

Annie

Chapter One

The Barter Mule

“Barter mule...will trade for anything.” The Craigslist ad jumped out at me with orange and red flashing warning lights. What terrible things could be wrong with a mule that someone would trade anything for? I was intrigued. A quick inquiry to the account holders anonymous craigslist email address: “I don’t really have anything to trade, would you take cash, and if so – how much? The response did nothing to alleviate concerns that the mule must be possessed: “No cash needed – will trade for anything you got.” What was wrong with this mule? I imagined a fire breathing devil mule with fangs and claw like hooves. This, I must see.

MapQuest directions in hand, I drove to a location outside of New Plymouth to get a look at a mule that somebody would trade anything for. I left the horse trailer at home in hopes to fend off imprudent behavior on my part. Under the wrong circumstances, I can be impulsive in my spending habits.

The drive to New Plymouth provided time to think. I don’t know anything about mules. I don’t know anything about packing for that matter. I had packed goats; seven goats to be exact. It is not easy gearing up seven goats; each goat with their little sawbucks and panniers waiting not-so-patiently for their turn to be tacked up. My hope was that one good mule could replace seven goats; key word being “good” mule.

MapQuest delivered me directly to a large, unkempt acreage covered in sagebrush and thistle. The owner of both the property and the mule was out of town. A rough gal with straw-like hair and a propensity to talk too much met me at the edge of a large pasture containing a menagerie of mules, donkeys and horses. I introduced myself and explained I was here to look at a mule for sale. I crawled through the fence and made my way to the end of the 40 acre pasture toward the animals.

A large and I do mean LARGE, mammoth jack was the first to approach. He bent his massive head toward mine until we stood eye-to-eye. I’d never been that close to a mule, let alone an animal that big. He looked prehistoric. If not for the gentle kindness of large, soulful eyes, I might have

been afraid. Trusting in the kindness radiating from those magnificent eyes, I reached up and stroked the silky softness of his muzzle. “You are a beautiful thing, aren’t you boy?” The others soon joined in on the petting hour with the exception of one inky black molly peering distrustfully from behind an old semi bed.

The herd followed me across the pasture. The mammoth lead the group as the others trailed close behind with the exception of one inky black molly following at a significant distance behind.

The gal with the straw hair rapidly fell into horse-trader mode. Apparently, most of the animals in the pasture were up for sale. She recited attributes of individual animals with the audacity of a used car salesman. “This big boy here can pack 500lbs all day long. That there donkey over there can be packed, ridden and can pull a cart driven by a 3 year old. Those three horses have pulled a pack string through every mountain range west of the Mississippi.” No mention of the cagey animal with the long black ears. I glanced down at the craigslist ad of an animal that bore an eerie resemblance to our shy friend still peering warily from a distance. I pointed toward the molly: “What about that mule?” I asked. The woman replied, “That one? Oh, hell...you can’t get anywhere near that bitch. She won’t even come up to you for a treat. I’ve been telling Larry for years he ought to cut her damn head off. You don’t want that one...”

Did I detect dare in the tone of the gal with the straw-like hair; a challenge, perhaps? Maybe she was cleverer than she looked. It could be she knew the best way to sell me anything is to tell me I don’t want it. Sort of a reverse-psychology approach to horse trading. The black molly seemed to watch the negotiations with intense interest – those long black radar ears picking up our every sound. I glanced from the mule to the straw-haired salesman, “Hand me a scoop of those horse treats.”

I could have fed the mammoth and his friends treats all day long. Each massive muzzled lipped the treat from my hand with the softness of melted butter. How anything so colossal could be so gentle amazed me. However, I was not here to entertain the petting zoo. I slowly approached the black molly with my hand outstretched, holding the treat in my fingers. She was having none of it. I couldn’t get 30 feet from her before she would whirl and run. I gauged the minimum distance with which she would tolerate my presence and placed the treat on the ground, stepping back several feet

from within her comfort zone. The molly warily approached the treat. One eye on the treat and one eye on me, she nimbly plucked the treat from the ground and dashed off. The gap between mule and human narrowed with each strategically placed treat; the last bringing us within 6 feet of each other. That would do for now.

