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ON THE TRAIL OF THE OLD WEST

THE BILL WILLIAMS MOUNTAIN MEN RIDE AGAIN

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"Circle up, riders!"

With that call from the trail boss, the 21st-century men in buckskins set off on horseback for a 200-mile Arizona backcountry ride that recaptures the spirit of the 19th-century mountain man.

The 50th ride of the Bill Williams Mountain Men ends today in New River, with the men sunburned and sore and counting the days until next year.

"It's about as good as it gets," said Gary Horton, a retired Laveen resident. "Too bad it's only once a year."

As the sun rose above the pines in Williams on Sunday, the 25 men from throughout the state gathered in the 18-degree weather, both men and horses restless to be off on the longest annual horseback ride made by any group in the United States.

"It's just a wonderful, free feeling," said Bob Dean, 64, the son of a founder of the Mountain Men. The Williams Realtor is making his 39th ride from the tall pines to the saguaro-dotted desert. "You don't have people calling you. You don't have to worry. ... We've seen a lot of different country that people don't see at all. Other people, they go down the freeways and the highways."

Two cowboys and some businessmen founded the organization in 1953 as a way to promote tourism to Williams and as a way to relive those days of the mountain men, when the fur-trappers and trail blazers rode alone across the frontier and lived off the land.

Williams, a town three hours by car northwest of Phoenix, is named for mountain man Bill Williams, who died in 1849.

The modern-day mountain men include a psychiatrist and a retired Air Force colonel, a contractor and a ranch hand, a truck driver and retired managers, and a few others. This ride, the ultimate guy trip for men who were born a century too late, is what they wait for all year.

Each day starts at dawn and they ride 20 to 40 miles, spending up to 10 hours in the saddle. They go in silence across country rarely seen by hikers. They don't ride the horses hard, or they wouldn't last the trip, although they're known to gallop into that last night camp in the late afternoon.

The nights are filled with camaraderie and guitar music around the campfire, after the horses

are fed, watered and brushed down. Bedtime, for most, is early.

The last of the original group died last year, and today, the men range in age from 31 to 78.

They ride in snow and rain and heat and mud, and their wives know nothing will keep them from this trip.

"He broke his leg one year in December and damned if he wasn't determined to ride," said Anita Horton, Gary's wife and a bartender.

Dr. Stephen Brockway, 53, of Cave Creek, explains the allure this way.

"There's a cowboy poem by Baxter Black that goes, 'The big high and lonesome is a place in my mind.' It's kind of illustrative," said Brockway, a psychiatrist.

"All the long vistas ease your mind, take you out of your troubles. It's hard to worry out here. The beauty of it lifts your eyes to the skyline."

The Bill Williams Mountain Men have represented Arizona in presidential inauguration parades from Kennedy to Clinton, and they have attended Washington cocktail parties in their fringed buckskins and traditional hats made of foxes or other animals.

The men, who are voted into the group after making one ride, visit children's hospitals and ride in parades. They raise money for annual scholarships for Williams High School graduates.

But the ride is the best part of their year.

This year's trail boss, Jeff Ashworth, a retired Air Force colonel and a Prescott resident, spent the last year riding the route and working with ranchers and the U.S. Forest Service to get permission to cross the land.

The men are still required to grow beards for the trip. Sleeping on the ground without a tent, though, no longer is mandatory.

Cooking was too much work after riding all day, they said, so they hired a caterer who feeds them well on barbecued chicken and steak and pork chops.

One of the support vehicles hauls portable toilets, with the official mountain men logo, because their campsites must be zero-impact. They take cellphones for emergencies.

Sometimes, their wives joke that they're not real mountain men because real mountain men wouldn't bring cots, tents, warm sleeping bags and a well-stocked beer truck. The men do not feel even a tiny bit bad about this.

"They weren't as smart as me," said Jack Myrick, who was the trail boss last year and lives in Buckeye. "They would be wishing, 'Why didn't we think of that?'"

The men point out that the well-stocked beer truck speaks to the lore of the mountain men, who would trade their furs, buy their supplies and then drink up whatever was left of their money.

The real mountain men, they say, lived the hard lifestyle because the frontier was so beautiful they couldn't do anything else.

And that's why they keep making the trip, even though paved roads and fences make that unspoiled route more difficult to come by.

"Coming off those hills, you can look over and see everything for miles," said Jason Letner, 31, of Phoenix. "It's just the peace and the quiet, and you get a lot of time to yourself."

