

WINTER KEEP

Ninemile Depot, past and present *by Ryan Newhouse*

Winter means a couple of things to the historic Ninemile Remount Depot—hooves and “hee-haws.” Lots of them. Barely before the snow settles in the expansive Ninemile valley floor, 25 miles west of Missoula, truckloads of U.S. Forest Service pack animals arrive at their wintering grounds: 1,500 rolling acres spread behind a group of Cape Cod-influenced barns and buildings. As many as 200 horses and mules arrive to winter among the ten pastures behind the Ninemile Remount Depot.

The need for a Remount Depot was born out of the infamous 1929 forest fires in western Montana, and the concept was modeled after Cavalry remount depots used during times of war. The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) started construction in 1930, but it was not entirely finished until 1935. The white buildings represented the well-run horse farms popular in the Northeast and rolling Kentucky hills. The Remount Depot held a working saddle shop and blacksmith. In its prime, the blacksmith shop supplied all the horseshoes for the Northern Rockies, cranking out 15,000 shoes a year. For 23 years, the Remount Depot was the center for housing, raising, and training champion pack stock used by the Forest Service for fighting backcountry fires.

A pack train consisted of nine mules and one horse. Mules were preferred because they were sure-footed, ate less than horses, and could carry heavier loads. They could also figure out the proper gait for the load they were carrying.

The Ninemile's Mission

- Provide a reservoir of experienced packers and pack animals for fire fighting and backcountry work projects
- Supply horses and mules to the national forests
- Develop ways to transport stock
- Serve as a training base for packers
- Improve and standardize packing techniques

The horses considered most reliable for pack trains were not purebred. Prized mountain horses were bred from the Remount Depot's resident American saddlebred stallion, Grand Menard, and mixed-blood mares. Although Grand Menard has long since passed away, visitors can have lunch at the picnic grounds a mile beyond the Ranger Station that honors the stallion's namesake.

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