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# Foxtrotting The Grand Canyon

*By: Lothar Rowe*

Some years ago the plan matured to cross the Grand Canyon, from the North to the South Rim with Missouri Fox Trotters. In May 2003 the plan became reality. A group of 8 Europeans, all very experienced riders, not afraid of height, were ready to go. It is the same group, which in the past had already taken three trail rides with the Missouri Fox Trotters from Miller Ranch, through Arizona. During planning we checked with Park Rangers, but none could recall that horses ever made this trip. Mules yes, but horses? Last year four horses made the trail down to the river from the South Rim to the Phantom Ranch and back. In past years, sporadic trips with horses were made on the Bright Angel Trail to the Phantom Ranch and back the same way. One group of horses had to stay more than a week at the Phantom Ranch to regain strength before they could risk the way up again. For good mules this trail is no problem, but for horses?

After communicating back and forth, endless telephone calls, and a personal visit to the rangers we finally got the desired approval and permit and could pass this happy message to our friends in Europe.

On May 24, 2003 the group acquainted themselves with the Missouri Fox Trotters on the Miller Ranch in Scottsdale, AZ and on Sunday May 25 we started our trip to Lake Jacobs on the North Rim of the Grand Canyon. At Lake Jacobs we had to fill our tanks with diesel fuel and water. It took a \$25 tip and 2

hours of slowly dripping water to put the valuable stuff into our tanks. It was already dark when we organized our camp at Trailhead No. 7 on the North Rim.

The next two days we rode on the Arizona Trail which leads through thick forest with many clearings. Riders and horses had fun going at a full gallop. During this time of the year, water for the horses is no problem here. We even found snow in some shaded spots. A few days earlier the night temperatures had been below the freezing point, therefore, as a provision we took along blankets for the horses since in Phoenix we already had daytime temperatures of 95 F. We didn't need the blankets because the temperature did not drop below 41 F.

Next day Trail No. 4 + 7 prepared us for the meaning of the word "grade". The steep-sloped trail passes along a steep canyon. It was a beautiful and eventful trail which under normal circumstances needs more attention, but we long for the next day - the ride on the North Kaibab Trail down to the Colorado River, to the Phantom Ranch at the bottom of the Grand Canyon. We trailered the horses into the National Park to the trailhead; at 10:00am we started our descent. Suddenly we faced a train of mules ascending and carrying a group of tourists - there was no room for all of us. We had no alternative but to turn around and ride back. We were told that a second train of mules was following 5 minutes behind. The wrangler was surprised to see us and that we received no information from the

rangers about the necessity to synchronize our timing with them.

We asked the mule boss and he told us another group with tourists would start at noon from Roaring Springs, 4.7 miles further down. He advised us to wait for the mules at a place approximately 2.2 miles down which they would reach by 2:00pm as there would be no other possibility to make way for them.

At 10:30 we started again, we increased the speed. The trail is narrow, but is a non-slippery, sandy ground which the horses like very much. It was 11:10 when we reached the described place; it looks like this is the mule's usual stop. The place is big with hitching rails for the mules. We checked our watches and decided it should be possible to arrive at Roaring Springs by noon, therefore we continued the descent.

The trail now started to become very narrow, very steep and rocky. The edge dropped steep into the canyon. Nobody even wanted to think about encountering an ascending mule train in this area. Turning the horses or dismounting from them was impossible. Taking pictures? No, we cannot stop. Everybody wanted to continue as quickly as possible. "Rocket" the 14 year old Missouri Fox Trotter gelding was leading the group. Time was running out and Roaring Springs was not yet in sight. Suddenly we came upon a small bridge where we met a park ranger.

"So, you are the group with the horses", he murmured. "You must hurry, because once the mules have started you will have to return to the mule stop, and that case you will reach the Phantom Ranch only at night, if you will be able to make it at all."

