

Taking The Boss's Mules For A Spin...For 40 Days and 400 Miles

by Coleson Bruce



“Ellie May,” Coleson Bruce and “Backyard Ben”

Many readers of this publication know my former boss, the Honorable William R. “Bill” Wilson, Jr., “that muleskinnin’ judge from Arkansas.” Judge Wilson hired me fresh out of law school for a one-year legal clerkship (sort of an internship for newbie lawyers like myself).

Over the course of my clerkship with Judge Wilson I learned a lot of law, but I also dared to show an interest in his gaited saddle mules. As a result, I’m now probably the only judicial law clerk in the country to have helped his boss castrate a mule and I’m certain to be the only (living) lawyer sworn in to the bar on mule-back. (If there are oth-

ers, please contact me immediately — a club will be organized.) I sure enjoyed getting to know all about mules.

I enjoyed it so much in fact, that the day after my clerkship ended, (having started out my clerkship as a mule ignoramus) I took off on two of Judge Wilson’s mules for what turned into a forty day, four hundred mile, solo ride from South Dakota, to Kansas, via the Sand Hills of Nebraska.

It came about this way.

This past July, just a few months before the end of my clerkship, Judge Wilson and I were on business in South Dakota. Always opportunistic, we took along a few mules and did some riding

on those beautiful high plains. Judge turned to me in the saddle and asked what I might do with my time off after my clerkship ended. I said, “How’s about loaning me two mules so I can ride ‘em from South Dakota, to Kansas, clear through Nebraska?” Judge smiled and with a good thinkin’, sort of look on his judicial face a plan was hatched.

Here was that plan: I’d borrow two of Judge’s mules; a bay gelding named Backyard Ben and a white molly named Ellie May, riding one and packing the other. Judge and I would trailer the mules from Arkansas up to Burke, South Dakota, (the home of a fellow mule man, Jerry Hutchenson) and then

for the next month and a half I'd head south on the mules, hobo'ing and camping my way through the Sand Hills of central Nebraska, until I made Kansas, where I would be picked up and trailered the rest of the way back to Arkansas.

It wasn't much of a plan, detail-wise. I didn't have a specific route or timetable. I just knew I had a few months off work and I wanted to take two mules, turn left when I wanted to and by the end of it, to have crossed Nebraska. I'd grown up dreaming about such a trip and thanks to Judge Wilson, Backyard Ben, and Ellie May, I had the opportunity.

There was a catch though; I essentially had no experience with mules or horses, or any other equine. Sure, I had been foolin' around with Judge's mules for the past year, and I grew up riding some. But, make no mistake, I was not prepared for the kind of long distance solo ride I had in mind. While Ben and Ellie were both solid trail mules, neither had packed before. With only two months until my clerkship was ending and the trip was to start, I had a lot to learn about mules and long distance

stock travel in open country.

For those next two months the mules and I prepared nearly night and day. Backyard Ben and Ellie May were worked out twice a day, six days a week (I probably clocked more time in the saddle in those first two weeks of preparations than all my previous saddle time combined). Necessary packing and camping equipment was bought or borrowed, and tested. I read everything from "Horseback Riding for Dummies" to Max Harsha's, "Mule Skinner's Bible" and anything in between, books on horseshoeing, groundwork, packsaddles, first aid, and a dozen other topics necessary to take care of mules on a long-distance ride. By the end of the two months of preparation, my apartment was littered with books and equipment. Scholastically, I was ready for Armageddon on mule back. All I really needed was actual experience.

Then, on September 14th, 2010, the Gregory South Dakota newspaper headlined: "Judge has Mules; Lawyer has time." With that, Ben, Ellie and I started south toward Kansas.