I listened to all I was going to from the abrasive straw-haired woman. She had rambled on and on about how if that mule belonged to her she would have turned her into glue or shot her and left her for the coyotes. I did not care if I was never able to touch her; the molly deserved a home safe from the likes of this human. Without inviting further conversation I stroll past the woman to my car. "I'll email Larry and make arrangements to pick up my mule."

Again I offered cash for the molly. Again, Larry turned me down. "I'll take anything you got – don't have to be much. Hell...I tell you what...I've had about enough of that mule – if you can catch her – you can have her." I knew I would not be able to catch her without roping her and my young colt wasn't up for that type of rodeo just yet. I would have to make Larry a deal he could not refuse. The only thing I could think of to trade was a cheap, broken shotgun that I did not like to shoot. It could be fixed – but it wasn't worth much more than 200 bucks fully repaired. I made my offer to Larry: "I'll make you a deal Larry, you get her in a round pen and I'll trade you a broken shotgun I never liked. You can still get the part needed for it; I just don't like to shoot it." I really think the word "trade" was all Larry needed to hear. He was an old outfitter and horse trader from way back. I have a feeling that the exchange of cash in a horse transaction of any kind was against his principles. If the man wanted a trade...a trade he would get.

ANNIE

Chapter 2

A home for Annie

With a Charles Daly automatic .20 gauge lying across the back seat, I followed the directions to the acreage outside of New Plymouth as articulated by Maggie, the feminine and often patronizing voice of my Magellan GPS. Larry planned to run the molly into a catch pen on his neighbors adjoining pasture. I brought the shotgun to trade for the molly and tossed in a 30' ultra-light in the event it was necessary to rope Larry's end of the bargain. I had no idea what I'd run into when I got to Larry's. I recalled the words from the abrasive, straw-haired woman's mouth: *"Oh, that one? I've been telling Larry for years he ought to cut her damn head off. You don't want that one."* I glanced over at the coiled nylon lying in the seat next to me and wondered if I should have brought a bigger rope.

Maggie was accurate as always. I could see a small truck, a four-wheeler and two men whom I assumed to be Larry and his neighbor gathered around a pole catch pen bordering the backside of the field where I first encountered the molly and herd a week earlier. I drove past Larry's place and turned left onto a canal road and backed my two-horse straight load up to the loading shoot.

Both men sat on the top rail of the catch pen looking exhausted. The small, leathery, wiry man wearing faded wranglers and a long sleeved, blue and green plaid button up shirt and a straw cowboy hat, I presumed to be Larry. The other, a portly, red faced man with a buzz-cut, camo pants and a sweat stained, dingy-white tattered T-shirt, held a coiled rope in his large hand. Patches of hairy, white belly flesh protruded from several holes in his ragged shirt. He wore an expression of contempt and never spoke or took his eyes off the Molly. Wide-eyed, sweat dripping from her beautiful long ears, the Molly never took her eyes off of him.

Larry made good on his end of the bargain. The molly was confined in a small catch pen wearing a blue and white rope halter with attached lead. Would she load? I was not optimistic that she would walk into a small, two-horse straight load. Most animals prefer a stock trailer when loading for the first time. It was going to have to work one way or the other; I didn't own a stock trailer. I opened the double doors on my trailer and butted it up tight against the shoot. What now Larry?

Larry climbed down off the fence and approached me with a kind smile and outstretched hand. "I'm guessing your Laurie?" The fat-man remained firmly seated on the pen without uttering a word – the molly never turning her back to him. I introduced myself to Larry and we discussed the next step in my journey of becoming the proud owner of a mule. Larry approached the mule with his arms widely spread, herding her toward the loading shoot. She glanced back and forth between Larry and the fat-man. She wanted to comply with Larry – but could not turn her back on the fat-man with the rope. I shot the man a look that I doubt could be misunderstood as anything other than the intent: "I don't know what you did to her and I don't like you – stay the hell away from my mule." Larry accurately interpreted my look and addressed him: "Hey Frank – I sure appreciate your help rounding up the mule. I think we can take it from here." So – Fatty has a name, "Frank"; as in Frankenstein the monster - fitting. Fatty

heaved himself off the fence, straddled the four-wheeler and roared off in a cloud of dust the color of his T-shirt.

