NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

Smoke Elser, 81, teaches the art of "mantying" during a wilderness horse-packing session in Missoula, Montana. Manyting, a traditional packing technique, requires origami-esque folds.

PHOTOGRAPH BY TOM BAUER, MISSOULAN

81-Year-Old Wrangler Teaches Cowboy Skills to Navy SEALs, FBI

Smoke Elser's knowledge of pack mules and crosscut saws proves priceless in machine-free wilderness areas.

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MISSOULA, Montana—Fat spring snowflakes are falling outside, but the 14 cowboys and cowgirls crowded inside Smoke Elser's barn turned classroom are already thinking about summer.

"I've been coming in my boots, trying to look all cowboy, but tonight I said, Forget it!" says one student as he enters the stable, stamping fresh snow off his insulated winter

Ask around for Arnold Elser and you'll get a blank stare—that name was forgotten long ago, when a young freshman from Cleveland, Ohio, arrived in Missoula for a season with the Forest Service working in a fire lookout. It didn't take long for the vast, wild country to steal Elser's heart (a local sweetheart named Thelma also played a role), and soon he was learning the tricks of the outfitting trade from northwest Montana's finest horsemen, who were the era's primary wilderness advocates.

Dubbed Smoke by his mentor, a locally famous outfitter named Tom Edwards, Elser had landed in Montana, the cradle of the wilderness movement, at a critical time in history: Post-World War II expansion and consumerism were poised to irreparably change the West's backcountry. Elser was swept along in the excitement and joined in the fight to pass the Wilderness Act, even testifying before the Montana Senate.

Elser leads pack horses through Youngs Creek, Montana, in 1964. Around the same time, Elser testified before the Montana Senate to push for passage of the Wilderness Act.

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY THE ELSER FAMILY

Sixty years later, at the age of 81, Smoke is still working as an outfitter and horse packer in the same places he once fought to save, and he's shared his favorite Montana wilderness areas with a who's-who client list of politicians and businessmen. Along the way, he's also trained the FBI, the Border Patrol, and Navy SEALs.

Elser recalls that despite the FBI agents' suits and dress shoes, they picked up the skills quickly. "They said that bad guys were often hiding in the national forests instead of living in cities," he says. "In the backcountry, the bad guys could carry guns, live in tents, move about freely—and nobody paid particular attention."

Elser began teaching wilderness skills for the University of Montana in 1964, and on nights like tonight, when most octogenarians would be tucked into their easy chairs, he's still plugging away.

No Chain Saws or Helicopters Allowed

The skills aren't just cowboy kitsch. In the nearly 109 million acres of U.S. wilderness, where machinery like chain saws, helicopters, and power drills is prohibited without special exemptions, these "old ways" are the only option for jobs like historic preservation, bridgebuilding, trail work, and maintenance.

Even law enforcement agencies such as the FBI must abide by the restrictions with few exceptions. Not only does this stipulation against motorized equipment protect a wilderness area's natural soundscape; it also encourages (and forces) restraint from modernization (and consumption), a tenet at the heart of the Wilderness Act.

Traditional skills, including horse packing, crosscut sawing, masonry, shingling, building log walls for erosion control, and using ropes and pulleys to pull trees, make up a unique and little-known skill set that many members of the wilderness community fear within a generation may be shelved as relics rather than maintained as a necessity for future wilderness workers.

As Smoke sees it, replacing hard-earned skills with mechanized equipment is a threat to wilderness preservation. "Wilderness areas were set aside for future generations," he says. "But people don't understand that."

Smoke props his boot on an old ammo can, puts on a pair of red-rimmed glasses, and starts taking role. Elk hocks, painted saw blades, and a sign with Elser's motto, "Three Miles an Hour," a reference to the speed of a packhorse, hang on the wall.

Elser tends to a horse at his home in Rattlesnake Valley, Montana, where FBI and Border Patrol agents sometimes come to learn wilderness skills. Even government agents tracking criminals hiding in the backcountry must abide by the ban on using mechanized equipment in government-designated wilderness areas.

PHOTOGRAPH BY CATHRINE WALTERS

"I want to make sure that everything we're taking into the backcountry with us has more than one use," Elser tells the class, emphasizing the importance of low weight, simplicity, and efficiency in a pack train.

That statement leads into tonight's first topic: rope splices, which eliminate the need for buckles, snaps, and other specialized fasteners. You have to have rope, and if you know how to splice, the reasoning goes, you don't have to rely on those other things.

You also don't have to worry about tearing a hole in your hand. When a thousand-pound horse pulls away from you, Smoke says, the metal fasteners can catch your clenched grip, while a splice will slide right through.

