

Chapters

A Mule Story

By Ted Bowser (copy righted) 6-20-2007

A friend once told me that it appeared that I lived my life in chapters. I have thought of his statement often and I came to the conclusion that we all do. I just have a larger degree of variance than most since I am an extremist by nature and throw myself into everything that I do with the velocity of a category 5 hurricane.

I have been blessed by God to have lived and worked in and across many different geographical regions and explored many different recreational opportunities during that time. This story is about the close of the most recent chapter that I would call the Mule Chapter.

As sad as it may seem to you, our family, after spending a considerable number of years at the mercy of and on the backs of mules, decided that based on our recent interest in USTRC team roping events and all of the time and travel they involved would need to sell our family mules.

These mules were a special type of mule because we had not entered the mule business lightly. We had acquired what we felt were the best mules possible and then developed their skills over a number of years. We handled these mules nearly every day and they were truly a joy to be around.

We always knew that if the time came that we needed to sell them, in our minds there would be only one place worthy of selling mules of their caliber. I went to work on my wife Kathy and son Clancy and convinced them it would be best to consign them to Jake Clark's Mule Days auction in Cody, Wyoming. This story is about our subsequent trip which ended up an adventure we will cherish but would never want to repeat. If you read the next few paragraphs I think you will agree it was a bittersweet experience.

It was a cold and nasty winter here in Oklahoma and we were feeding the dozen pasture horses range cubes in addition to their normal ration of hay to get them through the harsh and icy winter. In the herd of performance colts from Doc



Brandy in the roping pen May 17, 2007

Olena / Driftwood /Hancock and Oklahoma Star roping prospects stood a set of three mules as pretty as you would ever see; one gray, one buckskin and a black. I knew we were consigning them this summer so we started the process early of getting them up and giving them their individual pens. It was time to bring them in and start their journey to Jake Clark's Sale.

We fed them special supplements for their coats and hooves. We trimmed their feet and roached their manes. In time we would body clip and manicure them but for now we just needed to start back putting miles on them. We hauled them to ropings, trail rides, and got them back out on the road and in touch with society over the next few months.

You see for six years we had handled these animals daily and exposed them to every sort of activity possible as we did everything on our mules that others did on their horses only more. We had a bond with these animals and an obligation to make them perform their very best in

hopes that their next owners would see their value and continue the tradition.

It is a bit scary to think about the yahoos who could end up with one of our mules if you did not present them right. We were serious about making sure they were in as perfect of shape as possible when we presented them at Jake Clark's.

It was June and the time had come. We spent Memorial Day touching up the mules' ears and feet. I had shod all three a week before so they were going to look their best when we got them to Wyoming. We were surprised at how high the motel rates were in Cody so we had decided to sleep in the nose of the trailer on the way to save a few dollars. Kathy fixed the nose of the trailer up so well including a feather mattress it did not seem like much of a sacrifice at all. It was going to cost to make the 1300 mile trip from Oklahoma to Cody, Wyoming but we were determined it would be worth it.

The day came. We loaded our buckskin mule Brandy in the second compartment along with my son's rope horse, Blue. The black and gray mules Josey and Sandy went in the back. The front compartment of our 24-foot aluminum stock trailer was full of hay, clothes and supplies. We were ready to roll and the world was in our laps!

Clancy needed his horse because he would be meeting up with the Young Pro Tour in Casper, Wyoming after the mule sale to travel to exciting destinations such as Calgary and Cheyenne this summer. The Young Pro Tour is an outreach of Joshua Cowboy Ministries from Gordon, Texas. They put on roping clinics and perform cowboy church services across the nation. Clancy was honored to travel with them this year as a Junior Pro.

We had all the snacks we would need, cameras, feed and drinks. The mules were excited to leave also and looked like a million bucks. Neighbors had the instructions for doing our chores and life was good.

First stop – Hays, Kansas. We left at 7:30 at night so it was late when we

rolled into Hays. We still took the time to feed the animals and get them water. We tied them to a pipe fence at the fairgrounds and climbed in the nose of the trailer. It was a little warm but after a minor battle with a few stubborn mosquitoes (if you ever think you are too small to make a difference, remember how much trouble one little mosquito can be in the dark), we went to sleep. A few hours later I awoke and started taking care of the animals again. We offered them water and were on our way.

We had figured we would drive up to Cabelas in Sydney, Nebraska which we did. We pulled in and unloaded our mules. We were proud of the way they acted and we exercised them in the grass area next to the store before tying them up to the trailer and going into the store to look around. I looked a while and found some dog boots on clearance for my bird dog. We bought a souvenir for the young man doing our chores and were loaded and gone.

The rain was holding off for the most part but was threatening enough to keep things cool on the mules. We decided to go on to Casper and then we would be within a couple hundred miles of Cody which would allow us to arrive mid day on Wednesday. This seemed perfect. Life was good. We drove on and arrived in Casper before dark.

