

MULE CROSSING: *Lucky Three Ranch*

By Meredith Hodges

It was a cold October morning in 1979 as we hurriedly bathed the last 12 animals to be sold at Windy Valley Ranch's dispersal sale. After seven years of quality mule production and training, the mainstay of my life was about to come to a close. A hard sell, I had grown to love these longeared animals and could not imagine a life without them. I begged my mother to let me have at least one mule and the 18-year-old gelding Quarterhorse I had used as my ponyhorse to take with me when I moved to



Colorado to attend C.S.U. and start my ranch. But, she told me all the animals had to go through the sale. Tears welled up in my eyes as I watched my friends being sold one at a time; I could only wish that they would all go to good homes. As the killer bid \$450 for my old gelding, my heart stopped. He may have been 18, but I knew there were still a lot of good years left in that old horse! And, he loved the mules! As the monies were tallied, I stood in the office, stunned by the events of the day... Windy Valley Ranch would be no more. Without a change in expression, my mother looked up at me and said, "O.K... I will give you the old gelding, one pregnant mare, and the pony for Dena. They didn't really bring enough in the sale anyway, but you'll have to wait to ship them until the foal is born." I was ecstatic! It was at that moment I decided that the legacy of the Windy Valley Ranch would never die as long as I was alive to carry on and I eagerly relayed this information to my mother.

Mom had come with us for the final real estate check on our newly acquired property in Colorado. A meager ten acres with a few out buildings, it was verging on resembling a large dump with 100 head of sheep roaming about. There was no grass or fences to speak of, but the sheep manure was plentiful! It was three feet deep over the entire two-acre barn area; it was so deep, in fact, that the horses couldn't even get in under the sheds! Yet when Gary, my mother, and I stood in the drive and surveyed the property one last time before returning to California, all I could see was what could be. "It's got possibilities," I said enthusiastically. My mother scowled, then grinned and said, "Yeah, it's got possibilities all right."

Gary and I decided to marry before moving to Colorado and one of our friends wanted to make us a sign for our ranch as a wedding gift, so we had to come up with a name. We felt so lucky to be moving to colorful and inspiring Colorado to begin a whole new life together: Gary, Dena and I. When we asked my mother for some suggestions, she came up with the Lucky Three Ranch. It couldn't have been a more appropriate name and so it came to be! We moved in June of 1980 and a week later, Lucky Three Sundowner was born. The week after that all our animals—three horses, one pony, and one mule—were shipped to their new home in Colorado.

Though my trust fund provided enough to cover basic living costs, it could by no means provide us with an excess to spend, so the first two years we spent digging our way out of the sheep manure and garbage with nothing but shovels! We built fences and sheds out of discarded lumber and made do as best we could. Each day I set aside one hour to spend with the first mule that was ever totally mine!

It was Sundowner who inspired the direction our ranch would take. That first year, he won all his halter classes and gave us more pleasure than had any animal in my life. We decided to try to save and buy a jack eventually so we could revive the quality and standards of the Windy Valley rules. It was on my birthday in 1981 that my mother presented me with the papers on the last donkey born at Windy Valley, Little Jack Horner. After showing Sundowner at Bishop Mule Days, we hightailed it up to Healdsburg to pick up Little Jack Horner and take him back to Colorado with us. We were just outside of Sparks, Nevada, on our way home when we heard frantic honking behind us. We pulled over and were greeted by a rather large, burly, smiling man who asked, "You got a Windy Valley jack in that trailer?" No one can ever say that Bernie Fanning doesn't know his longears! We introduced ourselves and sat there along the highway talking mules for about a half an hour; then, we were again on our way with our trailer full of hopes and dreams.

It has been eight years now and the dreams have been fulfilled several times over with each new direction we have taken with our mules. Little Jack Horner has proven himself by producing some of the finest mules in the world; every one has claimed a place at halter and the older ones are now taking their places in performance. Lucky Three Sundowner has over twenty titles to his credit, including National Western Grand Champion Model Mule in 1983, and Bishop Mule Days World Champion Bridle Reined Mule in 1984. Lucky Three Mae Bea C.T., a molly by Colorado Poncho and out of our mare, Sam's Nickey (bred before Little Jack Horner was old enough to breed), foaled in 1982, has over 40 titles to her credit, including National Western Stock Show Drive & Ride Champion in 1986, Single Hitch Champion in 1987 and 1988 and Bishop Mule Days Reserve World Champion Drive & Ride and Single Hitch Mule in 1986 and 1987. Mae Bea C.T. has won a number of titles in Halter, English & Western Pleasure, Trail, Reining, and Dressage in her short career. She is the first mule I ever trained without any interference from anyone and in my opinion, she is the best I ever produced of the 30 or better that I had trained before. Given the right start in a carefully planned training program, our mules have provided us with the additional finances we needed to expand to

the breeding and training operation that we have today, but it more than just this for which we stand.

