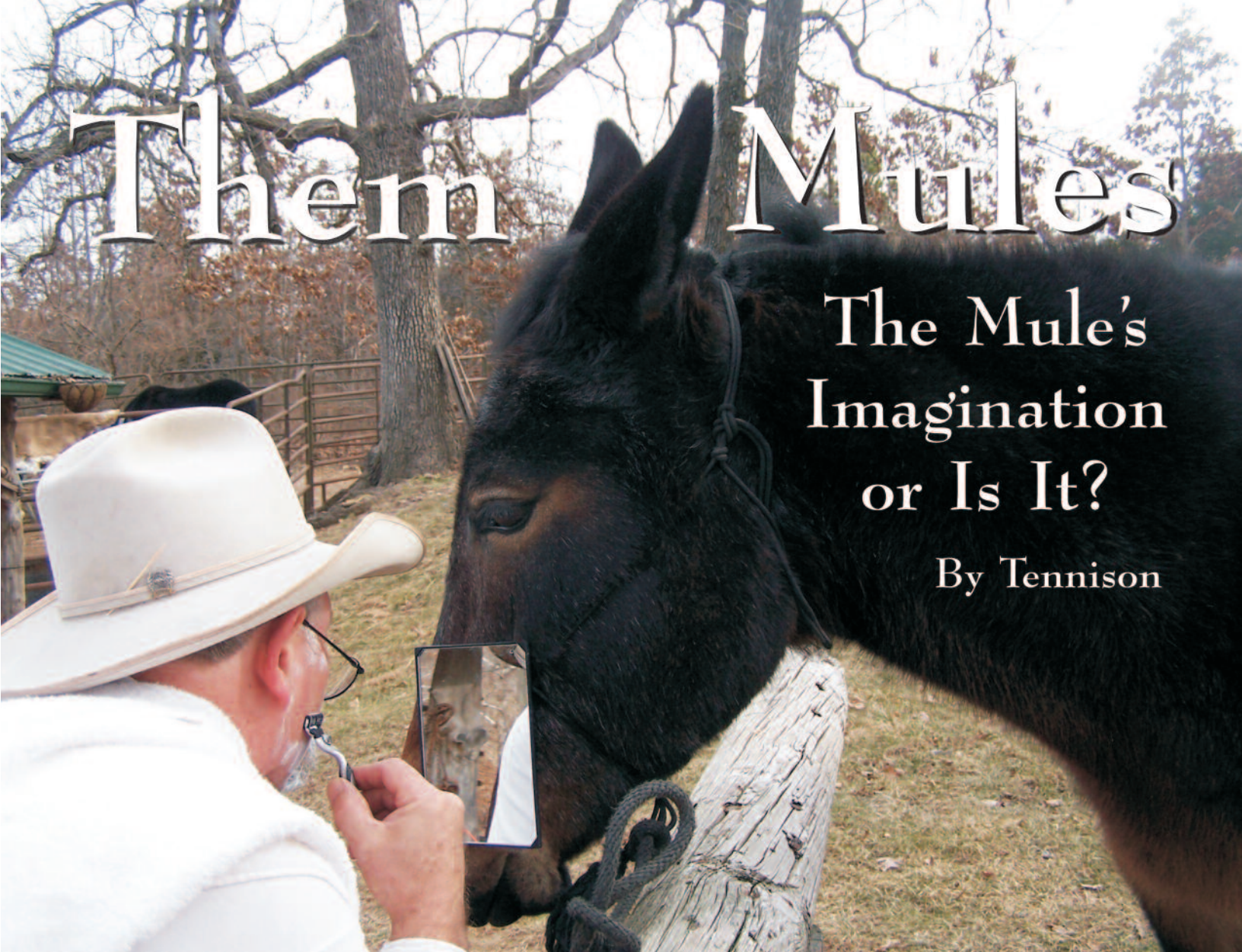


Them Mules

The Mule's Imagination or Is It?

By Tennison



During one of my many visits to grandma and grandpa Tennison's house as a boy, (they only lived a little over a mile away) at supper that evening grandpa mentioned something we were having making you strong. He said, "It made him strong enough that he moved the house a little the other day". That got my attention, after pondering it a bit I asked, "How did you do that grandpa?" He told me he ran around the house three times building up speed and on the third time around he grabbed the corner post on the front porch and moved the house. I never forgot that. My imagination went into orbit, I tried it the first chance I got. I never did move the house.

Since my grandchildren have been old enough to sit-up I've told them some of the wildest stories known to man. I love to watch as those little minds go into overdrive; you can see the wheels turning in those little heads, as the stories get wilder.

At a very young age our oldest granddaughter, now nine, would chime in and add a version or two of her own to grandpa's stories. My grandchildren and I have killed more mean bear, sneaking mountain lion and charging buffalo than the entire Indian Nation.

I told our five-year-old granddaughter a while back, that I could fly when my hair was longer. She looked at my head and I saw her imagination tryin' to picture grandpa with long hair (grandpa ain't got much hair). She too asked, "How did you do that grandpa?" Out came a story of not only how I flew but also the many places I flew to and things I did when I got there. Grandma sitting in her recliner shaking her head, as she has many times, with a very intent, big eyed little girl focused on her grandpa. Just yesterday I mentioned flying her somewhere on my back if my hair was long. She immediately asked, "What about grandma, how will she get

there?" I'll pick her up and carry her in my arms, I told her. She said, "You can't do that grandpa, you can't go like this," (flapping both arms briskly). We're going to have to put grandma on my back too.

