

Hobble That Mule



By Terry Wagner



Several years ago I was working for the Twenty Six Bar Ranch in Eagar, Arizona. I was running the Rudd Knoll summer camp at about 9000 feet up in the White Mountains of eastern Arizona. The US Forest Service had dictated that summer that no motorized vehicles could be used off of an established roadway by permit holders on any Forest Service grazing permits in the Springerville ranger district. Now the Twenty Six Bar has about 56,000 acres of USFS real estate leased there divided into sixteen fenced pastures. On the average that's about 3500 acres per pasture with some being larger and some smaller.

On one particularly bright sunny day I set out to pack fence material into one pasture and about twelve range blocks into another, a full day's work for sure. I was riding a little buckskin colored john mule I called Dunny. He was probably the best ranch mule you could find to work cattle on but he was not a pet. He wasn't mean, he was just Dunny.

Basically he was all business and felt there was no room in his world for foolishness.

I hadn't owned Dunny but a short time and was leading Ruby and Molly as pack mules that day. I had a hundred pounds of range block each slung on Ruby and Molly and headed out into the Seven Springs pasture toward the first salt station.

When I got to the first rubber tired feeder which was in an open grass plain with nothing to tie too, I got off and hobbled all three mules, Dunny first. I walked to Ruby and removed the sling hitch from the first fifty-pound block and lost my hold on it. The block hit the ground with a resounding thud. At that Dunny took off headed west doing about ten miles an hour with both front feet hobbled. I have always said that I won't walk to a pile of money, but I will ride my mule anywhere. I don't think anything can ruin a good day faster than having to walk back to your truck or camp because your mule decided

you looked better to him doing an imitation of a hiker.

Well, in this case it was short lived. Dunny got tired of hog hopping to make good his escape and finally gave it up after about a half mile. I hopped on Ruby and endured the decker frame on the pack saddle long enough to retrieve Dunny. I looked toward the heavens and gave a short thanks for the Lord giving me the small wisdom to hobble that mule.

I have been hobbling my mules and horses for more than 50 years. I have only been on a couple of large, organized group trial rides in the last thirty years and I never saw anyone but my wife Sandy and I hobbling our mules. I firmly believe that every mule should be broke to hobble. Besides slowing a mule's forward motion, hobbles can teach a mule to be a little more patient with his world. Long sessions of standing tied and hobbled is a good way to teach a young mule to stand quietly. A mule that is a little hard to catch will usually give it up after being hobbled

and fed a little grain when you walk up to him. I know a good cowboy who teaches his horses to stand quietly while being mounted by hobbling with a hobble that can be untied from the saddle. Several times being mounted and dismounted from each side while hobbled seems to work wonders at getting a colt to stand while being mounted. I have learned over the years the value of hobbling.

Teaching a mule to hobble is much easier than teaching a horse. Mules will accept confinement much faster than a horse will. Years ago I watched several different good hands use different methods to teach young horses to hobble. Probably the most memorable was a true California vaquero from San Bernardino, California. I had seen these men turn out incredible spade bit reining horses which is a very long drawn out and carefully planned process. Once the horse was moved into the bridle, they always carried a set of braided rawhide hobbles on their saddle and a thin horse hair lead around the horse's neck with the lead running through a bosalito (thin bosal) worn under the bridle. Whenever they got off, they always hobbled their horse, lightly bitted the horse up with the reins by dropping the romel end of the reins over the horn, and dropped the lead to the ground. The rider could go about his business even if out of sight of the horse and when he returned, the rider would find his mount exactly where he left him. I never saw these men tie their horses up when they dismounted.

One morning as a youngster of about fourteen at the Los Vaqueros Arena in San Bernardino, I watched as a two-year-old gelding was turned into a small arena. The wild eyed baby was circled against the fence as a vaquero in the center shook out loop in a 5/16 sixty foot reata. A quick roll of the loop fore footed the two year old and he was laid down in the sand. Another vaquero quickly held his head back while the first applied a hobble made out of a twisted burlap sack. At this, the colt was allowed to stand up. Not understanding his sudden loss of freedom, he lunged to the center of the arena, reared a couple of times, then attempted to walk, stumbling around the arena. He was allowed to stay hobbled till he stood quietly.