No longer concerned with rope-slinging monsters, the little molly directed her attention to Larry. She eyed him with wariness. The look of hate mixed with raw-fear was gone from her large eyes. She stepped into the loading shoot and peered into the darkness of the two-horse. Larry, without circumstance, patted her on the rump as she gingerly stepped into the trailer, "Load on up girl...your going home."

ANNIE

Chapter 3

A Mule With No Name

Less than three miles from Larry's driveway it hit me; *what in the hell am I doing with a mule?* I knew nothing about mules and even less about this particular mule. Larry claimed he had acquired the molly 10 years ago planning to add her to his pack string. For reasons he did not disclose, Larry closed up his outfitter business and turned the molly out before placing her under pack. He knew little about her other than she led pretty well. Had she been packed before? Had she been ridden? How old was she? What is her name? Larry didn't have a name for her and he guessed she was approximately two when he turned her out. If she'd been turned out for 10 years, that would make her 12. I found that odd since the Craig's List ad listed her at 8-10 years old. I seriously doubt Larry intended to be deceptive. It is more likely, being a matter-of-fact old horse trader; he didn't put much thought into such things. Larry reminded me of the type of cowboy who didn't put much thought into any such trivial matters as an animal's age or its name. I suspect every animal Larry's owned at one time was named Buck, Blackie, Molly or Old Blue.

It didn't matter to me if the mule was 8, 10, 12 or 14. I recognize a healthy animal when I see one and this shiny, little black molly had many active years ahead of her. I have also heard that mules typically live longer than horses and the prime age to start them is no earlier than 10 years old. I do not know the philosophy behind the theory, but I was willing to go with it.

I glanced often in the rear-view mirror for signs of a terrified animal attempting to flee out the back of the trailer. The smooth ride of the bumper-pull withheld any evidence of movement from the cargo inside. From the look and feel of the trailer, my newly acquired passenger hauled as calm as any veteran performance horse. Either she had been hauled before or she was too petrified to move.

She needed a name. I could not keep calling her the *Molly* or the *Mule*. I'm not like Larry. When it comes to naming the animals on my farm I take as much consideration as I would if it were my own child. In the hour it took to arrive home, dozens of ideas popped into my head: Jenny? Nope – too obvious. Brighty? Been done. How about Rose, Lucy, Alice or Duchess? I don't think so. Granted, I'd been in possession of this mule for less than 90 minutes, but none of the names I came up with suited her. As the trailer bounced over the potholes lining my driveway, I resigned to wait on naming the molly until after I got a chance to get to know her personality. I sincerely hoped it did not result in a name the likes of Kicker Kate, Biting Betty or Hell Beast.

“Mules can land a kick anywhere on your body from any conceivable angle known to man. If they can’t kick you, bite you or step on you, they’ll hire someone who can.” Those might not be the exact words relayed in numerous warnings, but the implications were pretty much the same. Mules are stubborn. Mules are mean. Mules are smart. Great, a stubbornly intelligent and mean animal that outweighs me by 1,000 pounds Truth or not, I planned to stay as far from her backside as possible. I backed the trailer into the opening of the round corral, swung open the trailer door and scrambled up the pole enclosure to safety. Several seconds passed and nothing. No fire breathing, wide-eyed animal with fangs and clawed hooves. No crazed hell beast intent on trampling me into the dirt with her mighty hooves. I climbed down off the corral. That was anti-climatic. I peeked into the trailer through the window, “Hey mule...you gonna stay in there all day?” A long, sleek black ear flicked at the sound of my voice. “Come on out girl...you’re alright. Nobody is going to hurt you...you’re home now.”

