

Them Mules

By Tennison

“ONLY IN AMERICA WITH LARRY THE CABLE GUY”

Photos by Horse Pix Photography



My entire publishing career I've waited for something to come along in a big way to put Them Mules in the light they have deserved since their existence began. A story told of mules and their contribution to our world and this nation to an audience worldwide. The story has been told many times in print and on video but it never made it to the masses.

The Bible put mules in a deserving light and has gotten to the masses, but the Bible didn't tell us why you'd choose a mule over a horse. The Bible is history and a lot of its content is based on faith. Because I have faith in all of the Holy Word, it has never been a stretch for this editor to believe they had good reason for owning mules in Biblical times. As for why, I'd like to say I know why! And that it came to me in a revelation from God All Mighty Himself and that revelation has only been revealed to a chosen few. But really it's as simple as, "To own one is to have all the admiration and respect for the mule's abilities, as those did who have gone before us."

I did predict if and when the story of the mule got told to the masses it would come from Hollywood. I've pondered that a lot, knowing Hollywood's record of not getting much, accurate when it comes to history. Hollywood hasn't been on my top ten list to accurately get that done; I just couldn't visualize how that might happen.

When I caught *Amazing Grace* and Steve Foster on the "Today Show" some months back, my first thoughts were, "Now there's a mule that is standing before the masses." Then I saw Grace's abilities right there on TV and felt nothing but good could come from Grace being shown on TV. Later I learned Grace had just shot a movie with my all time favorite actor, Robert Duvall. Not knowing any more than that, I wondered, "Is this where the story of the mule gets told to a huge audience?" In an interview with Steve recently, I learned the mule's history would not be told in the movie. The mule's intelligence will be apparent due to *Amazing Grace's* appearance in the movie. But that's not the whole story. Grace and Steve Foster reveal something even greater; wait until you hear the whole story. More about that in an article all their own later.

March 16, 2010, Neta came over to my desk and in a very quiet, very unassuming voice said, "Lynda Yoon from the History Channel is on the phone wanting to speak with you." I've been around Neta a long

time, even though I can read her like a book, she still tries to jerk my chain from time to time and to her amusement she accomplishes that on occasion. Looking right into her eyes, with my best, "Yea Right" look, she never cracked a smile.

Knowing Neta's not the best poker player, I asked, "You messin' with me?" I asked.

"Nope, Lynda Yoon, with the History Channel line-one," she said.

Lynda's pleasant, up beat voice said, "Talking with several people about mules, your name keeps popping-up Ben." That didn't hurt this country boy's feelings a bit, especially coming from someone at the History Channel, who I am a big fan of. "Pilgrim Films & Television is shooting a new segment for the History Channel called "Only In America With Larry The Cable Guy." Lynda said.

Now I'm a fan of Larry The Cable Guy but I gotta tell you my guard went-up. Larry the Cable Guy is a comedian and a good one in my opinion. I am very protective of how them mules are revealed in any media. My thoughts at that moment were, "Here we go again. I'm fixin' to spend a lot my precious time trying to set the record straight with this lady."

Lynda asked, "What is your take on how mules shaped America?" Woo! She just opened the door and jumped right in my arena and I'm fixin' to have this lady standing up with her hand over her heart reciting the Pledge of Allegiance in just a short.

I lit in on my best pulpit pounding sermon on the donkey in Asia, on to France and Spain, that mules were only ridden by royalty in Spain and jackstock into the America's, into the hands of George Washington. "Yes, I've got that," Lynda said. I'm glad she couldn't see me; I'm now batting my eyes like a toad in a hailstorm.

"What else do you know?" I asked.

"Well, I've learned mules went on to shape this country agriculturally thanks to Washington and the mule was instrumental in shaping America in the way she would go on into the industrial revolution, automobiles and the roads they drove them on."

"You've done your home work," I said.

"I have," she said confidentially.

I did manage to fill her in on a few things she didn't know, just enough so she stayed on the phone.

