

# Because You Asked

By Terry Wagner

**W**ell, here we are, about forty-five days into a stay-at-home situation that we are told is for our own good. Lots of folks are pretty upset by it and are marching on our state capitals to express their displeasure with things. I guess I can't blame them. No more neighbors than we have, it's not hard to "social distance" because that's an every day event. Sandy and I have left the house very little, but with that said, we have not been short of things to do or bored as so many people say they are. We have plenty to keep us busy, and we get up every morning with full schedules.

One thing that this time of year brings is the mules starting to shed and the need for more brushing and combing them to keep the hair coming off.



Terry Wagner and "Jones"

My old mule Jones, a 1992 model as I recall, has seen a lot of spring grooming. He has some health issues that cause him to have a really heavy coat of hair, and he requires a lot of extra grooming compared to the others. The old guy really likes being brushed and nearly goes to sleep in the process. During these last few weeks, I have groomed him a little more than in past years; this time and during these sessions, I got to wondering what these old mules would talk about if they could. Especially those old mules like Jones, who at one time, have had to work hard for their hay and grain. As I looked in his eyes while brushing his face one recent afternoon, I got to thinking that he might tell a lot of different stories.

## Jones Remembers.....

*I can recall one time when I was still in my youth, you had been spending a lot of time riding me and doing what I think you called "flexin." I only know that I had to turn in lots of different directions and make a lot of circles. You had been trying to get me to stop square and always seemed pleased with the way I stopped.*

*One afternoon, we started out on what I thought would be just another trail ride, and after about an hour, we came to a bunch of abandoned buildings; some were only partially standing. They had a big soft dirt lot there that you inspected very carefully and then we started our circles as usual. When we came out of one circle at a lope, you touched me with your spurs and asked me to speed up. I always thought this was great, and like always, I laid my ears back and went for it. We made a circle half way around the dirt lot, and I felt you sit down in*

*the saddle and squeeze with your legs while loosening the reins. I suddenly realized what you were asking for, and I gave it all I had. I dropped down into the soft dirt and sent the dust flying. I recall you kind of laughing and petting my neck as you rode around the marks I had left in the ground. You stepped off and loosened my cinch, then walked off the marks. I recall you saying, "Seventeen feet, not bad for the first time."*

*While we were resting there, a couple of men came over from the old buildings and said, "The old prison site was being torn down." Then the other one looked at me and said, "I have never seen a mule do that before." Several times you asked me do that while a lot of folks would watch me; I never really understood all that, but I always gave it my best.*

*I remember on a pack trip down Black River one summer, I was leading two pack animals; one was my half*

*brother named Rocky. He was acting up for some reason and pulled away from the other pack mule and took off down the river. You pointed me to him, and like always, when you asked for speed, I didn't hesitate. I put you right up beside him in nothing flat so you could stop him with the lead rope dangling from his halter. I remember you complimenting me when we got back to the others when you told Sandy that not a lot of mules will move in on a running animal as I had done with Rocky.*

*On another ride a few years later, your eight-year-old grandson was riding a black mule named Ace. I never really liked Ace; he had less than a pleasing personality in the dry lot, and I had to put him in his place on a regular basis. We were moving across a rocky hillside, and Ace trailed too close to a tree, and your grandson Carson fell off to one side crying and*

screaming hanging half off and half on. Ace had a panic attack over it and started to run off through the rocks with Carson hanging off the right side howling to the world. I closed the gap in about three strides, when you asked, and we stopped right in front of Ace. You reached down and grabbed his reins, side passed me up to Ace's side, and I let you lean down and across Ace so you could pull Carson back up and get him quieted down. I was pretty smart that way, and you never had to ask me twice to go in on another mule doing dumb things.

However, I do recall one time when I gave you what you weren't looking for. We were on a deer-hunting trip along with your grandson Spencer. As I recall, he was eighteen years old at the time. We had hunted four hard days in the Blue Primitive Range, which is no freeway as far as getting around in it. We had pushed a lot of steep canyon sides, and on the fifth morning, I was trying to make you understand that I

was not a happy camper. However, you simply wouldn't listen. When you climbed in my saddle, I bogged my head and bucked through the campfire. Spencer laughed so hard he could hardly breathe, and you said some really bad words, but I got your attention. You never ignored me that hard again.

Together, we had some real adventures punching cattle on the 26 Bar Ranch that had once belonged to John Wayne. Taking care of 1,100 head of cattle every summer at about 9,000 feet elevation made for some real adventures. Like the time you decided to rope the biggest old Hereford cow on the place to doctor her foot. Now, I am only 14.3 and no heavy weight, and she must have weighed at least 1,400 pounds. You got off while I was holding her, to doctor her or so I thought. Instead, you took a picture of me holding her, and I gave you my best look of disapproval to let you know that I didn't appreciate your dilly-dallying

around while I was working my head off. Later that day, when you turned in your weekly medication log, I heard the foreman, Dale Newman, remark that ear tag forty-three was the biggest commercial cow on the place, and he could not believe that a smaller mule could hold her to get her doctored. I remember you telling him, "Well it happened and I have a photo to prove it."

