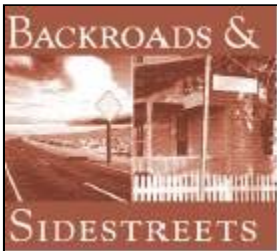
He refuses to say he fell off his horse.

"The activity of the horse was such that I'd come off," he says.

Hale says he doesn't ride like a wild man anymore, but does all he can to keep riding, just like all the other horsemen here. It's a worthwhile challenge to communicate with an animal, he said.

"To think what they're thinking is exciting," he said. "Even more exciting is that response in getting them to do what you want."

Trevon Milliard can be reached at tmilliard@dailychronicle.com or 582-2657.





Gallatin Valley Backcountry Horsemen club member Kay Kate evades deadfall on the Spanish Creek Trail Saturday morning while fellow Backcountry Horseman Walter Becker works at removing it from the trail. The Backcountry Horsemen volunteer their time to keeping trails in the Gallatin Valley clear for recreation.