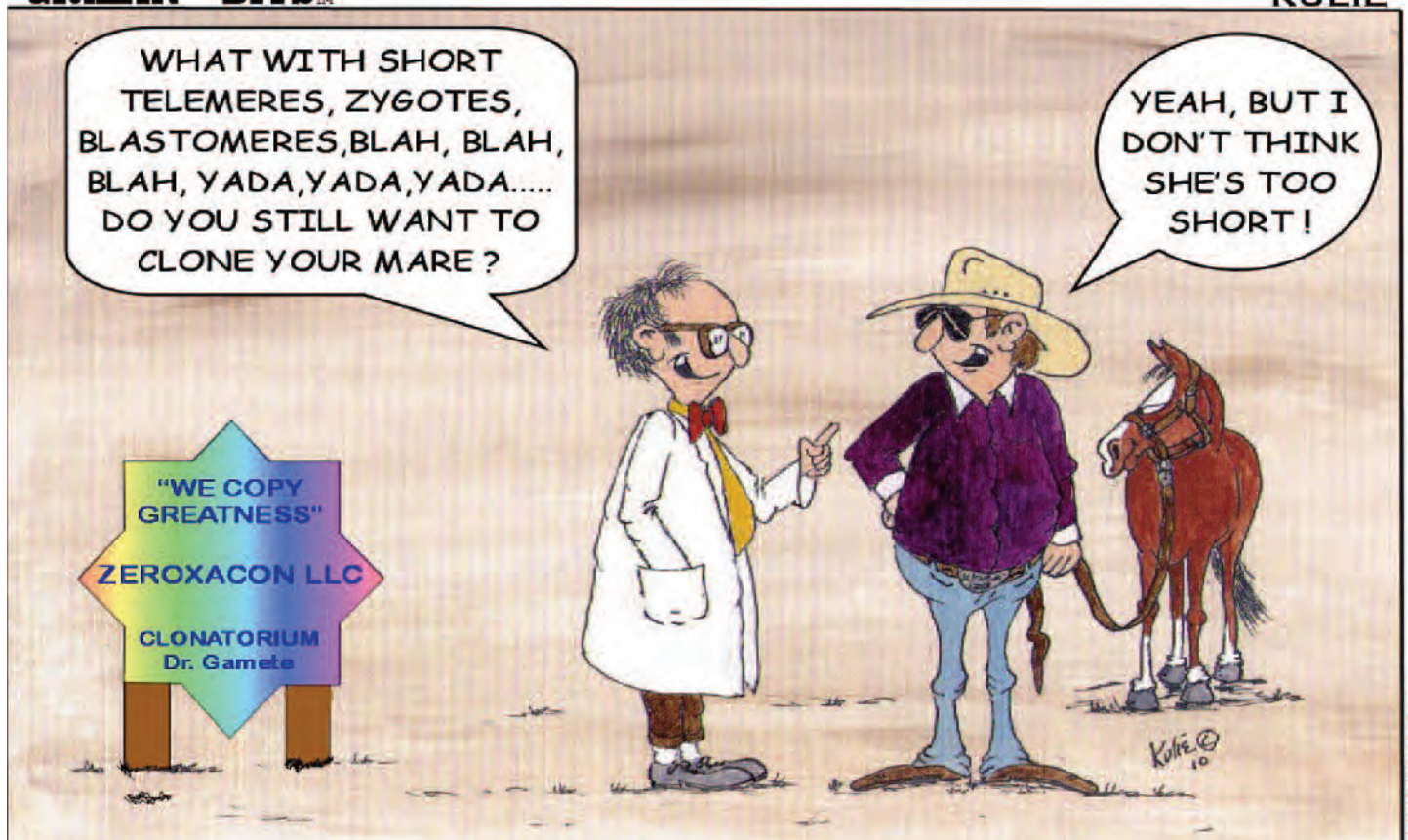
Well, I wanted experience and by the end of it all, I had a butt plumb full sore

of experience. When we finally set foot in Kansas, forty days later, Ben, Ellie and I had traveled just over four hundred miles (we took a zigzag route now and then). I'm proud to say that we only saw about forty-five miles of blacktop the whole trip, because we stuck mostly to old dirt section roads, grassy two-tracks and open country. Ben and Ellie informed me that fifteen miles a day was the sweet spot for day-after-day travel, but in a pinch they gave me as much as thirty-two miles in a single day. Depending on terrain, we'd ride for four to six days straight (averaging six to eight hours a day) then we'd rest a day or two. When fully supplied, our cross buck packsaddle weighed in at 100 pounds. We didn't have a single wreck.

Since we mostly avoided civilization, there were long stretches of solitude. We once went five days without seeing another person. It was common to go days, only seeing a car or two on the horizon. We'd camp on the open plains or in an old stock barn. I'd pitch a tent and cook on a camp stove while the mules were picketed and fueling up on local grasses. We all drank out of windmills mostly, which were plentiful in

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ranch country. When I wasn't singing country and western songs to the mules, we'd see deer, duck, geese, and pheasant by the hundreds. And the mule's ears helped us see dozens of coyote, five bald eagles, blue herring, pelicans, and a few badgers and porcupines. There was also one very close encounter with a young mountain lion that had taken a shine to the mules. All in all, we spent about thirty of the forty days camped out under the big sky wilderness of the high plains.

