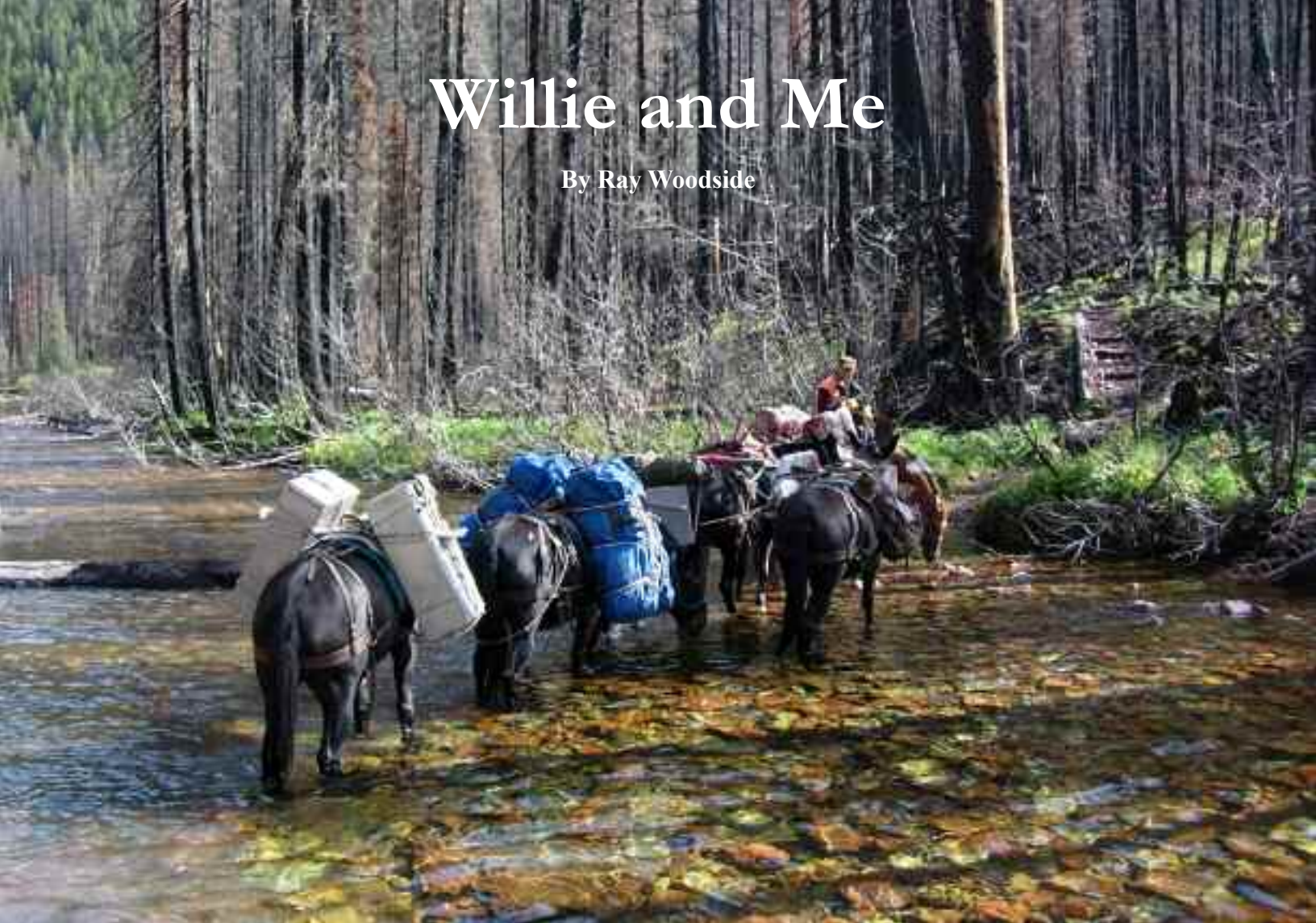


Willie and Me

By Ray Woodside



Crossing Young's Creek in the Bob Marshall Wilderness. Stopping for a drink. on the way out from a successful elk hunt. Willie is the back mule in the pack string, so you know he can work als.,lit's not all fun and games at shows. Photo by Ray Peterson

It is cold and crisp, about fifteen degrees not a cloud in the morning sky. The only sound I hear as I urge Willie my riding mule along is the metal of his shod feet clinking on the rocks and his labored breathing. When Willie and I are a quarter of a mile up the gated, dirt-logging road in the dark, I see another pickup pulling into the trailhead. So we are alone no longer.