"There are ten splices on each saddle," he says, referring to the places where leather straps attach to ropes that secure loads on the horse. "That's why I want you to learn how to splice."

The students are handed a few feet of three-eighths-inch coarse rope, and they start practicing.

When Elser isn't instructing students in his own barn, he can be found 25 miles away at the Lolo National Forest's Ninemile Wildlands Training Center, a U.S. Forest Service program that teaches wilderness skills to Forest Service employees around the country. (Classes open to the public are run through the Forest Service's Heritage Expeditions program.)

From the 1930s till the mid-'50s, the depot served as headquarters for wildland firefighting operations in the northern Rockies. With the ringing of the fire bell, a crew of 25 men and a train of pack animals could be ready to depart in 15 minutes....

The center isn't just a way to preserve Western heritage. A growing number of public land employees lack the crucial skills necessary for maintaining trails, building bridges, restoring historic sites, and even fighting fires in wilderness areas.

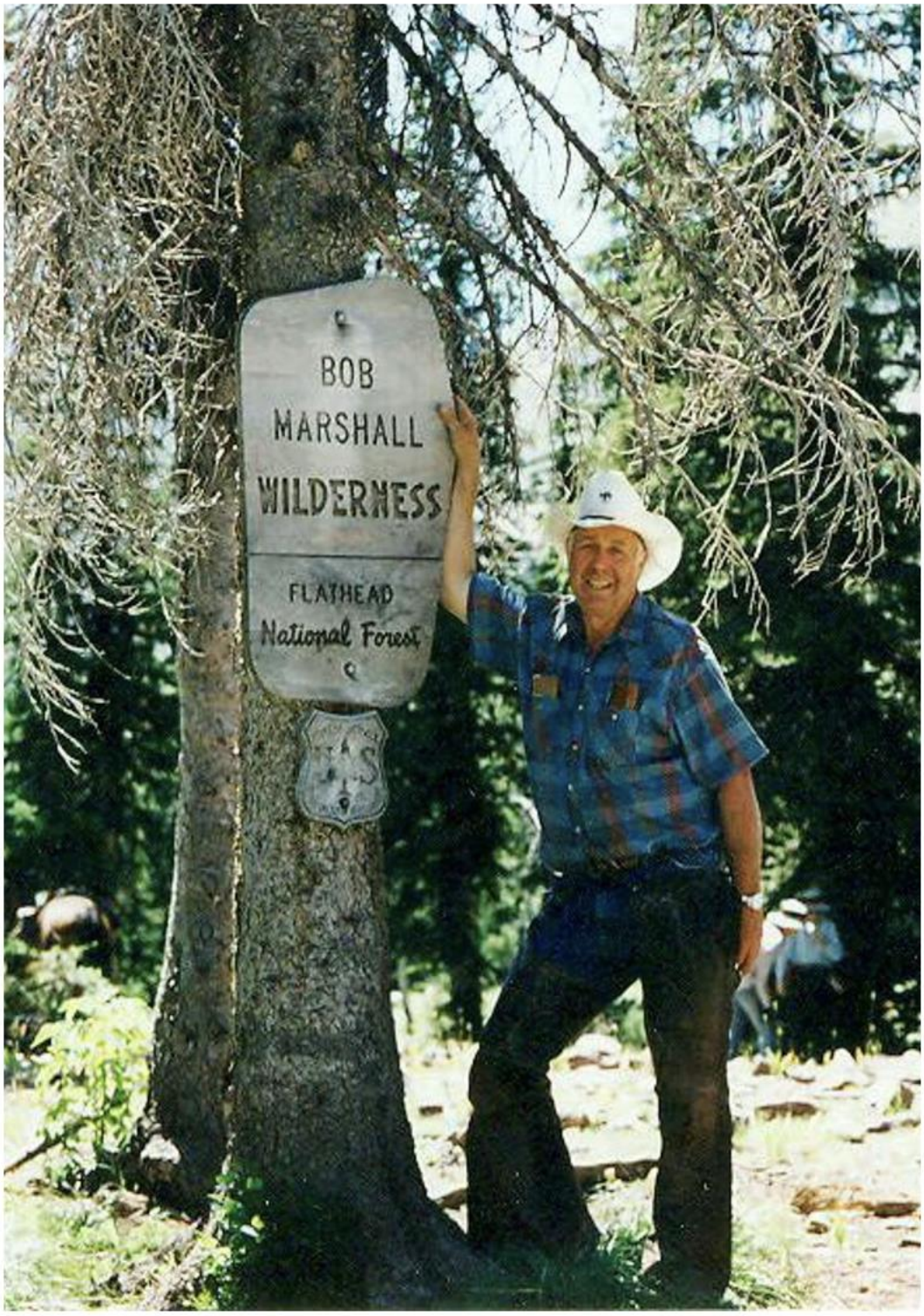
Fewer Children Learning Backwoods Skills

"It used to be you could have gotten a three-year-old to go out with the pack [train], and they'd know what to do. Nowadays, you can't do that. Someone would get killed," says Ninemile Resource Assistant Laura Johnson Boudreaux. "As we become more of a mechanized, organized society, the traditional skills are no longer needed. Most kids don't have to go out to cut firewood with crosscuts anymore."