The trip wasn't all wilderness and solitude though; we also met many of the best people on the planet. The few towns we passed through for supplies averaged a population of about twenty, and we'd usually meet everyone in town. I'd camp in the crow's nest of the local rodeo ground and ride the mules to the local saloon (only once did I ride my mules inside of the local saloon) and folks would stop in to visit. In Meadville, Nebraska, I met Mr. and Mrs. Harlen and Joyce Welch, who put me up in their remote mountain cabin through a two-day storm. Near, Halsey, Nebraska, Mr. and Mrs. Al and Sallie Atkins of the A.L. Ranch, let me and the

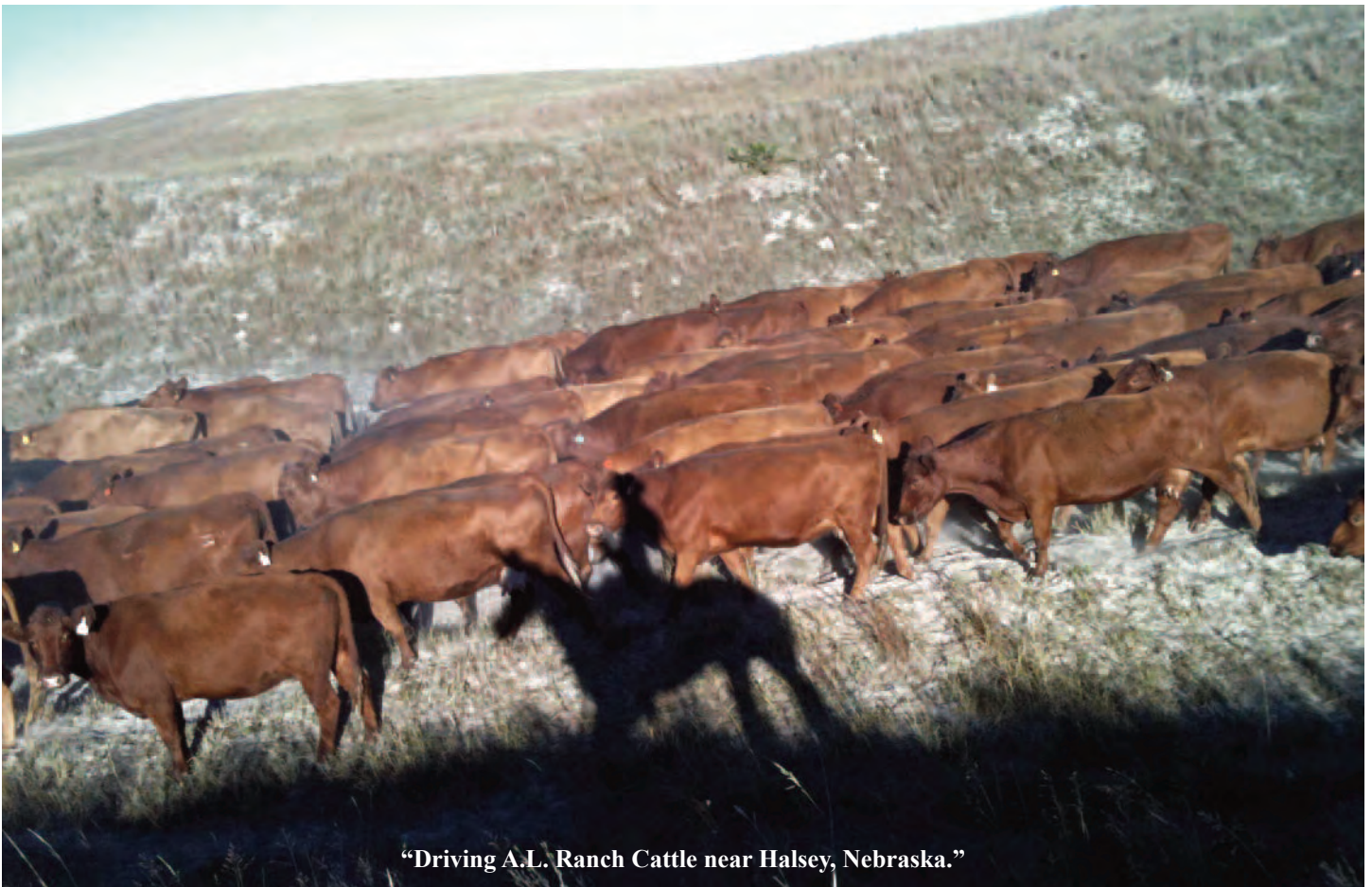
mules spend four days helping (and hindering) their impressive cattle operation. In Stockville, Nebraska, western historical author Ms. Jean Smith took me on a personal tour of Stockville County, where the likes of Ena Raymond, Doc Carver and Buffalo Bill dreamt up, then lived out, the history of the high plains. Dozens of other folks helped us along the way, from dropping off a square bale of hay, to just stopping to visit along the side of the road and pointing us toward something worth seeing. The folks we met made our trip twice the experience I anticipated and I started out pretty darn optimistic.