Once he quieted down a halter was placed on him and the lead rope half hitched around the hobble between the front legs. Enough slack was left in the

lead rope that the youngster could raise his head to a level slightly above his withers. The lead rope was then tied to a ring laying in the dirt that was attached to a chain and log buried in the ground. He was again left to stand there. He tried to get away several times only to stumble onto his front knees. Finally he stood quietly and after about an hour he was freed from the ring and chain. One vaquero held the halter while another removed and reapplied the hobbles several times from each side and the colt was left to stand hobbled again for a short period of time.

If you are handy with a 60 foot reata and have some good help around, this method obviously works. After watching what could only be described as an impressive display of roping ability and horse handling, I thought the process was a little complicated for me and decided to look for an easier method.

I started by reading everything I could including articles edited by Randy Steffan in Western Horseman magazine. Everyone had a different twist on the subject. I talked to anyone I could find that would listen to and answer a kid's questions. Finally, I asked Wayne Cozart, who was an Arkansas native transplanted to California via the United States Navy. Wayne was a first class hand with a saddle or harness horse and the best farrier I have ever been around to this day. He could flat nail the iron on. I still have and use an anvil that Wayne gave me all those years ago.

Wayne gave me some pointers about teaching a horse to lead by his front feet before hobbling so as to lessen the trauma of the first set of hobbles being applied. Basically you put a rope around the front pastern then lead the horse slightly by the halter and the front foot. Once the horse would lead by the foot, meaning a short step or two without throwing a fit, he was ready to be hobbled. It worked and I used this for a number of years to teach my personal horses and mules to hobble and any friends that needed help teaching one to hobble.

fold it just past the middle so I have one



Ace feeling a little apprehensive



Ace relaxed with his best foot forward

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Many years ago I dropped asking the mule to lead a step at a time and to only stand quietly while holding his foot in the air with a rope from the front and from a position standing by his side. Once he will stand quietly this way without restraint from a halter and lead, he is ready to be hobbled. To accomplish this you must first have the mule to the point you can handle and pick up all of his feet. I use a well worn soft cotton rope 1/2" to 3/4" in diameter and about six feet long. I take a wrap around either front pastern then pull the foot back and up to a position similar to that you would use to clean the hoof. I do this on both front legs till he will accept it without head restraint. Then I pull the front leg forward and slightly off the ground. I do this with both front legs till he will stand relaxed with either foot being held off the ground with no restraint on the mule's head.

If in the beginning he tries to become reactive in any way, I will hold him gently with the halter for a moment. If he halts his avoidance, I let the foot down at once. If he insists on avoiding the lesson, I move him around the pen then start over. I have yet to see a mule take more than an hour to stand quietly and be hobbled the first time. I have had horses that took several sessions to accomplish what the mule succeeded in doing in less than an hour. I have used this method successfully on colts as well as older mules and horses. When the hobbles are first applied, most mules will smell them then just accept them. Horses will usually be a lit-



Relaxed with foot to the rear

tle more reactive the first time. Horses will commonly rear the first time then try to walk out of the hobbles. Generally that is the most that will happen if you have done everything right to begin with. When you hobble the mule or horse for the first time, step back and watch him as I have had a couple of them come toward me. This is not to be seen as aggressive behavior. They simply want you to remove the hobbles.

The first hobble I use on a mule or horse is the soft cotton rope I started them out with when lifting their feet. I take the rope and

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First hobbles

tail about 8-10 inches longer than the other. I take the fold at the “middle” and pull the rope around the right pastern pulling the two tails through the loop. I then run the rope around the front of the left pastern laying the longer end over the two ropes between the legs. I pull this back and tie a quick release knot on the outside of the left leg. If the mule should get himself in a jam this allows me to quickly remove the hobble. I have never had a mule get in a position where they had to be rescued.