Previous generations of children would have learned how to use crosscut saws on the family farm or ranch. But as the share of Americans living in rural areas has decreased from 30 percent in 1960 to 19 percent in 2010, fewer kids have been exposed to outdoors skills at home. Meanwhile, enrollment in organizations that traditionally have taught such skills, including 4-H, Boy Scouts, and Girl Scouts, has declined significantly.

These trends also might explain why fewer people understand the reason equipment bans exist, says Debbie Austin, who oversaw exemption requests for 14 years in Lolo National Forest. As the forest supervisor, she never approved mechanized equipment unless a life was in danger. "I was a stickler on that," she says. "I certainly didn't approve more as time went on."

Rick Taylor, who works in Teton Wilderness, one of the country's original wilderness areas, says land managers there have resisted issuing exemptions to use the banned equipment for things like trail maintenance.



Elser has spent decades exploring the Bob Marshall Wilderness Area—"the Bob"—which encompasses more than 1.5 million acres of western Montana land and is considered the crown jewel of America's wilderness system.

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY THE ELSER FAMILY

"Here, we've proven you can do it [with traditional skills]," says Taylor. He says he has seen an increase in special requests since he began working for the Forest Service 27 years ago. "Seems like we were never doing exemptions back then."

Next on Smoke's syllabus is "mantying," which comes from the Spanish word *mantilla,* for a woman's shawl. In the horse packers' lexicon, it refers to the cowboy equivalent of gift-wrapping a box of supplies, but the consequences of a bad job can be severe: A poorly packed load can rub a stock animal raw or result in soaked and damaged gear.

"The traditional ways are probably a little harder to learn," Smoke says. "But they are much easier on the animal." The modern snap-and-go packs can dig into the horse's rib cage and lungs; mantying the loads puts them higher on the animal's back.

Elser's assistant Jeff Miller, who holds a Ph.D. in zoology, spreads a thick square of cream-colored canvas on the cement floor, sets a metal cargo box in the middle, and explains the sequence of origami-like folds for a proper manty. The student's goal is three minutes or less. Miller calls for a student to time him.

"I feel like a downhill skier in the Olympics," Miller says. "Everyone is watching, and I know I'm going to screw up." The stopwatch beeps. One minute four seconds.

"The last round will be with the lights off," threatens Elser. "Can't go home till you've done it."

As he wanders through the group, Elser emphasizes the importance of animal care. That's one reason he and the rest of the Ninemile crew prefer the custom-made Decker saddles to the cheaper, easier-to-pack sawbuck saddles. The relationship between a rider and his horse, a sawyer and his saw-mate, a packer and her train of mules represents a subtle but crucial element of teamwork underlying many of the wilderness skills Elser and his cohorts at Ninemile teach.

"Water tanks, pianos; we can handle anything with Deckers," Elser smiles, touching on the pragmatic aspect of packing that even land managers—intent on phasing out their stock programs because of safety and budget concerns—have a hard time arguing with.

In wilderness areas, where helicopter use is restricted, there are a lot of jobs pack animals simply handle more efficiently than a crew of human "trail dogs" would, such as awkward loads of long beams and gravel.

"We can take a string of mules and probably pack a ton of cargo in," says Mark Pengelly, a 31-year Ninemile veteran, who grew up under Elser's tutelage.

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY THE ELSER FAMILY

Elser leads a group of wilderness trainees and pack mules in Basin, Montana.

Over the next hour, the group's mantying grows noticeably tighter and quicker.

"Smoke is pretty much a dying breed," says Tim Green, one of his assistants, as he stores cargo boxes in the corner for the night. Like the wilderness skills themselves, the number of outfitters in the northern Rockies has declined dramatically over the past decade, and when stacked against tourists' desires for constant connectivity, the outlook for multiday pack trips in remote wilderness areas isn't good.

Elser has eased up on his threat of making the class manty with the lights turned off, and the neatly wrapped loads line the classroom floor. A time-honored backcountry technique has been passed on to a new class. But the question lingers, Will anyone pick up the mantle of keeping these skills alive once Smoke is gone?

Greta Weber contributed additional reporting. Molly Loomis is a writer based in eastern Idaho. Follow Molly on Twitter and *Instagram*.