Lynda said, "Listen, we want to come to Columbia Mule Day to film this new segment for the History Channel, Only In

America with Larry The Cable Guy during Mule Day. We've been in contact with Louise Mills, public relations director of Columbia Mule Day. I want to ask you, Ben, What is Columbia Mule Day?"

She opened the door again... "It's a celebration of mules and days gone by. When mule and horsepower were the only means to put in a crop to sustain the family and hopefully have some to sell. Mules snaked the logs out of the woods and transported them to the sawmills to be sawn into lumber. Mules took you to town when you needed to go and took the family to church on Sunday. Columbia, Tennessee, and the surrounding communities preferred mules to horses; these folks were breeders of fine mules and prospered because of them. That history going back well beyond the 1800's and the jackstock they used could be traced back to Washington's jackstock. The mules that were being raised in this part of the country got to be known far and wide, far outside of the area. Mule and jackstock from the area of Columbia, Tennessee, went on to Missouri, Iowa, Kentucky, Illinois, Kansas, and beyond to settle the West. The rest is a lot more history of the mule and how he shaped the America West."

"Perfect," Lynda said. "That's exactly what we want to get on film for the History Channel and Columbia, Tennessee, sounds like the perfect place. Ben, we need your help putting together a few things to possibly film. We're under a tight schedule, we will only be there on Thursday April 8th filming."

"Hold on, Hold on," I said, interrupting Lynda. "You're going to miss an awful lot of Mule Day by not being there Friday, Saturday and Sunday too. There's the Log Loading Competition on Thursday, great, great stuff; The Jackpot Mule Races, competing for cash and bragging rights to the title of the Fastest Mule In Tennessee. There's the gymkhana events Thursday evening, but Lynda, there's the Hitch classes on Friday, beautiful wagons, beautiful hitches, Two-up, Four-up and the driving skills by the men and women that drive them, and on Friday evening the Tennessee State Championship Gaited Mule Show will be happening, really something to see. On Saturday The parade downtown, with hundreds of thousands of people lining the streets and hundreds of entries. The Mule Pulls at the park Saturday in one arena and the Draft Mule Halter Classes in another arena, some of the best jackstock and draft

mules in all America.”

“Ben, Ben!” Lynda says interrupting me. “We can’t put Larry in a crowd like that, crowd control would be impossible. Larry The Cable Guy is a very popular personality and we don’t want to get him in a big crowd. Oh, and by the way, we need you to keep this quiet so we don’t have those big crowds.”

Now here’s what I’m thinking about now. You’ve asked me to keep it quiet that the History Channel was coming to Columbia, Tennessee Mule Day with Larry The Cable Guy. That would be like asking the History Channel to keep it quiet if I told them I had found Noah’s Ark on a high mountain and showed them it had petrified manure from animals of various species, some animals we don’t even know what were and a note attached to its bow saying, “Bet you’re wondering how this boat got here? Well, you can have it; I don’t need it any more.” Signed Noah. They couldn’t keep it quiet and besides you’re getting into someone’s very job description asking such and they were getting into mine. However I was in between magazines and I didn’t have the opportunity to tell you all. Keeping it quiet wasn’t difficult because of the timing. Do you reckon that was by design?

And as for crowd control, this may be the last place in America where folks still respect authority. If folks were told to stay back, by golly they would. I knew Lynda Yoon didn’t understand this, no need to try and explain it, she wouldn’t get it, were my thoughts.

After talking with Lynda, I called Louise Mills making sure she was informed and I wasn’t fixin’ to step on any toes. Louise was well informed and she had put together things for Lynda and I let her know what I was putting together. I gave each one on the list a heads-up that Lynda would be calling and it was for real.

Lynda called sometime midweek to express how much fun she was having interviewing the folks I had given her to call. She said, and I quote, “These are the very salt of the earth kind of people, exactly the kind of people we were looking for. They are so interesting to talk to. Do you know these people don’t have email addresses? These have got to be the only people in America that don’t have email.”