I love to see a child with an imagination and I'm doing my part in trying to instill one big imagination into my grandchildren. An imagination doesn't cost anything and the adventures are endless. No movie has ever been made to equal what the imagination can play in the mind. I rode for hours in a saddle on the saddle rack in the barn when I was a child. I wasn't big enough to catch or saddle anything by myself so without a mule or horse, from a big 'ol saddle, I kept the bad guys away. Wasn't nothing ever stolen at our place, no brothers or sisters were ever kidnapped and no land grabbin', no goods ever tried to ride in and take mom and dad's place. You know, I have five sisters and two brothers and they've never

thanked me for that. Mom, still to this day cooks me a good meal when I show up and dad takes me fishin'. I think they know what I did for them.

Mules too have imaginations, but unlike the child we need to squelch the mule's imagination. If his imagination gets out of hand the mule soon gets out of hand with it.

Have you ever seen a mule look with big ears and a raised head at a dog coming across a field? It could, as easily be a cow, a deer or a pick-up truck, many different things can cause the reaction of big ears and a raised head. When on his back you can feel the mule becoming more and more tense as whatever it is comes closer or moves on across the field. I call it his imagination running away with him. Really it's the predator and the prey instinct taking place, yes even the pick-up truck can be considered as a predator by the mule. And with many mules, if left unchecked those tense muscles build to Big Startled Movements.

Now, because mules can't talk I can't be certain, but here's my version of what's going on in the mule's head. "Hey, what's that going across the field? Is it a predator? Kinda' looks like a predator. He's probably out hunting, maybe he doesn't see me, OHHHH he's turning this way. HE SEES ME! HE SEES ME! HE'S COMING OVER HERE TO TAKE ME DOWN AND EAT MY GUTS OUT! We've got to get out of here!"

Now the flight instinct (to run) has kicked in, THE BIG STARTLED MOVEMENT (just one of several reactions). The question now is, will the flight instinct last long? Will it last just a few feet or yards or will it last until he gets back to the house or the trailhead? Of course the dog, the deer, the cow, the squirrel, even the metal predator, the pick-up truck is not going to take the mule down and eat it's guts out but that's the way the mule sees it. It's a fear, it's instinct, a survival mode, an imagination gone wild. We can help the mule here by interrupting his imagination. This is where training pays off big time.

At home we need to establish a calm down cue. John Lyons was the first I remember to speak of such. Something many had practiced for years, but like myself not totally understanding why it was so effective. By asking the mule to lower his head it was my belief it took his mind off what was making the mule so

tense. John Lyons goes on to tell when the head drops below the wither it has a natural calming effect on the mule or horse. You've got to admit you've never seen a mule or horse all shook-up when it was standing or traveling with his head lowered. The calm down cue needs to be practiced and practiced and practiced, practiced at home frequently.

Because the mule is a prey animal as he assesses a scenario like the one mentioned above, with the head high and those long ears erect the longer the mule stays fixated on the perceived predator the longer that imagination has time to go into overdrive. By asking the mule to give to the bit, (drop the head) you will feel those neck muscles relax. The mule will want to come up and start imagining again, if not interrupted you will feel those muscles go tense again. By giving the mule a practiced cue to drop the head, soften the neck and calm down we have interrupted that imagination. And now that we have a mule listening to us we can give the mule a valuable piece of information, "Everything isn't going to take you down and eat your guts out like you think they're going to."

Several years ago at Columbia, Tennessee Mule Day they had a Cowboy Mounted Shooting competition and I took my mule "Dolly" to compete. Dolly had been in many arenas across the country but as mules are, they've got to get used to new sights. Dolly and I had a routine, when something was bothering her in the new arena, trash cans on the outside, banners, etc., I lowered her head. When she wanted to come up, I kept lowering her head until she relaxed. We didn't leave the arena until she was relaxed with all things in and around the arena. Some fellows taking in Mule Day were watching and asked, "Why are making that mule carry her head so low?" "So she'll relax," was my reply. "Poor 'ol mule", was a reply coming from one of them. I had played the game many times with "Dolly", it worked every time and if you didn't interrupt her imagination, if she ever became real frightened of a banner or something, you weren't going to get her over it in that arena. By not letting her become freighted or letting her imagination run wild she pretty much always become acceptant of anything in the arena. The next time we came into the arena a head down cue wasn't required, she was already relaxed from then on in that arena.

Children's imaginations need to be nurtured, allowed to run free. I don't know if a child having an imagination helps them in life any, I do know it don't hurt 'em any. As for the mule, unlike the imagination of a child the mule's imagination needs to be controlled and it can be controlled by teaching him at home to just calm down.

Is it really an imagination that the mule has? I don't know but that's how my imagination interprets it.

By now you likely realize I have an imagination, something that's never left me. Which means nothing more than I'm really just one big kid with a touch of arthritis that has to shave every day.