We began as a family of three enthusiastic people, loving and living Longears, and that part hasn't changed. Good hired help is next to impossible to find, so we built up our ranch so that it would be relatively easy to care for it ourselves. In 1984, we added 70 more acres and a hay business to our operation—still managed entirely by our small family and a few friends on occasion. Experience and dedication to Longears caused us to cover a wide spectrum of training with our mules, ranging from Western to English and finally to Dressage and Combined Training. Little Jack Horner became a producer of mules that naturally possess the athletic ability and conformation to accomplish such a wide variety of interests, only further exhibiting the true versatility of quality mules. In 1984, we bought a 14.2 HH jennet at the Segelke Dispersal sale in Denver in hopes of developing a Mammoth donkey with the refined characteristics of the Standard. Today we have two jennets by Little Jack Horner who reflect success in this experiment: Lucky Three Pantera, currently a 15HH two year old and Lucky Three Serendipity, a 14HH yearling jennet. We hope the future will provide us with more quality donkeys, particularly jacks, which we might sell to help upgrade the Longears stock of tomorrow.

Our ranch was built out of love, respect, and loyalty to Longears. We have always enjoyed sharing our stories and experiences with others and encourage this good feeling in the industry. We have learned so much over the years and wish to share this success with others. Out of this desire for sharing grew the Colorado Donkey & Rule Society that has operated out of our ranch for two years now. It wasn't long ago that we were knocking on the doors of horse shows everywhere, begging for acceptance. Today, C.D.M.S. has horse people knocking on the doors of our learning clinics! At the same time, we now have nearly six times the number of Longears shows in Colorado that we had in 1981!

Acceptance by the United States Dressage Federation in 1986 was the most inspiring influence we had encountered in our 15 years with Longears. A tradition in equestrian arts, the U.S.D.F. literally lives by its motto, "A Circle of Friends." They have aided us in putting our mules to the test and allowed us to test their capabilities at numerous schooling shows. We have also found that Dressage Training (as tradition already has it) only enhances an animal's performance. It is for this reason that we now start all our young mules this way, though each individual may be suited for something different. It was our U.S.D.F. instructor, Melinda Weatherford, who inspired Gary, Dena, and I to go one step farther into Combined Training. The mule's natural jumping ability lends itself beautifully to this avenue of training—besides, it's just a lot of fun for both mules and riders! Our daughter, Dena, is working diligently to become a U.S.E.T. rider; she says when she finally makes the Olympic team, she hopes they will allow her to exhibit her three-day event mule, Lucky Three Nuggett, at the Olympics. Looks like Longears will continue to prosper through a third generation in this family!

I have been writing "Mule Crossing," a column that has been appearing in several mule and horse publications throughout the U.S. and Europe for six years. This has been my

way of sharing all our wonderful experiences with Longears. Our Longears have given us many memorable moments in our lives, most of them pleasurable, and it is the desire to share these with others that keeps us going. Lucky Three Ranch only produces three to four mules per year because that is all we can handle for training. Our mules have proven their quality many times over in the show ring and recently we have had wonderful news from L.T.R. mule owners: Lucky Three Desiree, 1988 Florida State Fair Grand Champion Model Mule at 2 1/2 years old; Lucky Three Stardust, 4th at Halter and 2nd in Green Pleasure at the 1988 Virginia State Fair, then two 1sts and a 2nd in performance and a 4th at Halter at the North Carolina State Fair at four years old! It does my heart good to hear all our breeding clients raving about their fine offspring by Little Jack Horner and the ultimate is when they come and beat us in a show as did Donna Groh's "L.J.'s Hanna!" Lucky Three Ranch was born of love and friendship, grew with quality and ability, and will continue to prosper with the sharing of all these good things combined!

For more information about Meredith Hodges and her comprehensive correspondence training program, *Training Mules and Donkeys*, please visit **www.LuckyThreeRanch.com** or call **1-800-816-7566**. Also, find Meredith Hodges and Lucky Three Ranch on Facebook and Twitter. And don't forget to check out her children's website at **JasperTheMule.com**.

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