After passing through Casper, Wyoming it was a temptation to just push on in and finish the trip. I thought about the trek ahead and remembered from previous trips that the Wind River drive was ahead of us. Where would I stay in that rough country?

When we were just about twenty miles

west of Casper, a lake off to the north caught my eye. About the same time as I saw the sign that it was a wildlife area, I recalled seeing this location on past trips and thought it might be a nice quiet place to stay. I pulled over and did a U turn about a quarter of a mile past the drive to the lake. We drove down the lane and antelope were playing. A little one just burnt a path across the prairie. We took lots of video footage of the game and the area. It was truly Wyoming. Yes, this was a good place to camp for the night.

We unloaded the mules and Blue. They were a little more tired this time but still



Ted with the three mules and our rope horse "Blue" just outside Casper, Wyoming

made a mad dash to get a mouthful of grass. We were not in a hurry so we allowed them the opportunity. We took pictures of them as we knew it would be

our last night together on these terms: our mules, our horse, enjoying our last casual night together. We could not have known how true that would be for my favorite mule "Brandy".

We settled the mules in and watched as the ducks and waterfowl circled the lake. There were a lot of strange noises coming from this oasis type setting as compared to all of the dry land that surrounded our camping spot.

Turn forward three hours. It was 3:00 in the morning and a mule was making a little fuss by the trailer. I got my boots on and went out. Brandy and Sandy had gotten their lead ropes over top of each other. We tied them fairly long and I untied one and retied them before going back in the trailer. Another hour passed and it said it was 5:00 a.m. by my watch. (I had forgotten to turn my watch back so it was really 4:00 a.m.) But it felt like time to go anyway so I went out to start preparing for the trip.

I fed but they were not real interested. I figured we would get them up to Cody and present the food and water again so it was no big deal. Just a few hours away and things should normalize. We all at some point like it to be more normal than less normal. A few hours and the mules would be able to start settling in at Jake Clark's, or so I thought.

Kathy and Clancy were both up now and stirring around. It was nice that this spot actually had a bathroom so we would not have to use the trailer.



Clancy with Brandy and Josey the evening before Brandy got sick just west of Casper, Wyoming

Everything was ready to go and I noticed that Brandy was lying down. I went over and she stood up. I jumped up on her back and rode her a few minutes. I suspected that she was trying to colic so I just moved her around. I rode her down to the lake to see if she would like to drink from it. She did not act right. I could feel her give a little when she crossed the cement spillway on the way to the lake. I hopped off and looked her over. She would walk a little then act like she wanted to lie down. I could not believe it. This mule has been lotted up right outside my kitchen window for the last four months. I have owned her for seven years and had never seen her act like this.

I told Kathy we needed to back track to Casper and find Brandy a vet. I loaded her and we drove out to the road. I jumped out when we got to the highway and went back to check Brandy. She was lying down in the trailer beside Sandy who had scooted over to one side. Oh, boy, I thought, this cannot be good. I clucked to her and Brandy stood up. We headed on to Casper.

We drove until we saw a diner that was open. We pulled up and I went in. I looked around the crowd that appeared startled to see me. I do not know if I looked like a robber or just an outsider to them but as soon as I told them my plight, they quickly drew me directions to a local clinic on a table napkin and clearly empathized with us in our situation.

We drove to the clinic and I saw their hours on the door. They did not open until nine and it was now a quarter after five in the morning. I decided to try getting them out for an emergency visit rather than wait. Brandy was up now and standing in the parking lot of the Central Equine Vet Clinic on Fairgrounds Road in Casper, Wyoming.

The operator at the on call service listened to my request and did not give me much hope that a vet would come out right away. I waited on the line and they patched me through to the vet. Doctor George Marble was on the line and listened carefully to my description. He told me he was about 45 minutes away and would see me soon.

I walked Brandy around until he arrived about 6:00 a.m. Doctor Marble (who for the most part went by George which I thought was cool) went to work examining Brandy and administering



Ted and Brandy after a longing session at the vet clinic

medications. I thought we would be in and out and everything would be fine. Brandy was given a shot of Banamine and tubed her with mineral oil. My past equine experience led me to believe the shot and the oil would probably do it. Brandy was not looking like she was in any real pain, just uncomfortable. I figured she just has a little bit of a tummy ache and might be over reacting just a tad. She really was a big baby and was not accustomed to hauling this far.

I started questioning myself about everything. Did I give her too much hay? Should I not let her eat grass when we were stopped? Should I have put kool aid in her water to make her drink? These questions and more were running through my mind. I would not do anything intentionally to ever hurt her.

George was gracious enough to offer to let our other mules stay in stalls at his clinic while we waited for Brandy to get better. He even doubled his own horses up in stalls to make room for ours. We

were impressed.

