

# Them Mules

## “AMAZING GRACE, HOW SWEET THE SOUND”

*By Tennison*

*Photos by HorsePixPhotography*

*Below: “Amazing Grace” dunking the basketball.*



On many occasions I've stated, "I have the best job in all America." I don't mean to sound repetitious but I do have the best job in America and don't be annoyed if you hear me mention it again sometime in the future. Great things come to me through folks I meet as editor of the *Western Mule Magazine*. When it does I want to share it with you.

This story has been told in many medias in America. I suppose the biggest was on the NBC "Today Show." However parts of this story have hit the Internet in recent months, which is allowing this story to be told worldwide.

I got a call July 16, 2009 telling me to turn the TV on to the "Today Show"; a mule was going to be on shortly. I did, and Steve Foster and Amazing Grace were on promoting the movie "Get Low" with Robert Duval. During that promotion Amazing Grace performed tricks and feats beyond belief. Because Steve Foster was and is a long time subscriber to *Western Mule Magazine*, it wasn't hard to track him down.

Steve and his wife, Pam, live in Front Royal, Virginia. There at their home, Steve trains mules, something he's been doing since 1967. "It all started in the late sixties while coon hunting when I was fifteen years old," Steve told me. "Some fellows coon hunting off mules would come to our place to hunt. I walked; soon they got to bringing me a mule to ride with them. I had no saddle, so I rode bare back. I really liked riding that mule and hunting. My first mule was bought from one of those fellows. I gave him \$320 for the mule and paid it out in payments with money I earned coon hunting and running my trap lines."

"I knew then mules were special. I witnessed mules standing patiently when hung up in something, a fence, a rope, waiting for me to get them out. Horses don't do it like that. Coon hunting in the night a mule might suddenly move to one side. It took me a while to figure out it was to miss stepping into a hole. This always fascinated me how they could see so well in the dark and of course how they could jump a fence flat



*Steve talking to "Grace" as she balances on these small boxes.*

footed."

When I got in contact with Steve after his and Amazing Graces' appearance on the "Today Show", I asked Steve to send us a story on his mule, Amazing Grace. He did, it ran in the December 2009, Issue of *Western Mule Magazine* (page 16). It was a good article, but the boy just can't brag on himself, which means, we got just a small taste of this man and his mule. There's a lot more to the story.

After seeing what Steve and Amazing Grace are all about during their performance at Columbia Mule Day and during shooting for the film with Larry The Cable Guy for the History Channel, I can brag on Steve and Grace plenty. And after having the pleasure of sitting and talking with Steve on several occasions, I got to know a lot about Steve Foster and his mule Amazing Grace and where he's coming from.

Steve, as I mentioned, has trained mules for over forty years and has learned a lot in those forty plus years. We both compared things we didn't know back then. We had some pretty good laughs about the many mistakes we had made, what we've learned over the years and we both agree, it wasn't so funny back then.

I can't help but study someone who professes to be a trainer. I studied Steve Foster before, during and after shooting for the History Channel. Steve Foster

has something special. I'm sure forty years of training mules has given him lots of insight into mules, it certainly has given him lots of stories to tell. Steve Foster has a gift; all that Amazing Grace does for Steve isn't by accident. It takes a gift to be able to train a mule to do what Grace does. Things like giving kisses on command, shooting baskets with a basketball, getting something to



*"Grace" getting a bottle of something to drink out of the cooler.*

drink out of the cooler, ringing a bell, answering the phone, counting, painting, rearing-up, jumping, playing the piano and more, all done loose in an arena. At Columbia Mule Day the arena was



*Steve jumping "Missy" over Larry, The Cable Guy, while he is laying across the bar.*

something like 150 foot wide by 250 feet long. Grace handles the crowds that hover around her in and out of the arena.

Not everyone has this gift, I've learned. I've seen it in a few people in my life and it fascinates me when I see it. As hard as I study it, I don't understand all there is to understand about a gift like Steve Foster has. I'm not sure Steve understands his gift completely either, but he does understand who gave it to him and what he must do with this gift.

Steve has competed with mules for many years in shows across the country. He's won his share of Gymkhana Events and Coon Jumping Competitions, winning the Pea Ridge, Arkansas World Championship Coon Jumping Competition, jumping against the best of the best. He won with a mule by the name of "Missy," now retired from competition. Steve has also won the Virginia State Championship Coon Jumping Competition numerous times over the years. Steve also has competed successfully in

gymkhana events on mules he has trained; his last mule by the name of "Abby" is now retired, living a good life on the farm in Virginia and enjoying trail rides.