I've got hundreds of stories, dozens of new friends and hopefully I'll get to visit with many of them and many of you, in the future. To wrap up here, though, it's worth sharing with you two lessons I learned.

First, I'm glad I was riding mules. Truth be told, were Judge Wilson a horseman, I probably would have tried this trip on horses. But I'm satisfied that a novice like myself finished this trip safely and with both animals healthy, only because Ben and Ellie May were such easy keepers. I probably worried

about what to eat far more than my mules worried about what they'd eat (a rancher once let me turn the mules out on a bale of hay, which they didn't touch until they'd first cleared every weed in the corral). Ben and Ellie would moan and creak the first few miles of the morning, but soon all four ears would get to floppin' for the next eight hours. Admittedly, the mule in 'em would come out now and then, and we'd have to have a talk about it, but more often than not the human in me would come out and they'd return the guidance. All in all, I never felt the mules weren't safe, which isn't a testament to my husbandry, but to their expertise at being mules. I owe the best trip of my life to Ben and Ellie (and their owner!).

The second thing I learned is that the world is not a scary place. Today's media (other than this magazine) would have us believe that the moment we unlock our front door we'll get robbed, diseased, and shark bit. Reality, however, and our country in particular, is full of beautiful places, amazing people and wild adventures. Sure, there's the occasional mountain lion hoping to eat



"Driving A.L. Ranch Cattle near Halsey, Nebraska."

your mule and Nebraska, may be more hospitable to mule riders than downtown Los Angeles. But, as a rule for every one danger to be mindful of anywhere, there are a hundred opportunities worth taking right where you are. Load up your mule (or your boss's mule), get on, and get out. I recommend forty days and four hundred miles, at least.

Finally, the real reason for writing this article was the opportunity to reach out and say hello to the dozens of people who helped Ben, Ellie and me along the way. In thanks, aside from those already mentioned above, I'm listing them all below and sending them each a subscription to this magazine (to the extent it finds them in the wilds). Hello everyone! And once again, Ben, Ellie, and I thank you!

I owe a particular debt of thanks to my Arkansas folks: Thomas Gama and the beautiful Mrs. Lee Hatcher (both of the Hatcher Mule Stables in Little Rock); Doctor Mike Pallone (the best equine vet in all of Arkansas); Sonny Simpson and John Cheek (mule haulers extraordinaire); and Cathi Compton (master of tolerance for all things mule-headed); and Mr. & Mrs. Rufus Reese (honorary Arkansans).

As for my "ground crew" in South Dakota, thanks again to Jerry Hutchenson, to Mr. and Mrs. Glen and Yvonne Hollenbeck along with Dick, all the Harkins, and an extra special thanks to George and Nicki Johnson (Waco says hello!).

And then to the dozens of triple-nice folks who helped me through Nebraska (and a little bit of Kansas): Mike, Randy, Joe, Rod and all the other Meadville General Store regulars, the Finks and Clete over at Nebraska Bucks and Birds, all the Callier clan and Jason, Dave Swisher and Jean McMullen, Mr. Knapp, Mr. Horning, the entire town of Stockville (and in particular Mr. and Mrs. Bradley Wood, Fred Baugher, Terri Nichols, Owen Wilson, and the rest of the Trailz End Bunch, but especially to Mrs. Ena Raymonde), Tom Teahorn, Mirya Hallock, Will Callahan, Steven Mueller, and with special thanks to Gene and Rhonda "I swear it was a mountain lion" Buechle, Brad at the A.L. Ranch, and Rick and Conni Gracy.

Finally, of course, thanks to the Honorable William R. "Wild Bill" Wilson, Backyard Ben, and Ellie May.



Our country in particular, is full of beautiful places, amazing people and wild adventures.



Meadville, Nebraska, population about 25. Harlen Welch (left) "Ellie May," author Cole-son Bruce and "Backyard Ben." The Meadville store is the only establishment in Meadville and by night Mike Gering (the now owner of the store) serves the coldest beer and best burgers in central Nebraska. I spent four days in Meadville checking the beer and burgers for consistency.