We knew we had a little time so we decided to go eat some breakfast. We did that and then went to the museum in Casper to look at old buildings and such. We figured that we could still get to Jake Clark's that day. Again, we could not have been more wrong.

We arrived back at the clinic and Brandy had not improved. Doctor Marble



Dr. George Marble, Ted and Brandy

suggested that we give Brandy another shot and drive her up and down some washboard roads. We loaded her and took her for a ride, a long ride and we shook her for all she was worth.

When we came back, nothing, no change. We walked her, we longed her at a trot, and we hung IVs to hydrate her, still no change. George kept her quiet and we did not let her suffer. He was there until 4:00 a.m. and I stayed up with her the rest of the night.

You have no idea of how sad a situation can get until you are looking in the

big soft eye of your best friend with her head in your lap and you see your reflection. When this happened, I wept. And not just a little either. You understand this was not just an animal to me. We joined up. We were true partners. I could ride this mule with nothing; I mean nothing on her head. We were a team. It was bad enough I was going to sell her. It could not be possible that I must watch her die.

It was not fair. She was only ten years old. She was not like any other mule I ever knew. Why? To say I struggled would be like saying Iraq is a skirmish. This might have been the saddest day of my life.

The really hard part was that every time I asked her to get up she did. I mean she just rose up, put her feet in front and rose. It was unbelievable the way she would try for me. She did not fight, she did not complain. She did what she was asked until the day she died. And she did. It was hard. I do not understand.

I had two mules left and they must go on to Cody. How could we do it? It was hard. We loaded Blue and our two good mules and headed for Jake Clark's. We left our best in Casper.

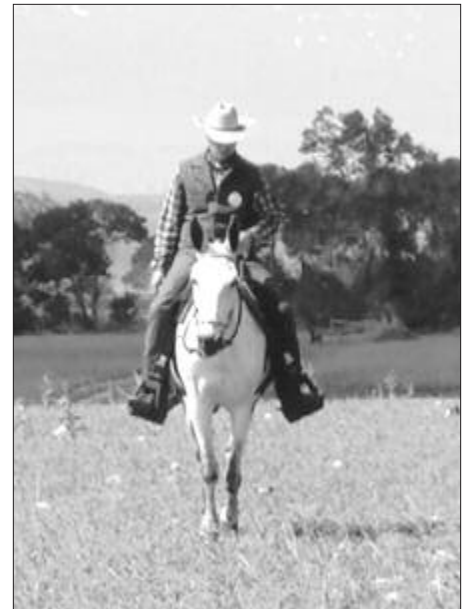
The rodeo was not the same as in years past. It had nothing to do with the level of performance of the participants either man or beast. I enjoyed the demonstration time and our mules performed among the best. The sale was exciting and we were blessed with two very caring mule families who purchased our ani-

mals at price which reflected their appreciation for the level of animal they were purchasing. We did so well on the two we sold that we went home feeling like we had won the rodeo.

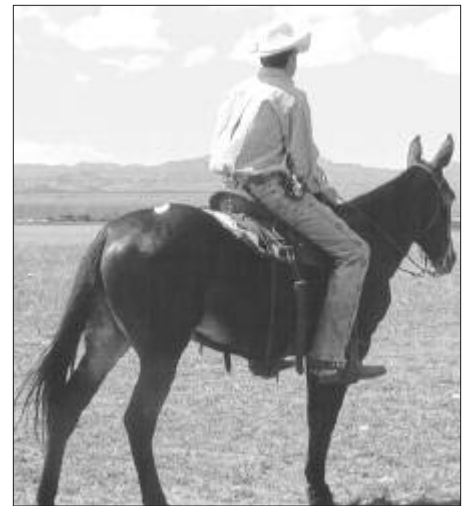
But in the back of our minds we could not help thinking about the times that folks came up to our stalls and asked us where our third mule was. For the most part we told them that she wasn't here without going into much detail for fear we would fall apart. The people were not wrong in asking and if I were them, after reading the ad, I would have been looking her up also. I am sure after reading the description in the ad most of them just thought we left her home and that we decided we could not part with her. This chapter in my life was truly bittersweet.

This is the actual ad from the sale catalog. #112 Brandy - *This is the kindest, gentlest, softest minded mule I have ever seen. We catch her in the pasture with absolutely nothing on her head and ride her to the house bareback. She is a people pleaser, really enjoys any job, with a rocking chair lope, side passes, neck reins, bends around and handles real soft. Brandy has packed some large loads for us and is always willing! We bought her as a three year old at this sale in 2000.*

I would absolutely lie down and go to sleep under her, I trust her that much. She is my favorite animal in the world. You will love her! We will miss her!



Ted on Sandy at Jake Clark's



Clancy on Josey at Jake Clark's