I push Willie hard because I want to stay ahead of the other hunters and get high up in the mountains before first light. The big bucks are usually up high, with only does and smaller bucks down lower in the foothills. I normally ride up a ridge that slopes from the lower elevation on the south end to the higher on the north. This area has been logged in the past, so it has many logging roads.

There are a lot of open meadows mixed with bigger timber, pine and fir. I zigzag back and forth as we travel up the ridge so I can see down in the canyons on both the east and west sides of the ridge. Crossing

several logging roads, it takes us about an hour and a half to reach the highest road, which heads further north. I usually follow this high road back up onto the higher mountains.

It is November 6, 2009, and here in Montana we have already had several hard freezes. The grass in the meadows has turned a golden brown and many of the leaves of the deciduous trees and brush have fallen to the ground or are a colorful splash of oranges and reds still clinging to the branches. The Blackfoot River snakes through the valley to the west as I head up the ridge. The snow capped Mission Mountains are far in the distance to the north in front of me.

I purchased Willie in 2000 for a pack mule when I was head packer for the Rich Ranch in Seeley Lake, Montana. The ranch would lease mules from me every summer, so I was actually packing my own mules while working for someone else. Willie was

only trained to lead when I bought him. A gentle mule is easy to train to pack, especially when you are packing them every day all summer. He is a Thoroughbred and Mammoth jack cross and is tall and lanky and can carry a heavy load.

After packing Willie for a couple of seasons, some of my coworkers were telling me that I should make a riding mule out of him. The next spring I started working him in a round pen. I didn't know much about training mules or horses, but I had just attended a horse trade show in Idaho where Craig Cameron from Bluff Dale, Texas, had given several seminars. He made it look so easy I thought with a couple of seminars under my belt and some of his training videos, I would give it a try.

I have hunted these mountains many, many times before. I usually see whitetail deer lower on the mountain. There the timber and buck brush is thicker. The mule deer forage in the meadows at a high elevation

where it is more open. This entire area has grazing allotments for cattle of the local ranchers, and there are even some spring fed water tanks high in the hills for the cattle. Of course the deer and elk use them also.

I am over two hours into my hunt before I see my first deer. In years past I usually saw several mule deer near one of the cattle water tanks. However, these last two years, there have been no deer in the area. The trees are growing bigger and denser and there's less grass for the deer to eat. They have moved on up the ridge to an area that was logged three years ago and is now open with plenty of new grass.

When I enter this newly logged area, I see twenty to thirty mule deer feeding in several of the open meadows. I stop and glass all of them. There are four or five bucks, but they are all small, two or three-pointers. I'm not about to shoot one of those on my first day of deer hunting. The fun of hunting for me is riding my mule and seeing all of the wildlife. Shooting a big one is just the icing on the cake. The cake is plenty good without the icing!



This was taken at the Extreme Cowboy Race in Eagle, Colorado.

After training Willie for thirty days, two springs in a row, and riding him a little in the hills during layover days on pack trips, I decided to enter him at the Montana Mule Days. The first year he didn't do well at all. I just didn't have a stop on him, so I made a commitment to myself to get him more fully trained. I rode him much more that summer and attended The Hell's Canyon Mule Days that fall. I won my first class ever at that Enterprise, Oregon show and decided that I wanted to go to Bishop Mule Days that next spring.