Step by gingerly step, the molly backed out of the trailer like she had unloaded a thousand times. I pulled the trailer away from the corral and shut the gate. An audience of six chickens, two goats, one horse and a dog formed a semi-circle around the round pen. The menagerie of critters gawked at one another through the eight foot pole enclosure. My 2 year old quarter horse dun, Jack, angled his nose between the poles and greeted the molly as if they had been pasture buddies their entire lives. In return, the molly vocalized what sounded like a cross between a knicker and a bray. Her alert ears took on a whole new level of perkiness as she pressed against the wooden rails separating them. If any mule could look doe-eyed, this one surely did. *Why Jack, I think she likes you.* Jack dropped his head and went back to grazing. He was over the whole boy-meets-girl thing for the day. The molly was not. She continued to gaze upon the buckskin gelding as if he were the Brad Pitt of the equine world.

I was not concerned how Jack would get along with the molly. There’s not a dominate bone in his body. Surrounded by cats, dogs, chickens and goats – the horse is the poster child for tolerance. Any fears of how the molly would react to Jack were dispelled by the love-struck encounter earlier. Still, I thought it best to keep her in the round pen for a few days until I figured out our next move.

With a full tank of cool water and fresh alfalfa at her disposal, the molly was content. She stood quietly next to Jack when he was near and paced nervously when he was not. I would have to turn her out eventually. I spent three days trying to win her trust. I thought if I could just catch her a few times I’d feel confident in turning her out in the pasture with Jack. She still wore the rope halter with its 2 foot section of lead dangling loose. If I were lucky, I could get close enough to snag the lead and catch her.

On the third day I stood in the round pen face to face with my new mule. She watched my every move – I watched hers. *Well mule, you can’t stay in here forever.* I was afraid the longer I left her in the round corral, the more she would come to dislike her new home. A little bribery was in order. *I’ll make you a deal, mule. You let me walk up to you and catch you and I’ll turn you out*

in to the pasture with that handsome gelding you've been mooning over. Her telepathic like ears flicked front to back – back to front as I approached. I timed my steps to hers. Each time she faced me; I backed off and give her a few seconds to think things through. I had no idea if this was the proper technique for catching a mule, but it seemed to be working. The moment I was within arm's length of the rope, I faked a reach with my left hand and scooped up the lead with my right. *Got'cha!* I had learned enough in three short days with this mule to know it would be the last time she'd fall for that trick. She politely followed me into the pasture towards Jack. It is unsafe to turn out a haltered animal. I untied the rope halter and slid it from her face. How in the hell was I ever going to get it back on again? I watched as Jack led his new pasture mate across the grassy field and introduced her to the neighboring herd; the wary animal never straying more than a few steps from his side.

The empty halter hung over my shoulder as an anxious souvenir of the last few days. I had a mule. I know nothing about mules. I can't get within six feet of this particular mule, let alone catch her. When I do catch her, what then? She might try to kick my head in. She might bite me or strike me. I will need to win her trust. Was that even possible? If not, what then? I suppose she'll be good company for Jack if nothing else. Maybe with a mule for company he'll stop thinking he's a goat.

So many questions...so much uncertainty and by day's end I was no closer on a name for my mule. *Agnes? No...too crabby- old-lady like. Bell? Nope...too Disney. Abigail? Nelly...Nah.* I hung the rope halter next to Jack's in the tack room and closed the door. *Bertha...Ms. Festus...Penelope Pitstock....*

ANNIE

Chapter 4

Shotgun Annie

The molly had become Jack's shadow. When he grazed, she grazed. When he came to water, she came to water. When he frolicked and played...she watched him like she thought he was a complete idiot. The exception to this routine occurred when I had reason to be in the pasture. Jack went about his business as if I were not there unless he suspected an apple treat might be gleaned from my pocket. Not so for the molly. She watched my every move.

I was more than simply being watched. I was being observed; analyzed in a way that only a mule can analyze a human. There was no distrust in her watchful eye. No, I was not an object to be feared – I was merely an object to be analyzed and studied – like a lab rat.

Well, are you just going to stare at me all day? You know if you were a good mule you would grab a shovel and help move this water around. A barely perceptible flick of a long black ear was my answer. *Whatever mule.*

Jack followed me out of the pasture toward the corrals with the mule on his heels. Why not – it was as good a time as any to find out what a barter mule was made of. I shut the gates behind us as Jack and the mule followed me into the round corral. Here goes nothing.

