

“Jethro”

By Cheryl Schmidt

Growing up in a ranching and farming community I was surrounded by a colorful cast of characters; One-armed Frank, Slobbering Ivan and many more too numerous to mention. My Dad was a cattle rancher and bred Paint horses and mules. Both Dad and I trained horses and mules and we went on numerous wagon trains, farmed with the mules and rode them to work cattle. This story is about my favorite mule, Jethro.

Jethro was a big Mammoth bred mule, probably bred to something with draft in it, we never knew. We got Jethro because no one could ride him. He could buck in a four-foot circle and make you wish you would or “could” fall off but the force of his whirlwind bucking in such a tight circle just made your guts hurt for days afterward. We took him to the Salinas River, which is dry most of the year, and tried to wear him down in the sand but it just increased his strength. So, in our infinite wisdom we decided that we should teach him to drive. Dad being an old “Missouri” man (for real) got me convinced that he would be real easy to teach to drive. So we hooked him up in harness; now here is an odd side note, Dad must have had some reservations because usually we put new mules in a broke span of mules in a four or three up and put the new mule in the middle. I should have realized Dad didn’t really believe his own story when we hooked Jethro up in single harness.

Jethro promptly ran away. Jethro was well over 17 hands and had a head like a small car so there was no holding on. THEN Dad decided that he’d add a little weight to him and that way Jethro couldn’t run away. So we hooked him up to a huge timber Dad used to weight the disc. It took two of us grunting like a constipated bear to get that timber off the disc and lined up to where we were going to



Cheryl and “Jethro” on the ranch looking for cows.

hook Jethro up. We decided that since he’d already been through a couple of fences we’d put him in a nice twenty-acre pasture, just in case he ran away again. We got him all hooked up and Dad said okay climb on (the timber) and yes, it was big enough to stand on quite comfortably. He handed me a rein and he took one. Well when that big old mule hit the end of his chains and felt that timber back there he proceeded to tear out of there like someone had shot him. And I mean he really picked up some speed! By the time the tears were running out of my eyes from the wind and dirt being kicked in my face, I just looked over at Dad and without a word handed him the rein I was holding on to (for dear life I might add) and bailed off the timber.

Mind you, Dad lived to be 94 years old, and rode up until six months before he died, so at this time he was not a young man. I had to give him credit for hanging on as long as he did but he finally bailed off too. Jethro really picked up speed then and that timber was bouncing behind him like a toothpick; every time it hit the ground and shot up into the air we thought

for sure it was going to kill him. He made about four trips around the twenty acres with that timber bouncing on end every other step and barely missing him every time. We tried to get in front of him several times on his trips by but eventually we’d have to jump out of the way as Jethro was on a mission to outrun that timber at all costs.

As Dad and I stood there, completely helpless, Dad commented in his usual dry Missouri way, “Well, I guess if that old mule lives through this he’ll sure enough be broke.” Oh Lord help me I was thinking, if he lives through this we’ll never catch him again! Thank goodness Jethro did live through it and finally gave up and stopped. There wasn’t a scratch on him. But, he still bucked when you tried to ride him so we decided to put him up on another part of the ranch with the brood mares for the winter and then decide what we were going to do with him.

Come spring, we brought all the brood mares to the main ranch and of course Jethro. We decided to give “old” Jethro another try at the saddle. Dad called all mules “old mule” but Jethro was only

about seven or so. We never really knew what his exact age was. We saddled him up and rode off. Jethro never bucked again or gave any trouble of any kind. He even learned how to pull in harness and pack. I guess you could really call him a three bell mule. I rode him on many wagon trains, worked cattle with him and did whatever I wanted with him. You can imagine some of the looks I got when I pulled him out of a horse trailer at a neighbor's cattle round up. He was an awful sight, huge head and extremely tall and heavy built but he was graceful as a gazelle and I never lost a cow. Well, on Jethro that was near impossible to do anyway. He did have one penchant and that was to never and I mean never let a cow get out of his sight. That meant if they ducked off the mountain through the trees...so did you. I had to learn to trust him in those situations as he never stumbled or slipped. However you did have to dodge a few trees on the way down. Many times I just closed my eyes and laid down as close as I could to the saddle. I know that sounds a bit out of control but you couldn't stop him once he got after those cows. I put little kids on him, rode in parades and he ended up to be the kindest most honest mule ever.



Jethro between Patty and Queenie (white mules) disking the arena. Mind you Patty and Queenie were large draft mules. My dad would stand on the disk or harrow and we begged him to stop it because we always feared he would fall into the disk so he finally built a fore cart.

I have a picture of Jethro in my hallway and I often stand and look at it and think, my dear sweet Jethro, I miss you. Unfortunately, his demise was human error. Dad used to let him turn around in the stock trailer to come out and I begged him not to do it. Jethro was so big even in a large stock trailer he had to grunt to turn around. Personally I don't like to let any

animal turn around in a trailer, I prefer to back them out as I have had too many accidents with horses and mules trying to push past me in a hurry to get out. I begged Dad to make him back out but he never did want to bother with it. Finally one day Jethro hurt his back. We tried everything, chiropractor, etc. but finally one day he could no longer get up and had to be put down.

I'm thankful for my time with Jethro and we had many "exciting experiences," as Jethro had a crafty mind and was not opposed to using it on me. But I can say he never hurt me or put me in a situation he couldn't get us out of.



Jethro with a friend's daughter on the ranch.. We'd been out moving cattle and she desperately wanted to ride Jethro so she donned my hat and I took her picture once we were back at the trailers.

**Happy
Mother's
Day!**