Soon after, I located a nice indoor arena that I could ride in almost every day that winter. I still didn't know very much about



This was taken during a trail contest at Thistle Creek Ranch in the Idaho Mountain Trail Challenge. It was the bare back class. We had to do a 360 turn on the stump and Willie had never even been on one before.

what I was doing, but I did invest in several private lessons and entered Willie in any show that would let a mule compete against horses. Willie got better and better in spite of my lack of knowledge. I, being sixty-two years old at the time, was on a sharp learning curve regarding how to train and show a mule. I could ride with the best of them in the hills but just didn't know or understand all of the arena rules and regulations.

I made several mistakes trying to train Willie. At one point an instructor told me

how to get Willie to change leads in an arena. As we galloped across the arena, I was supposed to use my left heel to get him set up for a right turn. I kept using my right heel. The instructor yelled at me, "NO, THE OTHER LEFT FOOT!" I still had a lot to learn.

As I am traveling on up the logging road, I see many mule deer here and there and I stop to glass them even though I doubt there will be a big buck with them. Upon passing through the logged-off areas, we enter a more timbered hillside. To my surprise, I see two or three whitetail deer running through the woods downhill to my left. They are moving so fast in the trees, I can't tell if they are does or bucks.

I have had a hard time hunting whitetail deer from a horse or mule. Whitetail deer usually see a person before we can see them, and are off and running with their white tail in the air; whereas, the mule deer will look and watch a person before they run, and then may only run fifty yards and stop and look back. I usually don't worry about looking for white tail deer when I am riding, as they are gone before I can get off the horse or mule to get a shot at them.

I am into my hunt almost three hours now. The weather is crisp and clear; a perfect day for a wonderful ride and a chance to see a lot of deer and maybe some elk. Hunting and riding is a great time to relax and do a little thinking about whatever a person wants to think about.

GRAZIN' BITS

KULIE





Bob and Willie at Bishop Mule Days in Bishop, California, 2006.

In May of 2006, I took Willie to the big mule show in Bishop, California. During the event, there are typically about 700 mules exhibited at Bishop Mule Days in 181 classes. Over 30,000 people attend the annual show. I had no idea if I could compete at that level or not, but I was soon going to know. We won the first class I entered Willie in. We won another class the next day and placed in several more classes.



Montana Mule Days 2010, grand entry. Photo by Bob Mischka.

Willie was on a roll, even if I didn't know what I was doing. Before running the western riding class, I asked Tim Phillips, one of the best riders, how to run that particular class. I didn't have a clue. After running the western riding class, I had to get to a different arena to run the barrels. Upon coming back to the first arena, Tim told me that I had won the western riding class. I couldn't believe it.

We then went home to the Montana Mule Days and he won Over All High Point Riding Mule and High Point Gaming Mule. He went on to capture the same awards for two more years. I also entered many Extreme Cowboy Races and other extreme trail races where he did very well against mostly horses.

Keeping my eyes alert for deer, I wonder to myself if I dare shoot my .300 Weatherby Magnum off of Willie. I don't dwell on the subject very much as I have never been in a situation where I needed to shoot from the saddle. However I have shot a pistol off of him several times in some of the extreme trail contests.

I am surprised again to see a couple more whitetail deer off to my right, up the hill near the crest of the ridge. Once again they are running through the timber way before I see them. It is just really good to see so much wildlife on my first day of deer hunting.



Taken in the Bob Marshall Wilderness with Young's Creek Drainage in the background. About 7000' elevation.

GRAZIN' BITS

KULIE



As I am riding on up the road enjoying the ride and the wonderful scenery, I am startled to see a nice buck standing and looking straight at me from about fifty yards uphill to my right at two o'clock. He is looking at me from behind some buck brush that has lost its leaves, and he is surrounded by several twenty to thirty-year-old Douglas fir that are branched out to the ground. For a person that hunts as much as I do, I know right away that the deer is a shooter. I always carry my rifle in the scabbard upright in front of my right knee for easy access. Now it is in my hand before I have thought about it. As I looked at the deer, I realized he is a whitetail, and if I dismount, he will be gone in a second.