“They are the salt of the earth Lynda and yes, they don’t have email.”

Lynda was looking for someone who had a mule that Larry could compete with in the

log loading competition and someone who had a mule Larry could plow with. They wanted Larry The Cable Guy; as I understood it, to interview those who owned fine jackstock in the area, question these folks about their mules and what they did with them when they weren’t competing. Larry wanted to know more about the mules and their history.

As I questioned Lynda more on how they were going to portray the mule in this filming, I began to let my guard down a little. Lynda told me in one conversation, “We believe the mule has gotten a bad rap. A lot of people out there believe the mule is not smart; they think mules are dumb. We’re going to show them Amazing Grace and show them how trainable and smart mules really are. They think they’re stubborn and we’ve learned they’re not. People today have no idea what role the mule has played in our American history. We want to set the record straight on some of this. We want people to know why this community preferred mules.”

As the weeks went on, Louise and I were doing various things, while Lynda was feeding us a tentative shooting schedule. I tried more than once to knock Lynda off this one day shooting schedule. I got to know Lynda very well during this project and learned you couldn’t knock Lynda Yoon off a floating log with a base fiddle. I’ve only mentioned Lynda as pleasant spo-

ken and a very up-beat person. But there’s another side to this Segment Producer, Lynda Yoon, she turns into a Bulldog when things aren’t quite going like she has it in her head. But I must mention she can laugh. We did plenty of that too. Bulldogs that can laugh, I like.

The final schedule got to me just days before leaving for Mule Day. The schedule read something like this: “Meeting with Jim Morton location producer, Wednesday, April 7th afternoon. Shoot B Roll around the Park (B Roll means, without Larry the Cable Guy in it). Catch Wagon Train coming into the Park. Check out where Larry might do interview with The Queen of Mule Day 2010 and her Court. How are we going to control the crowd in any one place? Where’s the Log loading going to take place? How will it work, where’s the wagon to be loaded going to be stationed, where are the logs? Where will Larry meet Amazing Grace and perform with her? When will we go to a secluded location so Larry can plow and interview a well-known jackstock producer? I’m only hitting the high spots; there was a lot more.”

I know from experience; if you want to know what’s happening in town, ask at the local restaurants and cafes. All the gossip starts there. I couldn’t help myself, when the waitress brought Neta and me our coffee I asked, “Have you heard anything about the History Channel coming to Mule Day?”



W.J. Staggs giving Larry some instructions as they get ready to load logs with “Tiny,” while the camera man does some shooting.

"The Disney Channel," looking at me with a wrinkled forehead and a puzzled look..."Nope," she replied.

"The History Channel," I repeated.

"No, I haven't heard they were coming either."

True story. Neta and I couldn't drink coffee for ten minutes, laughing at her response.

When I got to the Maury County Park I found Louise Mills in the office and said, "You've actually kept this secret haven't you?"

"Well yes," Louise said, "Lynda told me not to tell because of the crowds it could cause."

I told Louise, "I ran an experiment this morning at the cafe and if anyone knew it, they would know it there. They didn't know anything. Louise, I know who to leave my wallet with."

We met up with Jim Morton in the afternoon. After all the introductions, cameras were going every which way. All the filming crew had mikes on and they weren't for looks; somebody was talking to someone all the time. When the wagon train rolled in, Jim got on the mike to someone telling them to get it on film, "I'm getting it now," was the response in Jim's ear piece. When Jim was told Mr. Emery Combs was placing the log wagon in the arena and would load a few to show them how it might go tomorrow, Jim Morton asked someone to get there. "Already here, were getting it," was the response. These folks were on the ball, impressed me.

In a meeting with Steve and Pam Foster and Amazing Grace, Steve gave them an overview of what would take place and a spot was secured for Steve, Amazing Grace and Larry The Cable Guy to film the fol-

lowing morning. This wasn't a stretch for Steve and Pam. I guess after being on the "Today Show," in a movie and countless interviews, this becomes routine. And I must say Steve has complete confidence in his mule, Amazing Grace, and his jumping mule, Missy.

