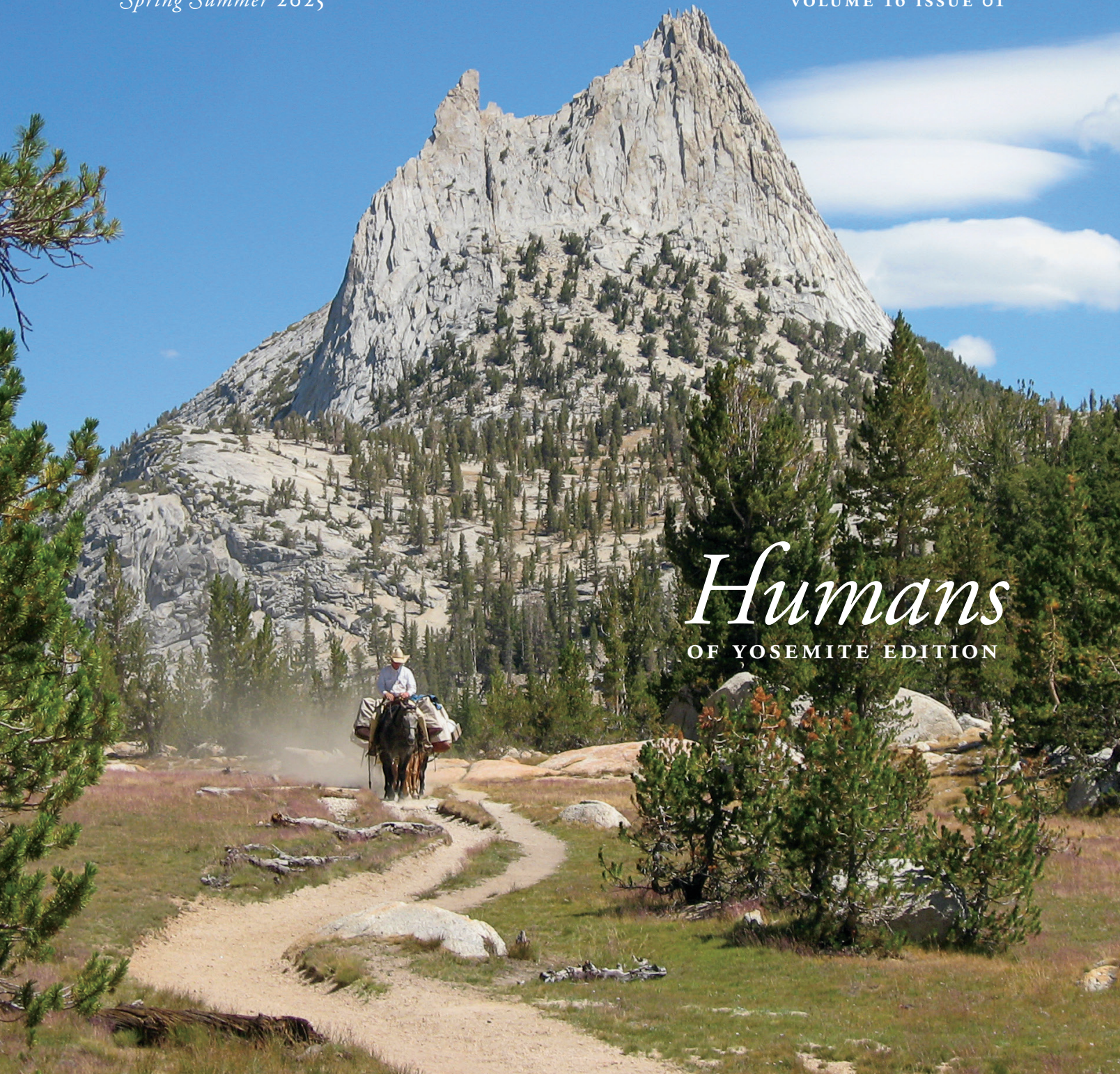


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I RIDE FOR THE BRAND

BY BURREL “BUCKSHOT” MAIER
YOSEMITE STAGECOACH DRIVER

I'm a cowboy, and my real name is Rambo. I was raised on a ranch and named after an all-around cowboy named Gene Rambo. My father was a rodeo cowboy, and my brother, Clay, was named after another all-around cowboy, Clay Carr. It's in our DNA. We are not horse-lovers; we are horsemen.

My father was in a car accident coming home from a rodeo in Salinas, Calif. He couldn't do what he was doing, so he opened up a place for kids to learn how to ride horses. That's where Clay and I both learned how to drive horses. My brother and I were always entrepreneuring. At one point, we had a little stagecoach and a team of horses, and we would go to these school carnivals, and that was our little business.

Clay went to work for a man in Oakhurst who had a wagon and horses, and they did stagecoach rides. A Yosemite ranger named Norm Messinger came down and hired them to give rides in Wawona, when the cabins were just being put in there. Everything was fine until one of the wheels fell off one of the wagons, and the Oakhurst man got real panicky. So my dad donated his horses to use in Yosemite, because he knew it was a good job for Clay, and he worked a good deal with the National Park Service. After the first year, I started driving a second wagon.

How cool could this be to get to do this in Yosemite? All the cabins were open, and things were just so Shangri-La. Clay left to do rodeo when I was around 16. I wasn't a ranger yet, but I'd go to the ranger meetings, and we'd be

out on the lawn. A ranger named Bill Dengler — I always called him Mr. Dengler — ran the meetings, and the last thing he always said to all of us was, “It's a privilege for you to be here, so act like it.”

To this day, I still remember that.

One of the proudest things in my life was when my job was changed from seasonal to “permanent subject to furlough.” I came on as part of the park service in 1989, and I ride for the brand. I really like being a park service employee. The Yosemite Association and the Yosemite Fund that became Yosemite Conservancy helped keep the stagecoach running, and we had so many volunteers that came out and helped us over the years.

Every year, we'd have a party. Just because I liked it.

I'd invite everybody. It didn't matter if you're park service or company or volunteers or whoever — everybody was welcome. I would do it at the corral. Coming up to my 50th year in 2023, I ended up having to have it at the community center, and I was afraid nobody would come. It was a potluck. It was just word of mouth, and I was real worried nobody would show up.

We wound up having 375 people.

I'm really proud to ride for the brand. I've seen a lot of changes in Yosemite, and it's almost two years now without the horses, and I do miss them. But I still get to visit with people in the barn, and I like doing that. I just get excited that I get to be up there. It's a privilege. This is not a job. It's a lifestyle. ■