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*"Fox trotting The Grand Canyon"*  
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Rocket increased speed. MO and Travis could still follow but the younger horses could not hold this speed. We have to reach the springs by noon before the mules start their ascent. Rocket again increased speed and led MO and Travis. Winfried led the rest of the group. Rocket was giving it his best; 5 minutes to twelve we arrived at Roaring Springs. The mules were ready to start. The wrangler had already heard about the crazy people with their horses crossing the Grand Canyon. Here they were, the 10 Fox Trotters just in time. A brief smile and "good luck" from the wrangler. "Are those horses?," ask a tourist. "No, they are not horses, they are Missouri Fox Trotters," I replied. They were surprised, shook their heads and off they go, slowly and leisurely. We rested for one hour and gave the horses and us a break. Only now did we realize what a tight call it was and we were proud of our Fox Trotters for making this trail at such speed - 4.7 miles in 1 1/2 hours. No problem in flat country, but here in those steep slopes? "Pity," said Reiner and Resie, "we should have taken pictures from those steep descents." Too late now, back there everybody was concentrated on the horses and the trail. Taking pictures? Keep on going. None of us wanted to stop on those narrow paths close to the rocky edge with several hundred feet dropping into the canyon.

The continuing trail from Roaring Springs to the Cottonwood Campground was almost a stroll compared to what was behind us. Cottonwood is the overnight stay for all hikers who are crossing the Grand Canyon from the North like us. From here the trail stretches. We passed the Ribbon Falls and continued through a very narrow canyon. It became very warm and we appreciated the shade given by rock formations. One horseshoe was lost, but quickly replaced with our emergency tools.

It was 4:00pm when we reached Phantom Ranch. We made 14.2 miles, starting from an elevation of 8250 and now being at 2480. There was a camping place with hitching rails. At 8:00pm we finally got something to drink, but had brought food with us due to the fact the

ranch is booked 1 1/2 years in advance. For the horses we expected hay from the mule station. Three bales of Alfalfa (\$25.00 per bale) had to be enough for our 10 Fox Trotters for the next 2 days. The first bale was munched the same



evening. At night deer came and consumed almost all the rest. They came in silence and unnoticed and stood only a few feet from our sleeping bags. We tried to buy new hay, but the wrangler had none to spare. We had planned an extra day at the Phantom Ranch but with no feed for the horses we decided to continue our ride.

We started at 8:10am to the Kaibab South Trail. This way we avoided the 6 to 8 mule trains coming down the Bright Angel Trail. The South Kaibab Trail was 7.3 miles long, and had a climb of 4800 feet. Here we were not supposed to meet mules, but at 9:10am we met a wrangler descending with 5 mules carrying hay. He could not turn with his mules, so each of us had to find a spot where they could pass. It would be the only mule train that day the wrangler thought. Contrary to the North Trail where we only had 2 chances to pass in 6.8 miles, this trail had several possibilities.

There was no water on the South Kaibab Trail and the heat soon increased and the trail got steeper. Steep slopes; narrow, rocky paths; tight, very tight turns and endless uphill climbing was in front of us. Now the horses had to give their best, use their full power in this incredible heat. With many stops we needed 4 1/2 hours for the 7.3 miles to reach the Rim. This is the same time the mules need. It is very hard on our horses, who had to climb almost without feed in the

morning and without water on the trail in temperatures of 95 degrees. A few of us dismounted and walked a distance to give relief to their horses. "Rocket" and "Bell" both seemed to have special strength and a strong will to proceed.

"Rocket" took the last, steep 100 yards in a slight gallop - unbelievable. "Horses"?, asked some hikers, "are they indeed horses?" "No", was always our proud answer, "They are Missouri Fox Trotters".

Arriving at the Rim, the first thing we did was to give water to the horses. A Ranger with a water truck stopped, got out and said "So you are the group with the horses coming from the North." First we thought he wanted to tell us that we were not allowed to tie the horses

to the trees. But he was so impressed with the performance of our horses that we didn't get a warning, instead he told us about the 4 horses, which last year made the trip into the Canyon from the South Rim.

Two of our group got into the bus and were greeted immediately by the driver - "You are from the group which came through the Canyon with horses," and he advised all other bus drivers over his radio and all knew about the crazy riders and their adventure. In the parking lot, where our trailers were parked, the 2 were also greeted with "hello" and admiration. It was obvious our group was the talk of the day. We never had to show our hard-earned permits. The crazy Germans had crossed the Grand Canyon and were the talk of the day. To be truthful, there were only 8 Germans as Resie and Bruno are from Switzerland. Ten Europeans with 10 genuine US Americans, the 10 Missouri Fox Trotters from the Miller Ranch had crossed the Grand Canyon from north to south in only 2 days.

It was the first, but most certainly not the last time. The Fox Trotters have impressively shown that they are equal to the mules in such difficult territory. There is still one difference between our Fox Trotters and the mules. If they have enough feed and water the Fox Trotters are much faster. A bow and respect to the performance of this outstanding breed. 