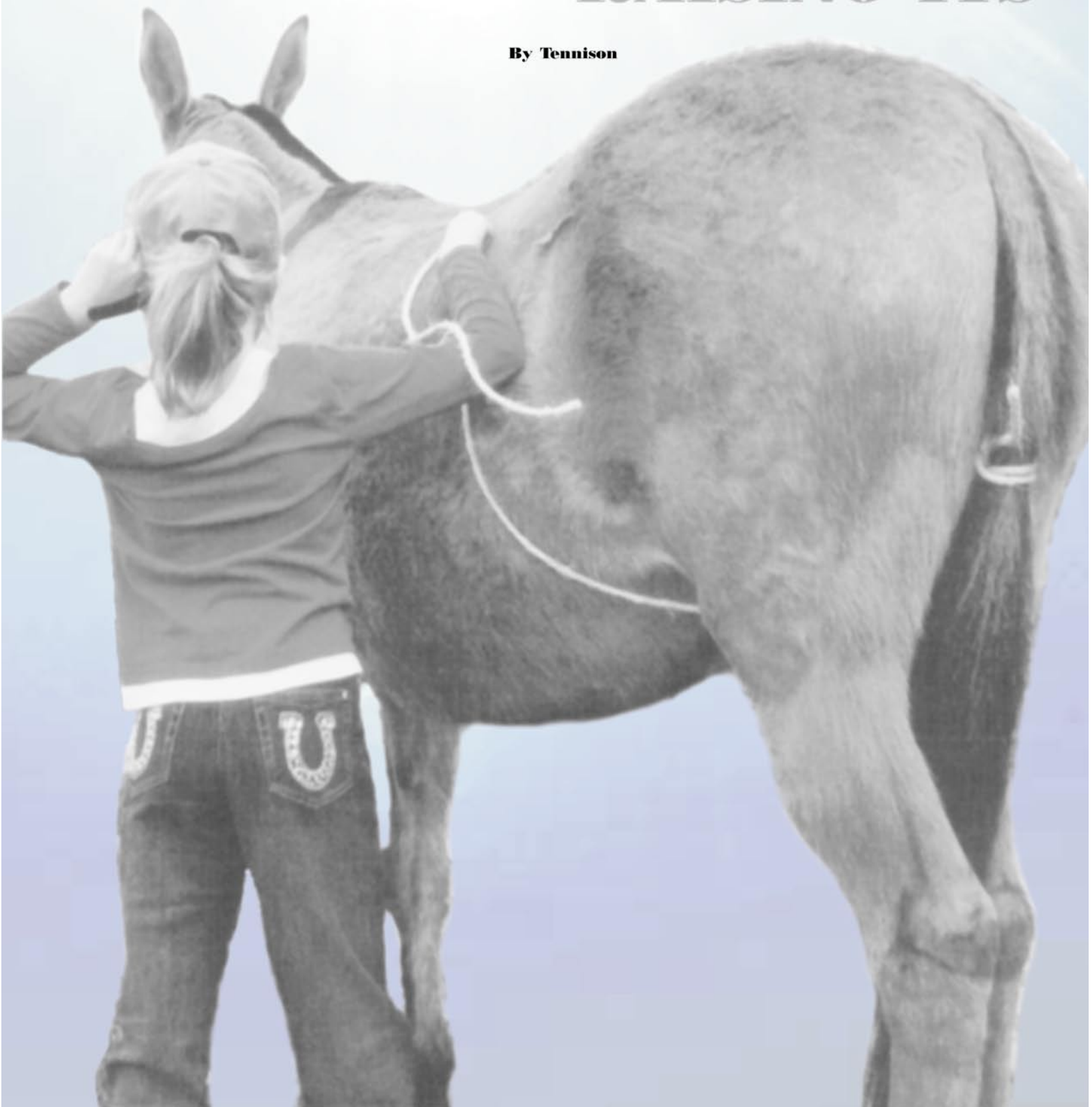


*Do you know the answer?*

**CAN A MULE BRAY Without  
RAISING ITS**

**By Tennison**



# “Them Mules”

**W**e’ve been covering some serious things these past few months in “Them Mules” articles. I believe it’s time to let our hair down a bit in an article. “Can a mule bray without lifting its tail?” is the question. Knowing the answer to this question won’t make your mule ride better or worse, I suppose. You’ve got to admit though, you’re curious aren’t you?