I really surprised you one day loading a cow and calf out in the middle of a large pasture. Your method of loading was to tie the cow down, and tie the calf to the cow's tail. Then you would back the trailer up and tie the cow off to the front of the trailer, untie her, and squeeze her into the trailer with the tailgate and the calf following. On this day, with my help, as usual, we got the cow tied down and calf roped and tied to the mama's tail. Then you tied the cow to the front of the trailer with a rope. You then stood there and looked at me hobbled next to the trailer, and

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took another rope from the cow's horns and ran it through the side of the cattle trailer and half hitched it off to my saddle horn. You took my hobbles off and went back to the cow as you normally did. I heard you holler "BACK, BACK." So I did.

I felt the weight of the cow on the rope and horn and just kept slowly backing. Finally, I had the cow and her baby up in the front of the trailer, and you ran inside and slammed the center gate. You came out and just looked at me and said, "I don't believe it." You seemed pretty pleased and let me know I had done pretty darn good. I heard you say one more time, "I just don't believe it." You loaded me up in the back, and I got another bunch of petting, and after that, we loaded lots of pasture cattle that way.

It was on a day off that you took me to a place just down the highway from my barn. I didn't know what was going on, but there was a big corral with some puny little steers in it and some guys on horses chairing them out of a funny looking gate and trying to rope them. I got real interested in what was going on while you were talking to a guy that I got the feeling was in charge of what was going on as he was talking louder than anyone there. I heard him say, "I see you came." You said, "Yeah, old Jones has never done this, but I recon he can figure it out." We stood next to the gate where the cattle were coming out and watched the goings on for some time, and that's when I heard you say, "Let me and Jones haze one to the stripping chute.

You backed me in a funny little corral, and, suddenly, I saw a steer come out, and you pushed me out at a run, and we followed the steer to the end of that arena. I wondered why you didn't rope the steer as I gave you lots of time. I had seen the puny size of these steers and figured I could handle them if I had two sore feet. We did this one more time, and I was still a little puzzled why you didn't rope that little

sucker. Finally, we got set in the arena one more time, and this time, you roped the steer while another guy on a horse tried to rope the back feet on the steer. He missed, so I had to hold the steer while he tried again and caught one hind foot. We followed down to the end of the arena, and a guy took the ropes off the steer. We did this one more time, and I decided this was a lot less work than roping big range cattle.

You walked me back to our trailer, and I heard a guy say, "Where you going?" I heard you say, "He's a mule, and he has done this right now two times. He'll do it that way the next two thousand times." I also heard you tell the guy who had been doing all the talking that you wouldn't hold him to his money. Not sure what that was all about, but I got a ration of oats while we were headed home.

Not long after our arena roping adventures, we headed out of town with the truck, camper, and trailer and traveled for several hours. We finally stopped and unloaded at a big corral with lots of seats around it. Someone said we were in Denehotso. There were a lot of people and horses. As I stood at my trailer eating hay, I heard you talking to several people, and you were greeted by a man named Omar. Over the course of five days, you and I joined these folks, riding about twenty miles or more each day. We stopped at a big corral every night, and I finally learned as we traveled that this was the Navajo Nation Council Delegate Ride, and it memorialized the hardships faced by Navajo Nation Counsel Delegates in pioneer days having to cross the vast reservation by horse and wagon twice a year for counsel meetings in Window Rock, Arizona.

It wasn't a bad trip. The horses did a lot of trotting while I carried you in my running walk that I inherited from my Tennessee Walking mother. Finally, on the fifth night, we got to a big barn, and there was a big feast with lots of laughter and lots of feed for me and

the others in the corral. The next morning, I got some extra grooming and my fancy silver tack. We all waited in the barn for about an hour.

While we were waiting, a man started talking to you. I recognized him as the man who let me share his corral each night we were on the ride with his two horses. He said, "I have watched you two, and while the rest of us have changed horses mid day, each day, you have ridden him the whole way." Then he asked if you wanted to sell me, and he offered you a great deal of money. Everyone there heard the offer, and there was silence. You grinned and said you were impressed and thankful for the offer, but you would have to take a minute and discuss the matter with me. Telling everyone that mules like me don't hold to changing homes, and everyone had a big laugh out of it.

Finally, all sixty of us headed out across town to the Navajo Nation Counsel building where there were lots of people with microphones and cameras. I was introduced to a lady with a microphone as the only mule on the entire ride. She looked at me and said, "So you're a mule!!"

Later that same year I carried you in the Navajo Nation Fair parade. I have never seen anything like it since, 100,000 people on a five-mile route. There were several horses in front of us, and several times I called to them, and everyone near me would shout out, "Do it again." I didn't really understand why they wanted me to do that, but they seemed to really like it.

Lots of time has passed, and we're both a little slower moving than we were back then. I gave you these memories and thousands more I could talk about because you asked.

Tu Amigo, Terry

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