Jack new the routine. He buzzed the corral a half dozen times before coming front and center to the middle. He dropped his head into the halter and stood quietly secured to the outside of the round pen. Good boy Jack. Did you see how that works, mule?

The mule began to buzz the corral much the same as Jack had done. The similarities ended there. Instead of turning to face me when she had her belly full of running around in circles – she continued to race around the pen in an impressive show of speed and stamina. When I thought I'd pass out from spinning in one direction too long, I put enough pressure on her outside shoulders to encourage her to roll back the other direction. This brilliant method of mule training continued for a good 20 minutes before it dawned on me: It is physically impossible to wear out a mule. Other than a little dampness behind her ears, the vexing animal barely broke a sweat!

Eventually the mule appeared to give up. She came to a stop and faced me. Sweet! I got this! I slowed my ragged breathing and approach her calmly with halter in my left hand. No malice or fear in her eyes as I reached with my free hand and stroked her neck. She didn't move. Not a muscle. *Yes! I am about to catch my mule!* I positioned the halter in both hands and slipped the nose piece over her muzzle. I remembered to take a breath before passing out. I almost had this. She stood as rigid as the railroad ties encircling the corral. I had her by the nose – but knew she wasn't really caught until the

halter was over her poll and secured. How the hell was I going to get the rope halter over her head? Somebody should have told me you needed three hands to halter a mule. The second I released the hold with my right hand to reach under her neck for the halter, she was gone. Looking back, it was an amazing feat of agility on her part. She ducked, tipped and flipped herself out of my grasp with the speed of a hummingbird's wing and left me standing bewildered in the middle of the corral holding a mule-less halter.

Around and around the corral she goes...when she stops, nobody knows. Unless I shoot her right her and now. Which, I'm ashamed to admit, may have crossed my mind. We played round and round and duck and jive for another half hour before I lost it. *"You stupid, infuriating, unappreciative, stubborn, worthless piece of shit mule...you're more worthless than the shutgun I traded you for. You're just lucky I don't have that gun or I'd drop you right here in this corral and never bat an eye. I should have left you with Fat Frank and his hairy belly fat. Would you like that? Huh? I ought to lock you in this corral for a week with the only way to get water is to drink it out of my hands! How would you like me then?! They eat mules in some tribes. You know that, right? How would you like it if I sold you to the mule eater Indians?"*

I don't get angry very often and then it's usually the result of embarrassment or hurt feelings. The mule had hurt my feelings. I wanted her to like her new home. I wanted her to like me. All animals like me. What was wrong with this animal? By the time the hissy fit had passed – I was on my knees in the middle of the corral being "observed" by those large, black eyes. I stared back. *I can't let you win. I have to catch you if it takes all night or we will never be any use to each other.* I got to my feet and exited the corral.

The 30' coil of nylon ultra-light felt heavy in my hands. I didn't want to do it this way. For the first time since I brought her home I detected fear in her eyes as she frantically raced around the pen. The anger I had felt earlier was replaced by guilt. Her beautiful black eyes had become a mirror and in them reflected a sligher, less hairy version of Fat Frank.

I swear that mule somehow reached out with those ears and flung the lasso off her head like she was flicking flies. I recoiled and prepared for a second toss. I slowly pivoted my body in time with hers....anticipating the perfect moment of release. Follow through...like throwing a baseball – it's all in the follow through: One one-thousand, two one-thousand...and....release. The lasso soared through the air a foot in front of and slightly below the molly's head. She instinctively ducked– right into the center of the loop. The zipping sound the rope made as it closed around her neck sealed the deal. I had caught my mule.

I slowly walked toward her reeling in the rope. She didn't try to duck out this time as I tied the halter. Slipping the lasso over her ears took a little more finesse than I anticipated, but we got it done. There were no winners. If the mule had been defeated – it was only because I had cheated.

I re-coiled the rope and tossed it out of the round corral and out of sight. It hit the ground in a thud of dust as a promise to never again be used against her. Somehow we would figure this thing out no matter how long it took. Fat Frank had made a final presence in the eyes of my little black molly.