A writer from Memphis, Tennessee, posed this question way back in 1953, writing a story for *Collier’s Magazine* on the subject. Lydel Sims was that writer and her research went deep. When I read the title it made me curious and caused me to stop and think. It has caused anyone I’ve asked this question of to seriously think. Most who I’ve ask, after contemplating the question for a few seconds, had a question of their own, “Is this a trick question?” It’s not a trick question and I bet you’ve run the question around in your head. Well, do you know?

What raised the question in the first place was that back in 1953 Lydel Sims had come across a story in Colonel Calaibourne Mason’s writings describing a story written by Colonel Mason during the Civil War pertaining to braying mules and a method to stop them from braying. Lydel Sims went on a search over several months to prove it right or wrong. I want to share it with you.

The story Lydel came across by Colonel Mason goes like this. Colonel Calaibourne Mason served for the Confederacy under General Stonewall Jackson. General Jackson was planning one of his famous marches upon Union soldiers and Jackson was concerned for the effectiveness and safety of his troops during this march in the mountainous terrain during the night. One of Stonewall’s major concerns was with the 200 pack mules in his company. He knew they would give away the element of surprise if they brayed while sneaking up on those Union troops in the dark.

If you know much at all about a mule you know that should be a concern. For a fact when a mule gets a whiff of another mule or horse they will bray a very high percentage of the time. Now let’s be conservative here. Say 50% of the mules went to braying. That would be 100

mules braying in the dark of the night... Yep, that would get you spied. Back to the story.

Colonel Mason piped up and said, “General Stonewall all you have to do is provide some good strong string and I’ll take the mules in and out quiet and safe.” So the story goes, they tied the mules’ tails down with the string and not a bray was heard that historic night. “The mule never brays until he first lifts his tail!” Colonel Mason told his grateful commander.

Well, there’s the story. Actually there are two questions here, Can a mule bray without lifting his tail and could the mule bray if you tied his tail down? What do you think?

I posed this question to few of the top mule hands in the industry. I did have a lot of fun with this question. Nearly always in any phone conversations there was a pause on the other end. No one answered it quick.

Miss Lydel Sims posed this question to several experts in the industry at the time also. At that time in 1953 little did Miss Sims know times were coming to a close for the Owens Brothers Live Stock Commission Company. The tractor was in and the mule was out though no one knew at the time that it was for good. The Owens Brothers were believed to have bought and sold more mules than any other livestock company in the world at the time. Lydel was told if you want to know anything on the subject of mules, ask Wayne Owens, second-generation member of the famous Owens Brothers in 1953. The Owens in ‘53 still had one hundred or more mules standing in the barn.

When Sims asked the question of Wayne Owens, it stumped him. He said, he just didn’t know and invited her to come back to the barns and observe. Sims observed mules braying but those mules were plum on the other end of the barn. Going to the other end of the barn they would bray back where they had just come from (ain’t that just like them mules).

“Well get a mare,” Wayne told a stable boy. The mules only nickered at the mare. One let out a bray with its head over the stall and the tail was obscured by other

## **Question 1.**

*Can a mule bray without lifting his tail?*

## **Question 2.**

*Could the mule bray if you tied his tail down?*

**Brad Cameron,  
Cameron Mule Company**

*Oh, yes.... Well a mule does stick its tail out (or lifts it) when it brays. I don't know if it could bray with out lifting its tail though. The bray itself takes a great deal of effort from the entire body, much like a bull elk bugling. You could also wonder if they could bray with their head tied down as they do poke their nose out (along with the tail) to bray. In order for this to actually work, I would think you'd have to tie the tail down pretty tight, which would cause them to have trouble doing other things besides the braying! Aside from that, what a sight it must have been to see 200 head of mules packed up heading down the trail! Ch"ears",  
Brad*

**Steve Richards,  
Wyoming Outdoor Industries**

*A mule does raise its tail to bray. All equine raise their tail when vocal. I believe they could still bray even with the tail tied down.*

*Where the Eagle flies and Coyote cries  
Steve*

**Mike Easton,  
Five Star Equine Products**

*Yes, I believe he can bray without lifting his tail...But who would tie a mule's tail down to find out?*

*Mike*

**Bob Myler,  
Myler Bits USA**

*The Mule does lift the tail to bray. But I'm not sure he could not bray if he couldn't lift his tail. We humans have to lift our tongue to the roof of our mouth to swallow and so does the mule. But if we can't lift our tongue or the mule can't swallowing can still be achieved but its harder. I believe he could bray without lifting his tail but, like swallowing, it probably would be much harder.*

*Bob*

mules and could not be observed. Lydel Sims had no luck in solving the question at the Owens Brothers Live Stock Commission Company.

