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The Last Pack Trip

By Eileen Sisk

The moon rose full and bright above "Wild Horse Mesa" the night before Janet Fleming Jones and I were to set out on a pack trip that had been a year in the making. But this night, Jan lay inside the outfitter's home shoring up strength for our adventure.

Although she was a fifth-generation Hoosier, Jan considered the juniper-and sage-speckled hills on the fringe of the Gila National Forest her adopted home. She had sojourned to New Mexico for years, having taken several trips with her mountain-man friend, Jim Mater who owns and operates a custom pack outfit. Jan insisted I take "a pack trip the way it ought to be done, a true Western experience."

When I met Jan at the Albuquerque airport, I doubted she could withstand the rigors of six days on horseback.

"I really thought she wanted to get away from home to die -- out to her beloved New Mexico mountains," a mutual friend later wrote.

It seemed everyone, save for herself, realized the toll cancer was taking on the 72 year-old former physical education teacher. Jan still saw herself as a strong, robust horsewomen who had no need for painkillers or the disease that ravaged her.

Jan made it up the mountain the next day, but forced to head back to the mesa after only one day and night on the trail. I will always remember how tall my six-foot friend looked in the saddle atop Jim's spirited Appaloosa with Jim leading the way on foot.

One week later Jan up and died for no good reason, with the closest she would ever come to a son and daughter at her side. The best thing was she pretty near died with her boots on with people she loved in a place she loved.