

It Began As Just Another Day, Then The Mules Were Mentioned

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8-19-65

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MERTZON — At this state of the game, when so small a number of the ranch population is involved, I hesitate to call the following incident a sign of any trend. However, it needs exposing. And if there are any preventive measures available, they should be taken before some government clerk does something drastic, like putting us all under quarantine until we can pass an IQ test for third-graders.

A couple of ranchers, father and son, from just south of us dropped by the other day for a visit. I happened to be doing a little light butler and valet work up at my boss's house at the time.

It is not out of the ordinary for this father-and-son combination to come by our place, especially considering that they are addicted to horses as my boss is. Neither is it unusual for them to spend all day sitting around the dining table, tracing and retracing the lineage of every stallion and mare that has passed through this country since time of Coronado.

But on this occasion the conversation did not open on "remember old Sheepshead Bay," or "the half-sister of old Joe Such-and-Such that was supposed to be by Poco Smokie but was actually by Winter Night out of a mare that old Frank So-and So traded old misfit for..."

No, right off the bat, the father wanted to know if we had a team of mules they could borrow.

My boss took his inquiry just as I knew he would.

Ever since the last mules we had on the ranch (six of seven years ago) broke down a new one-by-six gate just to chew the tail off a colt which my boss thought more of than he does his land and cattle, the word mule has been about as popular around here as the word fire is at a gasoline plant.

So it didn't surprise me to see him start waving his arms as if he had a red ant in each shirt sleeve, scattering cigar ashes until the room looked like a new deposit of volcanic ash being hit by a whirlwind. Nor was it surprising that his language fitted his actions as he described what he thought of all mules and their forebears since the colt he loved so much had become as bobtailed as a jackrabbit.

When the boss had calmed down a little, he asked why these two gents wanted a mule. They had arrived in a high-powered machine equipped with all the conveniences of a yacht. Furthermore, in this day and age, a rancher who doesn't furnish his help a pickup or two is as hopelessly behind the times as a man who tries to lap the local supermarket on a \$5-a-day grocery budget for a family of two.

The visitors explained that they had no intention of working the mules personally. But they had a "Deep South Secretary" tumbling prickly pear, and this worthy could wreck half the four-wheeled vehicles in the country within three days — and then fix the other half where a man of Henry Ford's mechanical genius couldn't make them start.

They figure the only way to get any appreciable amount of cactus hauled was to fit out the man with a wagon and team.

I senses that if I didn't add something to the mule discussion, the visitors' line of thought would waver and the remainder of the day would be spent arguing about the ancestry of a remount stallion that was full grown when General Custer was still at West Point. Therefore I timidly mentioned that a neighbor of mine in town had a secondhand hearse that he would sell at a bargain. I pointed out that this vehicle was well broke to slow speeds, which made it ideal for hauling pear as well as giving their man an economical yet stylish vehicle.

What I did not tell them was the forbidding craft had been parked across the street from my house for a week, and to assure its removal I would have grubbed a little pear myself.

The horsemen and my boss ignored my suggestion. Instead of considering the purchase of the ancient hearse, they began to wonder what the boss' brother had done with old Mike and Mouse, and whether the wagon and harness had gone with the mules or whether, like so many other things, had gradually disappeared, hame strap and bolt at a time.

While they were pondering jacks and equipment, I realized that if news of all this conversation were directed to the right ears it could effect the short grass country nearly as much as sipping irrigation water from the sea.

It dawned on me that if the Secretary of Agriculture or, for that matter, top cabinet officers in charge of the Interior and Labor departments were to hear that one-fiftieth of the ranchers in Precinct 3 of Irion County, Texas were turning to mules for freighting, then some Washington skin doctor specializing in

curing the shingles was going to have at least three noted patients whose cases of the worrisome rash would make medical history.

By this time the conversation at the dining table was leaning toward the birthright of a nephew of General Lee's favorite mount, so I had ample time to imagine what Mr. Freeman would do if, after sending a report to the President lauding the progress of the American Farmer, he happened to pick up a paper and read that down in Texas there was increasing demand for mules and wagons.

Or what Secretary Udall would say, after having heard and read ten million words pleading for permission to hunt eagles from airplanes, he found that the same group was going downhill faster than a circus with a sick elephant and a drunk acrobat.

I conjured up a visions of the Secretary of Labor working out a survey showing how farm labor is so abundant in this country that if a farmer put out the word that he needed help, the Big Bend Park wouldn't provide standing room for available tractor drivers, much less other men seeking rural employment...and then, after mailing these findings to the press, discovering that Texas farmers really needed wagon jockeys, not cowboys or tractor hands.

What would President and Mrs. Johnson says to a visiting big shot from Russia, who during the entertainment at the LBJ Ranch, saw a family rolling into Johnson City by mule power?

About this time the session around the dining table was ended by the arrival of an oilman. As far as I am concerned, it's just as well as he came when he did. Obviously there was no use hoping to recover the mules from the boss' brother. Not did it appear that the visitors were even mildly interested in the hearse.