In July of 2008, Steve and Amazing Grace competed in The America's Ultimate Idol Equine Extravaganza, a national equine event for equine only. To qualify for the national competition it required winning at a state level first. Steve and Amazing Grace won the North Carolina State Competition against all horses, qualifying them for the national competition held in Richmond, Virginia. October 2008 at "The America's Ultimate Idol Equine Extravaganza Competition," Steve and Grace competed against winners and their equines from across the country (all horses) for the national title. Steve and Grace won that title hands down.

At that national competition in Richmond, Virginia there was a fellow by the name of Doug Sloan, an equine trainer, a trainer of stunt horses used in movies.

Doug was performing at the Nationals Extravaganza and caught Amazing Grace's abilities. In January 2009, Doug Sloan called Steve and asked if he and Grace were up to shooting a movie-starring Academy-Award Winner Robert Duval, Sissy Spacek and Bill Murray. The movie has been shot; Steve and Amazing Grace have appeared on the "Today Show" and have made numerous appearances nationally since then. One appearance being at Columbia Mule Day in April 2010, and soon to appear on the History Channel on "Only In America With Larry The Cable Guy," which should air in September or October of 2010. They are scheduled to appear at the largest fair in Tennessee, the Wilson county Fair in Lebanon, Tennessee where over half a million visitors came in 2009 Steve and amazing Grace will appear there August 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup>, 2010. I want to add, the movie "Get Low," starring Robert Duval hasn't even come out yet as this is being written! "Get Low" opened in theaters July 30<sup>th</sup>,

2010.

Steve has told others and me more than once, "I really believe that God has put Grace in my life for a reason." Doug Sloan, being a twenty-five year veteran in the film industry, knows his animals and in an interview posted on the internet talking about Amazing Grace, he said, "This is only the second time in my career I've ever seen something out there that's impressed me enough to use it. I always watch, but it's rare that something impresses me enough to use. So Steve may be right. It may be divine intervention, but I don't mind being used."

In the movie Robert Duval portrays the part of an old hermit that doesn't have any friends in town except this old mule (Grace). Robert Duval said in an interview, "The creature was more talented than some of the human stars I have worked with over the years."

Where will all this lead? I asked Steve this question and what Steve shared with me is exciting. Steve stated, "All that has been given to me is of God. All this I do with Grace and the opportunities I have had and now have come from God Almighty. All this that's happening is way beyond me. I'm only a country boy from the Shenandoah Valley. I'm excited each day to get up and see what God has in store for Grace and me. I ask God daily to show me what he would have me do. I do believe God has brought Grace into my life for a reason and that is to spread the word of Jesus Christ to the people, all through a mule. I have a message to share; because of Jesus Christ I am new. Jesus plucked me from a life of drugs and alcohol and made me whole again, I want everyone to know you don't have to live like that; there is love, joy and peace through a merciful God that loves each and every one of us. All ya gotta do is give Him your troubles and follow. I'm proof God is merciful and God can work through anyone and anything. God working through a mule...now wrap your head around that."

"Amazing Grace does some amazing things and I am taken back often by her abilities. I've been told Grace is a one in

a million mule. I say she's just a mule, but there's way more to this than a man and his mule. Grace is amazing, but I want the world to understand where her abilities are coming from and mine."

"I don't know what tomorrow will bring; I'm just trying to follow. I've been told this mule will make me millions, I pray Amazing Grace allows me to witness to millions. "America's Got Talent" called recently asking us to come audition, because of prior commitments we elected not to go. For a coon huntin' country boy from Front Royal, Virginia, this is all pretty exciting, it's a new adventure every day."

I love to talk to Steve; he's on fire for the Lord. I mentioned when I wrote of the History Channel covering the mules at Columbia Mule Day, how that could put the mule before millions... This one is even better than that, a mule putting God before millions? I saw Grace and Steve before hundreds and the plan of salvation was given before those hundreds. I say this man and that mule are well on their way to delivering the message to millions.

Oh the people I meet! And the things I get to see! I do have the best job in America... And this is way beyond me too Steve!



*Some of the perks of a magazine editor; getting a kiss from "Grace."*

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