

Mounted Volunteers Assist at Folsom Lake

Article and photos by Linda Hamilton

With personal satisfaction as their only pay, 500 mounted members of the Folsom Lake Trail Patrol serve as "eyes and ears" for the rangers of California's Folsom Lake State Recreation Area (FLSRA). These volunteers ride horseback to survey the ~5 miles of trails surrounding Folsom Lake and the American River to Auburn.

The patrol kicked off its 10th year of service by providing first-aid assistance to the American River 50 Run in April.

Recognized by yellow patches on blue shirts, the patrol has grown to its present size from a start-up group of 12. Folsom Lake Trail Patrol was initiated in 1979 by then Chief Ranger Frank Herald to augment ranger patrols within the FLSRA.

Qualified members are certified in basic first-aid and community CPR. Further, horse and rider must both pass a qualifying test in which the rider proves to a training committee that he or she can control the horse in various trail situations.

Ranked one of the most urbanized parks in the state, Folsom Lake sees more than 4 million visitors annually, twice as many as Yosemite. In 1988, said American River District Superintendent Bruce Kranz, the patrol provided more than 3,000 volunteer hours.

Patrol duties include informing visitors of park rules and regulations, maintaining public relations mobilizing during holidays and other peak periods, and reporting accidents or incidents involving damage or harm to property, animals or park visitors.

"They provide a uniformed presence on the trails that shows people some kind of authority," said Ranger Paul Hladik, who serves as trail patrol "park liaison." They also provide information on problems of inappropriate use of park land and of the trails."

Since its inception, the trail patrol has helped maintain the riding/hiking trails from Hazel Avenue to Auburn. Following the flood of 1986, patrol members were asked by the state parks department to ride the trails, survey the damage done by run-off mudslides and the Coffey Dam break, and report back to the chief ranger. Such extensive damage was noted that when members grouped together to repair the trails, they were overwhelmed.

"When we went out to do the work we realized there was more work than our organization could handle, so we thought of coming up with an idea to help us out," said Janet Pucci, an original member who is still active.

The idea became reality in 1988 through the Adopt-A-Trail program, designed to provide trail maintenance within the FLSRA. Patrol members recruit outside groups to "adopt" a mile of trail, and then provide guidance in proper maintenance. To acknowledge each group's hard work, plaques are placed along the trails indicating the name of the group maintaining that portion of the trail.

"Our purpose was to get people to help maintain the trails," said Vivian Buletti, Adopt-A-Trail chairperson. "Currently, we have 14 adopters who maintain up to 19 miles of trail. It's been a great success."

Another success for the patrol was that of getting radios to link with park dispatch at Folsom Dam. Patrol input led to drafting of a grand proposal for state funds. The patrol received four radios as a result and also authorized the purchase of two more radios through membership funds.



Jeff Windeshausen installs a water bar during a trail maintenance work party. Volunteers report getting personal satisfaction from such volunteer work.

Establishment of two-way communication, said Ranger Hladik, has made the patrol "really viable."

Establishing such communication is even more valuable in the most important facet of serving in the Folsom Lake Trail Patrol—providing first-aid and rescue services to park trail users. Each year, the American River 50 Run starts the high season in early April. In isolated areas where the trails are narrow and accessible only by foot or horseback, patrol members and their horses have carried distressed runners to awaiting medicopters, boats or ambulances.

At least 10 runners were carried out in 1985 following a dramatic weather change that gave them little time to train in hotter, more humid temperatures. In 1988, one runner suffered severe cramps in an isolated area where the trail was too narrow for even two horses; one patrol member remained to help while two others went to the next aid station to coordinate assistance.

"We rode to the sheriff's radio station, and he radioed for a helicopter," said Linda Gurnee, past president. "First they tried to get walking people to get him out, but we suggested that would be too hard. They couldn't get motorized vehicles in to him because it was too narrow. The helicopter circled, trying to find a place to land, and finally landed on a sand bar because the river was so low." Debbie Brickel, the patrol member who aided the runner, worked more than an hour



Horses used by Folsom Lake Trail Patrol members must be reconditioned to potentially frightening situations. Dan Matutttch teaches his Half-Arabian gelding SAHARA TZAR to stand calmly as a bright object flaps about his head.

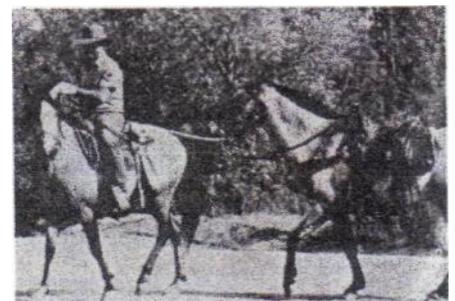
to stabilize him and get him out on her horse. Her husband Tony, a run participant, stopped to help.

"The runner was too cramped up to get in the saddle so we worked on him a while. Finally, my husband helped me get him onto the horse, and we took him to the helicopter. They wanted us to get the horse as close to the helicopter as we could, then they transferred the runner to a gurney and took him the rest of the way," she recounted.

The patrol's valuable contribution to the American River 50 Run has sparked interest by other groups and increased use of riding/hiking trails by other horse groups. They now annually assist with the American River 50 Endurance Ride, the Tevis Cup ride, and the Western States 100-Mile Run. For the past two years, they have served as judges for a local 4-H trail ride held at Brown's Ravine.

Mostly, however, patrol members simply enjoy helping out. And, after 10 years of serving the public and the state parks department, these volunteers also are finding substantial recognition.

"I think the trail patrol is of real value,"* said Chief Ranger Frolley. "I would like to eventually incorporate it into our ranger law enforcement functions."



A patrol member, clad in the identifying blue shirt with yellow patch, teaches horses to pony and be ponied. These skills are required in case of trail emergencies or rescues.