Sims eager to find the truth used her position as a reporter for the Memphis Commercial Appeal. Sims took the question to the people of Tennessee, Arkansas, Missouri, Mississippi, and other states. Hundreds knew the answer but the answers did not agree.

A gentleman from Paragould, Arkansas wrote, "I don't care where a mule's tail is, the mule can still bray." She reported, "He said it with some heat!"

Then a gentleman from Mathiston, Mississippi said, "It may be possible for a mule to bray without holding his tail up, but for the fifty years I have been working mules, I have never seen it happen."

You can see Lydel Sims would get two different answers and she reports on how heated it became when two did not agree on the answer. Some nearly came to blows on occasion.

Still not knowing if a mule had to raise his tail to bray Lydel Sims went to the animal health community, The Doctors of Veterinarian Medicine. The answers came in to say, "the mule did raise his tail to bray but... did not need to."

During Sims' investigation she came upon several reports that there was a debraying operation performed on mule's tails. The reason for tail surgery was for the purpose of keeping a mule from lifting its tail to bray.

One report came from a former Texas Ranger whose grandfather was a scout for a freighting company operating though Western territory full of hostile Indians. His grandfather had told him a vet would cut a small cord in the mules' tail about four inches down the tail from the root, thus rendering the mule's ability to lift his tail and no longer would the mule bray. The former Ranger said he saw it for himself years later when a Ranger captain bought six mules at a sale after World War 1. One of the mules carried his tail a little different from the other five. He overheard some men say, "The bay mule has been debrayed," assuming the operation had been preformed on the mule.

Lydel Sims surmised if she had proof of such a debraying operation it would give Colonel Mason's story an awful lot of legitimacy. Sims as mentioned was

very thorough in her investigation. She went to a Mr. W. A. Aitken, then the editor in chief of the Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association to pose the question of the tail operation. Aitken knew of nothing remotely concerned with a debraying operation preformed on the tail of mules. Sims one tough reporter did note Mr. Aitken's answer but Sims also noted Mr. Aitkin's failure to give positive evidence to the contrary.

Sims wasn't afraid to ask anyone in her search for the truth including Major General George E. Armstrong, Surgeon General of the Army. Remember this was back in 1953. General Armstrong said, "There was a debraying surgery for a fact. The Army preformed such a surgery on Army mules....but the operation was preformed on the opposite end.... on the larynx."

"It is doubted," said General Armstrong, "that a mule cannot bray unless he raises his tail."

An official of the U.S. Cavalry Association referred Sims to a Colonel Frank Tompkins. Colonel Tompkins revealed that his father held a position as a Cavalryman before the Civil War and his father spent time in service in the Far West, fighting Indians never mentioning a tail operation on the mules. "These cavalry columns all had mules", said Topmpkin. Having his own experience with Army mules and pack trains Colonel Tompkins said that never in all his years of service had he heard of a tail-debraying operation. "I do not believe there is any such thing".

Sims sided with Major General George E. Armstrong and Colonel Frank Tompkins.

One last official: The Bureau of Animal Industry of the Department of Agriculture. The Bureau's statement was this, "It is fairly well known among horsemen that all members of the equine family, when making their characteristic vocal sounds tend to raise their tail to some degree. The degree depending on the individual animal and the circumstance under which they make their characteristic sounds. For example, an animal under stress of excitement would tend to elevate it's tail to a greater degree when making it's sound than an animal under less exciting circumstance." The Bureau informed Sims, "The majority of those consulted state that a mule can bray with-

#### **Dr. Robert Miller DVM**

*Maybe you should ask someone else.*

- 1. I couldn't bray without lifting my tail!*
- 2. I've got to say though why wouldn't they have used a sting in the Pacific Theater (Burma) on the thousands of mules there in service instead of the surgical devocalization (surgery on the larynx)?*

#### **Freeman Quality Mule, Mr. Ben Freeman**

*I don't know (he said with some heat!)  
...He probably couldn't bray very good!*

#### **Rod Lara Mule Trainer/ Mule Showman**

*1. A mule does raise his tail to bray slightly at times and higher at other times.*

*2. I don't know if he could bray if you tied down the tail. Here's what I do know. The mule also raises his head to bray. In the show ring when a mule I'm riding wants to bray for whatever reason before he lets fly I'll drop his head down he will not bray. You've got me to thinking Ben. I don't know if he doesn't bray because his head is down or I've took his mind off of what was causing him to want to bray.*

out elevating its tail to any degree."