I got myself quite a title from this bunch at Pilgrim Films & Television. I was deemed their "Historian" by Segment Producer Lynda Yoon, herself, a pretty big title for such a little boy. I do know the history of the mule. Somewhere in our many conversations I must have impressed Lynda a little with what I knew to earn such a title. I can take you all the way back to the Bible and mules, but I will admit when you get beyond the Bible into the wild ass, just where they were and their names, I'm a little weak.

Have you heard the saying, "It's not what you know but who you know?" I knew someone who wasn't weak on the wild ass. He knew all about how they intertwined to produce the jackstock that came to America and he knew how to pronounce their names as well, Dr. Bill Lance, a dear friend of Neta and mine. Bill was my go-to man. He did try to verse me on the names of the wild Asses; I saw that wasn't going to work very quickly. "Now Ben, I've had enough camera time to do me a lifetime," Bill said,



Dr. Bill Lance and Larry in front of the mule stalls, doing an interview on the history of the mule.

Foundation several years back. I learned there, he can spit the history of the mule out like it's water and when Bill gave his explanation on how the mules carried the big guns in war, he told it like he was there. This guy will give you goose bumps when he talks of mules and their abilities.

"Bill, I know you're no camera hog. This is important; I can't go that far back. It's the History Channel; we've got to get it right." I told him. Dr. Lance agreed to do the interview the next day.

Toward evening Jim, and a few of the camera crew left to view the location of the plowing and where the interview with Tim Marlin and his fine jackstock would take place. It was set, Thursday morning, we would meet at the office 8:30 a.m.

Now, I could spend a lot of time explaining all they shot, but it wouldn't be fair to the History Channel giving you that information. They want you to watch it when it airs in September and I want you to watch it too. Besides even though I know what sequence they shot it all in, they very well may air it in a different sequence and some of what I might tell you might hit the cutting room floor. I do want to give you some behind-the-scenes info that you won't get viewing the segment on the History Channel... An inside to Daniel Whitney, better known as Larry The Cable Guy.

When I asked Larry, why he was doing this show, without hesitation he told me, "FOR THE MONEY!" Then I got the real answer, "I'm traveling the country in search of small towns like this one with unique stories to tell America. I want to let America know this community has preserved a part of their culture. People are forgetting or just don't know about things from their past,



Larry getting some special affection from "Amazing Grace" as Steve Foster, Grace's owner looks on.

things that made this country great, like how important mules were to our country and what they did to make it great.” He is a comedian but there was nothing comical about how he told this. I, without question, sensed Larry’s passion.

I got me quite an education on this guy’s popularity and how people react to popularity like Larry The Cable Guy has. Remember earlier I mentioned Lynda’s concerns for crowd control and I felt she had no understanding of the country they were coming to? Here’s what I now have to say about that. A country bumpkin like Ben Tennison has no, absolutely no, understanding how much people want to see and get to a fella like Larry the Cable Guy. And to get a little credibility back, I want to stress: “Only and I repeat only, because of where they were, did they maintain any order of the crowds that eventually showed up.”

When the filming began Larry arrived at the park at

around 9:30 a. m. and was shuttled from the office into the arena by golf cart with the only fan-fair by those who knew he was coming. The crowd wasn’t huge, a normal Thursday morning opening of Mule Day.

I heard one guy tell the women next to him, “That guy looks just like Larry the Cable Guy.” I heard that comment more than once in the next forty-five minutes

along the fence. Word must have spread like wildfire through the Maury County Park. Within an hour or less the stands were full and the fence around the arena was four deep with people. I’ve never seen anything like it, . . . unreal!

Anytime Larry wasn’t in front of the camera, he was talking with those on the fence, posing for photos and sharing one-liners non-stop. Anytime “Git-R-Done” was shouted from the crowd, Larry threw it right back.