Years ago I had a mare that was blessed with a huge knot between her ears instead of a brain. When hobbled the first time, she came right at me pawing the air and lunging at me. She finally managed to fall then kick with a hind leg, locking it

between the two front hobbled legs. The thought went through my mind that she was in a perfect position to be field dressed but she didn't belong to me so I gave it only a fleeting consideration. I have never had a mule go to this extreme.

The vast majority are quietly wearing their first hobble in twenty to thirty minutes. This is not the only way to teach a mule to hobble and there are as many methods as people doing it. I can say it has worked for me for many years and is very easy to accomplish.

There are a number of different ways to hobble a mule. Besides the common method I have been describing hobbling the two front feet, there is a scotch hobble wherein a hind foot is hobbled with a longer lead to the front hobbles. Also, there is a four way hobble that hobbles all four legs. After a mule is seasoned at hobbling, an alternative position for the hobbles is to place them between the pastern joint and the knees. Some packers break their mules to hobble on the hind legs when lashing down a load as they feel they are less likely to get kicked. I prefer to position the hobbles on the pastern when breaking them and after they become accustomed to the hobbles.

Once the mule is accustomed to the hobbles, it matters very little what you hobble them with. I hobble my personal saddle mule a lot with a piggin string.

Hobbles can be made of about any



*Utah Grazing Hobble - top,
Chain Grazing Hobbles - bottom*

material and there are as many designs: rawhide, rope, burlap, leather, nylon, chain and forged steel. Probably the two most common hobbles in use today are the Utah grazing hobble and the chain grazing hobbles.

The chain grazing hobble is a good choice when letting your animals graze. The Utah grazing hobble, although

intended for grazing purposes, is pretty restrictive in it's design. If I intend to let my mules graze with hobbles on for more than just a short time in a camp, I use the chain grazing hobbles. I keep a set of Utah grazing hobbles made out of nylon on all my saddles and usually around the neck of a pack animal. I have never burned an animals pastern or legs by hobbling them.

The United States Forest Service takes a dim view of saddle animals pawing the base of trees they may be temporarily tied too. When ever we tie up even for a short time, we hobble all the mules. It seems that after mules are routinely hobbled when tied, they settle down much faster. Remember one thing if you let your mules out to graze, hobbled, in the back country where predators can be a problem, do not leave your mules without someone being close by. Hobbling takes away your mule's flight ability and they are basically defenseless against predators.

If your mules aren't broke to hobble, teaching them will make your life a little easier on the trail and around the barn. Also, if your mule becomes entangled in wire or other debris, his hobble training may very well prevent him from serious

injury. I have seen this benefit first hand.

Several years ago a draft cross mule by the name of Dirty Harry was left in our care for about five years. Leo Voyles, who has since passed away, was a good friend who had a home in a beautiful setting near Nutrioso, Arizona. I had leased pasture from Leo for a while to run a small bunch of cattle on. A year or so after I sold the cattle, Leo asked me if I had a mule I could put in his pasture as company for his old horse E.C. It seemed that E.C.'s long time pasture mate had died due to advanced old age. Leo felt that E.C. would do better if he had some company. I told him I would put Dirty Harry in the pasture as she was well over twenty five and I thought the two old geriatrics would get along just fine.

Harry had been settled in for about a month when Leo called and said that he had noticed Harry standing in the same place for about two days at the north end of the sixty acre pasture on the neighbor's side of the fence. Leo said she hadn't moved since he first saw her there. I drove the ten miles or so to Leo's pasture and saw Harry in the neighbor's pasture, with her tail against the pasture fence and a yearling filly nuzzling her. Obviously

Harry had jumped the low pasture fence to meet a new friend. The two were standing very contentedly next to each other.

When I walked out to the pair, I realized that Harry had both front feet entangled in a big ball of old barbed wire that looked like a tornado had hit a spaghetti factory. In her desire to meet a new friend, she had not seen the wire in the tall grass and landed with both front feet in it when she went over the fence. I ran for the truck and retrieved a set of heavy side cutters and cut Harry out of the wire. She only had a few small scratches for her trouble and was glad to get a drink of water. I had heard stories over the years of hobble training saving horses and mules from such situations but this was my only first hand experience with it. I guarantee you that if such a thing ever happens to you, you will be glad you hobbled that mule.

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