Now if you haven't caught it, anyone who has answered the question has not reported that they had actually tied a mule's tail down. The closest to that came from a Mrs. Potts who lived in Memphis, Tennessee, who grew up on a farm. She said her daddy would tie the mule's tails with burlap to keep the cockleburrs out. She told Sims, "While they were tied they wouldn't make a sound. But when my daddy took the burlap off, they'd bray like everything!"

Lydel Sims didn't think that was proof enough. However, it could have been more proof than the government agency had given. Her search went on.

There was nothing do but tie a mule's tail down. Sims' experience at the Owens Brothers wasn't particularly good for such an experiment. She needed a mule that would bray on time, on cue. Bygolly she found one, thirty eight year old "Blue"!

Lydel Sims describes "Blue" as too old to work and too toothless to eat anything, anything but store bought bread. "Blue" had her store bought bread twice a day

fed to her by seventeen-year-old Ann Wylie of Brighton, Tennessee.

Because of Blue's "fixed habit" as Lydel Sims called it of eating a couple of loaves of bread twice a day, "Blue" predictably walked up out of the pasture twice a day and brayed for Ann to bring her a loaf of bread. What this young Tennessee lady was willing to do was something no one has been willing to do since Colonel Mason's time, tie down a mules tail.

Ms. Ann did indeed tie Blue's tall down and when Blue came up out of the pasture for her bread she did not bray. "She tried and tried," Ann told Sims over the phone, "but she just couldn't."

Sims was in route to Brighton, Tennessee, after that phone conversation, excited and had not failed to bring along a photographer to document the event. The Wylie family was all gathered. Ann tied a firm knot around Blue's tail, ran the cord underneath and tied it around the hips. Sims says, "Blue just stood there looking reproachfully back over her shoulder. Ann turned and began walking toward the feed house where she kept the bread. Forgetting her tangled-tail, "Blue" wagged her ears, tried to twitch her tail free, threw up her head, opened her big floppy lips-and blubbered." That's what Lydel Sims said. "Blue was trying to bray but she couldn't make it. "Blub-blub-blubble!" she went in a throaty whisper," reported Sims.

From that day on Lydel Sims was satisfied. There had been 201 tails tied down, Colonel Mason handled 200 of those mule's tails, Ann Wylie handled the one, ol' Blue. Sims says at the end of her article that she would not go so far as to say-yet-that a mule cannot bray without lifting it's tail but she did say with sublime confidence, that a mule will not bray if you tie its tail down.... "especially if it is a mule named Blue."

Now this writer (your Editor in Chief) has been writing article on mules for twelve years and I know how this is going to play out. More than one of you out there is going to tie your mule's tail down and find out for yourselves if a mule will bray with its tail tied down. I feel compelled for your safety and for legal reasons to give you this warning. WARNING: To tie a mules tail down could be dangerous! YOU COULD GET YOUR HEAD KICKED OFF! Now that

you've been warned, I know there will be more than one of you who will do it anyway. If you do, (and I'm not encouraging you to) I'm from the "Show Me State" and you've got to show me. To tell me won't work. Video and sound will work and I will report to our readers WHAT I SEE and HEAR or DON'T HEAR or WHEN I SEE and HEAR or DON'T HEAR IT ON VIDEO. A still photo for magazine purposes along with a video would be nice.



*Our Super Model for this article is six-year-old Kaylah Grace Cottengim with her Grandma's mule "Beauty". Super Model Cottengim also goes by the name of "Miss Kitty" (note the beauty mark on her left cheek). Because of Kaylah's condition (her missing two front teeth) she preferred to pose with her back to the camera. These models are touchy about things like that. Her Grandma and Grandpa think she's as cute as a baby calf with or without her two front teeth. Miss Kitty doesn't work cheap. She demanded hotdogs, chips and dip catered in for the photo shoot and an afternoon of mule riding with Grandma and Grandpa. Grandma and Grandpa are Ben and Neta Tennison who were more than pleased to pay the fee.*