The Bakhtiari probably originate from the Caucasus Mountains. Several thousand years ago they started their migration south. Some reports suggest that they have been in their present pastures for more than 2,500 years. Others believe that they stayed for many centuries in Syria and only came further south about 700 years ago.

The Bakhtiari say that they successfully defied Alexander the Great. They certainly have a long history of military success and of causing “trouble.” To this day they are feared as “bandits” by the people of Teheran and the settled peoples of Iran.

In the 19th century the Bakhtiari Khans rose to positions of great power and wealth. By the early 1900s they ruled Iran. In 1908 the Iranian oil fields were found on their land. The original Bakhtiari Old Company is the root of BP Oil and the Royal Iranian Oil Company.

In 1923, the team of Merian C. Cooper, Ernest B. Schoedsack and Marguerite Harrison made the remarkable documentary of the Bakhtiari migration, *Grass*, which has also been restored and distributed by Milestone Film & Video.

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, the Khans lost their power and some of their heads. The tribe was forced to settle and was considerably weakened. In the 1940s, the nomads destroyed their new “houses” and returned to a way of life that suited their flocks.

The tribe that was once described as “the most important tribe in the British Empire” is no longer in the mainstream of Iranian politics and has no interests in the oil fields. The Bakhtiari are once more what they were before the rise of the Khans—a large group of nomadic shepherds. There is less feuding between sub-tribes and more concentration on the business of sheep farming.

The semi-annual migration of the Bakhtiari is not just a tradition, it is essential. Essential if the tribe is to maintain its flocks at their present level and hence a certain economic strength and independence. When the winter pastures in Khuzistan dry up, the summer pastures are still under snow. To truck the sheep, if there was a road and enough trucks to move that many animals, would be a disaster as sheep must eat all the time. The four to eight week journey gives time for the snow to melt and for the grass to grow in the highlands near Esfahan. The journey also allows the tribe to make use of the fresh spring grass within the mountains, valuable pastures that would otherwise go to waste and deteriorate (like the Highlands of Scotland).

The lifestyle of the Bakhtiari is an ecological pattern that works. More than that, they have strategically protected themselves over the centuries by not building the roads and bridges within their mountain refuge that would make their life easier. Today they may not be in danger of military attack, although that possibility should not be ruled out (as has tragically happened this last decade with the Kurds) especially as the government would like to see them “settled.”

This journey has been reasonably described by the Daily Telegraph in London as “the most hazardous test of human endurance still undertaken year after year by an entire people.” The migration filmed by Anthony Howarth is the exact trek filmed fifty years before in *Grass* for the same reason—for among the Bakhtiari tribes, this is the hardest, most difficult migration of them all.

The Bakhtiari tribes are particularly inaccessible. Once within the mountains the visitor has no option but to travel as the Bakhtiari do, on foot or by mule.

Anthony Howarth had the unique advantage of having made the journey the year before. He knew that the crew would have to be small, tough and mobile. Small in numbers in order to maintain the close relationship which had been built up the previous year. Tough and mobile because the Bakhtiaris wait for no one once they start moving.

Award-winning British cameraman Mike Dodds was chosen because of his professional approach and his ability to shoot with sensitivity under arduous conditions. Ivan Sharrock had worked as a sound recordist with Anthony Howarth in East Africa. His qualifications were the same as Dodds’. Sharrock later went on to win an Academy Award for his sound work on *The Last Emperor*. As it turned out, Ivan could even out-walk the Bakhtiari, to say nothing of the rest of the crew. Alan Jones made up the complement as Camera Assistant. Shusha acted as interpreter and through her contacts in Iran, was instrumental in gaining access to the tribe. She proved herself just as tough as the rest.

Every piece of equipment had to be duplicated over and above normal contingency allowances. Thus there were two generators for charging the camera batteries. Generators required gasoline in considerable quantities. There were four cameras, although it was never intended to shoot with more than two. There were lightweight camera and blimped cameras. A mass of sound equipment allowed Ivan to supply the film with sync sound throughout, despite numerous accidents. His best day was the descent from Zardeh Kuh when he broke five microphone cables and several other items.

In order to keep the weight down, it was decided that the crew would eat with Jafar’s family and would live during the day in his tent. Tiny mountaineering survival tents were taken strictly for sleeping in and to protect the equipment.

In the end it took twenty-three mules to carry the crew and their two tons of equipment. The single heaviest item was the 100,000 feet of Kodak Ektachrome film stock. This film was carried from beginning to end of the migration by three long-suffering mules. The exposed film went through rivers, over the snow and even rolled down a mountainside, but not one foot was lost. This was a great tribute to the sure-footedness of the Bakhtiari mules and the skill of the muleteers.

A system had to be worked out to give the crew maximum mobility. Each of the four members had two mules, one to ride and one to carry the equipment and stock required for that day. In this way the main body of the supplies could be sent off ahead or left behind to keep the camera equipment out of the shots. The worst accident occurred when Mike Dodds’ equipment mule rolled at least one thousand feet down a precipitous tree-covered hillside. One of the Bakhtiari chased after it and caught up with the unfortunate animal in time to pull the girth strap loose and allow the camera to roll on for several hundred more feet while he tended to the mule. At the same time this incident seemed to represent a very real sense of values; after all, their lives almost depended on the mules. The smashed eyepiece of the camera was skillfully and quickly repaired by Alan.