Larry went to various locations at the park and with crowds of people in tow. When Larry was waiting for them to set up for the next shoot, he would gladly walk over to the many people requesting to have their picture taken with him and sign autographs, all under the watchful eye of a lady who’s name I didn’t catch, but I gave her one, “Pit Bull One.” When things got to crowded or Larry needed to get in front of the camera, she wasn’t bashful about telling



Larry riding in the wagon interviewing the Mule Day Queen and her court. Officer Dale Moreland was driving the wagon while Jerry Brown and Randy Yancey drove the second wagon that carried the film crew.

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Larry and "Tiny" waiting between filming to load logs.

folks where they needed to get to and they did what she asked.

Again, I credit that behavior to the part of the country they were standing in. "Pit Bull" was probably in her late twenties, I'm guessing, taller than me...that's not saying much. Not fat, very fit. She gave me the impression she could put knots on your head faster than you could rub 'em. The few times I saw any opposition, Pit Bull One said nothing, she just gave this look that could melt steel and it was over. She had to be an X-CIA agent.

I got to see two sides of Larry The Cable Guy, well, three counting his comedian

side. We all know the comedian side. There are two sides I want to share with you that you may not know. I think we all wonder if this bigger than life personality has a heart. I wonder like anyone else. The way Larry opted not to have a cold drink and sit down between takes, showed me he was grateful to his fans. And he seemed to enjoy the photos taken with them and autographs he signed. But I got to see more.

They had put Larry in the three seated golf cart headed to another location. A gentleman by the name of Ricky Tabor from Camp Cross, with a booth there at Mule Day, leaned his head out of the crowd and

asked Larry if he would come down and take a picture with Camp Cross.

"What's Camp Cross?" Larry asked.

"It's a Christian based camp for kids that can't afford to go to camp, they come at no fee," Ricky answered.

"Where you at?" Larry asked.

Pit Bull heard it from the third seat back and immediately went into a fit shouting, "Larry NOOO! Larry, we've got to get up here for the next take NOW!"

I leaned down and into Larry's ear I said, "Larry, it's just four or five booths down that way." He pointed to the driver to go down that way to Camp Cross. Pit Bull was shouting all the way, "Larry you can't do this," only going mum a moment to look back and give me that look... Yep, she's X-CIA.

Later we had lunch in a room off of the side of the Mule Day office. I couldn't believe it. People were pounding on the door wanting to see Larry The Cable Guy. It must have been old hat to the crew and Larry; no conversation was broken by any of the pounding on the door. I was searching the room for Pit Bull One, but she was nowhere in the room. The pounding soon stopped...I had a vision of her standing in front of that door with her arms crossed and black shades on. Really I don't know if she was the one that stopped it, but I'm giving her the credit.

I asked Larry over a sandwich, "Would you like to attend an event like this and see all the sights and nobody knew who you were?"

"Oh yeh! One of my favorite things to do before I got into this business was to go to the fair. I loved going to the hog barns, cattle barns, seeing all the livestock I miss it. I can't go any more. A lot of my humor comes from cattle sales and hog sales I attended before getting into show business. I had a pig operation before I got into this. I love to go to a sale of any kind. One of my best friends is an auctioneer. As a matter of fact I own twenty percent of a sale barn in Nebraska," Larry told me. Cupping his hand to his ear he rattled off an auction chant, he would make a good auctioneer.

Larry told me his life desire, was to drive a potbelly cattle truck. "That was my life's desire." Larry told this story, "A few years back the bus had broke down and we were waiting on a repair shop to open. When I woke up about 7.00 a. m., I looked out the window and across the road was a bunch of livestock pens. My hobby is building minia-

ture livestock facilities. I hopped out of the bus and headed over to look things over. I'm interested in how any livestock facility is designed. While I was looking things over this potbelly cattle truck pulled in and was backing up to the chute. I hopped down and went to helping him back into the chute. When he got to the chute he stuck his head out the window and hollered, 'Unload 'em right there'."