I don't know what to do. With the deer being off to my right and I being right handed, I will have to turn Willie about 180 degrees, so he is facing south, for me to get a shot and not have the rifle muzzle next to



Riding on the Young's Creek Trail in the Bob Marshall Wilderness. Photo taken by Ray's wife, Brenda.

his head. I am thinking that since the deer hasn't run yet, the mule and I aren't bothering him very much at this point. I slowly turn Willie and start to raise my rifle. The deer decides he has seen enough and starts trotting off, uphill, now quartering away from me back down the way we just came up.

I can just see flashes of him through the trees. I notice that he is probably going to cross a small clearing about twenty feet wide where I may have a clean shot at him at about sixty to eighty yards. I have my cross hairs on the clearing and as he enters, I squeezed the trigger on the .300. The deer drops immediately in the small brush and out of my sight.

I automatically jack another shell into my rifle as I sit waiting for about five minutes to see if the deer was going to get up and run. During this time of waiting, I realize that I have just used a rifle to shoot off of Willie for the first time, and he didn't even flinch.

Still not knowing how big the deer is, I urge Willie up the hill, through the brush, to the spot where I saw the deer go down. Willie snorts his disapproval once on the way up the hill, as he smells the deer. We ride on up past the deer and I tie Willie to a tree. The deer is a monster! He is probably the biggest whitetail deer I have ever seen in this part of Montana in my twelve years of hunting and guiding, on horseback or on foot.

The deer is a wall hanger, but I have no one with me to get excited with except Willie, and I am sure he isn't going to get very excited as he is going to have to carry the deer for three hours out of the hills. There is no one to shake hands with, no one to slap me on the back, so I start the task of getting the sling ropes and saddle panniers on my riding saddle so I can load the deer on Willie. I am wishing my wife or one of my hunting buddies were with me to celebrate, but then again I am also enjoying the solitude of getting the deer by myself with

Willie as the only witness. He has been a true riding partner for several years. He trusts me and I trust him. An old man needs that when he is in the hills alone.

When I hunt by myself, I always carry a light set of saddle panniers rolled up and tied on the back of my saddle and a rope to use as a sling rope. At sixty-four, I am getting too old to load a deer whole, on my mule by myself. With the saddle panniers, I can cut the deer in half and load a half at a time. The panniers have straps to pull both sides of the panniers together over the top of the saddle to steady the load.

I would normally load the hindquarters first on the right side of the mule. However, because of the steep hillside, I approach Willie on his left, the uphill side, and put the hind quarters of the deer over the top of the saddle and down into the pannier on the right side, which I have propped open with a small stick. Then I load the front quarters on the left side. Tightening the straps from pannier to pannier over the top of the deer,

locking the antlers tight to the seat of the saddle. Now I pull the basket hitch of my sling rope up on both sides of the load to help support the panniers, and use a packer hitch to tie the sling rope off. I am almost ready to head down the hill back to the pickup.

It is about noon now and the sun has been out for several hours, warming up the hillside to around twenty-five degrees. Since I will be walking on the southwest side of the hills, I will be in sunshine all the way down. I take one layer of clothing off. Now all I need to do is to shoulder my rifle and check the area to make sure I didn't leave anything on the ground.

I untie Willie from the tree and head down the hill to the road for the three-hour walk, about nine miles, back to the pickup. I just put one foot in front of the other going back the same way I came up the hill. Upon coming to a water tank, I use a big rock to bust the ice and give Willie a long, well-deserved drink. We walk back down to the road and I tie Willie to a tree so I can sit down and have a bite of lunch and a good drink of water myself.

As I am eating, I look back up the road. It is such a beautiful day. The sun is shining, the evergreen trees are a dark green with the light brown grass covering the ground between them, with several patches of bright

colored autumn leaves throughout. The sky in the background is a bright blue with a few white fluffy clouds mixed in. It is a great day for hunting and a long walk back to the pickup. Life just doesn't get any better than this.

After eating, I untie Willie and start up a small hill on the road for about a half of a mile. I get hot and sweaty going up the hill as I didn't take enough clothes off. The rest of the walk will be all down hill and much easier. I have a smile on my face, a nice deer in the panniers, and my best mule right along side of me.