Larry said he raised the trailer door and unloaded the cattle. The driver made his way back to the chute and stood looking at him puzzled: "Hey, You look like Larry The Cable Guy."

"I am, Larry The Cable Guy. Are you going after another pot load?" Larry asked. "Yea," the driver answered.

"I want to go with you," said Larry.- "Come on, it's about forty minutes out," the driver told him.

"Hang on," Larry told him, "I'll go tell them where I'm going. My manger had a fit and wouldn't let me go." Larry told me with his head hung low.

Larry The Cable Guy is country thru and thru and I know he misses it greatly. This project he has taken on with the History Channel is from a country boy's heart. Larry truly has a desire to educate America on our past. He's a country boy who has made it in a big, big way and he still knows his roots. I'm glad I got to meet him.

I want to take this opportunity to thank each and every one of you that I contacted on this project. I never once heard I can't do it. Everyone was willing to drop what he or she were doing and do what he or she could to fulfill the History Channel's request. I can't tell you how I appreciate it. I know not everyone was used in the filming that was contacted, but you stood by anyway. Thank You!

Those I saw filmed were: W. J. Staggs, from Livingston, Tennessee. Larry teamed up with W. J. in the log loading competition. They placed fifth over all. W. J. wouldn't admit it but I believe Larry weighed him down a bit. W. J., Koy Flower and Scotty Watkins teamed up and took third place. W. J.'s mule, "Tiny," is a 19 plus hand, john mule and just a four year old. Oh, he's tall.

Koy Flower, from Clarkrange, Tennessee, was on film bringing the logs to the loading ramps. Koy was very helpful in providing contacts.

Mr. Emery Combs from Waverly, Alabama, who puts on the log loading competition at Mule Day was filmed with his

Belgian Mares. When Larry straddled a log they had just hooked to and had his leg between that log and another, Emery told Larry PDQ to get his foot out of there. Larry did, immediately. Thanks Emery, I don't know if Larry knows what you did for him...I do.

Steve Foster and Amazing Grace were featured. Larry fell in love with Amazing Grace. He couldn't get enough of her abilities, and Missy the jumping mule.

Officer Dale Moreland, from Dexter, Missouri is a Missouri State Highway Patrolman. Dale hauled the 2010 Mule Day Queen, Lindsey Jo Thomas and her court in the show wagon, hooked to a four-up team of sorrel mules. Larry conducted an interview with Lindsey Jo and her court while driving around the Maury Country Park in Dale's wagon. Shots were taken with Larry riding shotgun beside Officer Moreland.

Jerry Brown and Randy Yancey, both of Dexter, Missouri, hauled the camera crew while they filmed the interviews going on with the Queen and her Court in Dale's wagon. Then Larry rode with Jerry and they filmed from Dale's wagon. Jerry Brown builds show wagons, he built the two wagons, Dale Moreland's and of course the one he was hitched too. Being on the History Channel with those beautiful wagons couldn't hurt business, I'd think.

Dr. Bill Lance filled their cup and ran it over with history of mules. Jim Morton, field producer, thanked me more than once for putting this wealth of information in front of his camera. I didn't tell Bill this. I

told him they might have something they could use. I don't want Bill getting the big head. He's pretty hard to get along with now, let alone thinking he's a big star.

Tim Marlin, from Franklin, Tennessee, had the film crew and Larry at his place late afternoon showing them many generations of fine jackstock. Also at Tim's place were Jay Bird Mangrum and his team of black mules that he used to teach Larry the art of plowing. Jay Bird told me, "You should have seen that black dirt roll out of there when Larry was plowing. He did it good."

I know I've forgotten someone and I'm sorry and again I want to thank everyone that was used in this production and those that were not. I know you were ready at a minute's notice. How this all came together impressed Lynda Yoon and she now knows what I have had the pleasure to know for going on twenty years. These people will do anything for you when you need them. THANK YOU EVERYONE!



Ben and Neta talking to Larry during a break. Larry The Cable Guy is as country as the two he's talking with.