I led the mule out of the corral and tied her to the hitching post in front of the tack room. She stood quietly while I brushed the sweat soaked dirt from her neck. I talked as I brushed and moved around her. "Well girl...that was an ordeal, wasn't it? Someday you will come to trust me. You just have to bear with me. I know I have a lot to learn about mules. Heck, I have everything to learn about mules. You just have to be patience with me. I'll make you a deal, I promise not to screw up too bad if you promise not to kill me the first chance you get." An ear flicked in what I hoped was affirmation of the deal.

A soft muzzle lipped the apple treat from my palm. I scratched behind her ears before turning her out to join Jack. She took a few steps and turned to look at me. There it was again, that "look." What must she be thinking? Whatever thoughts she possessed, I felt without a doubt involved her opinion of my worthiness as a mule caretaker and human in general.

I'm sorry I lost my temper today girl. I didn't mean it. I wouldn't shoot you and you are worth way more than any old shotgun.

I shook my head; my little shotgun mule. What am I going to do with you?

Shotgun! Shotgun Annie!

And that is how Annie got her name.

ANNIE

Chapter 5

CATCH ME IF YOU CAN

“Ok Annie, bring me the halter. It’s hanging on the fence right over there...go on, bring it here girl!”

I flipped open the pages of a paperback with a smiling woman holding the lead of a docile looking mule on the cover.

“What’s wrong with you, can’t you read? It says right here on page 14, chapter six – and I quote: *By now, your hard to catch mule has begun to trust in you and your abilities as the lead herd animal. The mule should be receptive to your wishes and desire to be caught. So much so, that the mule can now be taught to bring the halter to you with a willingness to be caught. Congratulations.*”

Congratulations my bee-hind. I had enough of chasing my mule around the pen in a contest of which one of us would pass out first. I ordered a book appropriately titled, “How to catch the hard to catch mule.” Obviously, Annie hasn’t read it. Oh, I could catch her eventually – but it was not easy. She remained qualified as a hard to catch mule. She did fairly well once I got hold of her. She led like a dream and I could tie her with a cobweb to anything and she would stay put. I just had to catch her first.

I tried every technique in the book. Two weeks of ground work in the round pen; two weeks of lugging the halter around whether I wanted to catch anything or not. Two weeks of pockets full of apple-oat cookie bribery. What horse doesn't like apple treats? Jack would jump through flaming hoops backwards for an apple treat. Even my dog eats them! Not Annie. She likes them, but not well enough to get any closer to me than absolutely necessary. She would stand as far back as she could stretching her neck beyond what seemed possible for an equine vertebrae and lean on her front end toward the cookie in my outstretched hand. Surely there was no stretch left in her. I'd smirk – "Gonna have to do it, aren't you? Gonna have to take one...more...little... step." Not on your life. That mule was not going to give an inch. When I was sure she'd give up and step closer or leave the cookie for Jack – she unleashed the secret weapon: Mule muzzle. Annie gained a good six inches by stretching her upper lip out like an elephant trunk and plucked the apple treat from my hand without so much as disturbing the air between us. If I wasn't watching it I wouldn't have known the treat was gone. My mule has lips made of the same stuff that's in Stretch Armstrong. "Well, Annie...it's hard to believe a mule with such talents as yours was free."

I had given up. I refused to resort to roping her again. I knew now that I could catch her...eventually. I would simply allow for extra mule chasing time prior to catching her. Who knows –

maybe the more I work with her, the easier it will get. Hope is a good thing.

Annie jumped in the back of the trailer like she'd done it her whole life. Maybe it was because Jack was already loaded in his half of the two-horse. I didn't care the reason or that I had nothing to do with it – it was the easiest thing I'd accomplished with the molly since bringing her home. I gingerly hooked the butt chain behind her, staying clear of kicking range. I had no idea if she kicked or not – but I'd heard that all mules kick. I heard they have eyes in the back of their head with special photoreceptors that rapidly constrict in the light and can see a million different images at once...like flies! I heard they sit and wait for you to get in just the right spot and WHAM – you're wearing a drool bib and being spoon fed pureed sweet potatoes the rest of your life.

I unloaded Jack and Annie at my property in Halfway. I planned to ride over the weekend. I figured if this mule was going to be anything other than a lawn ornament, I best start taking her with me and getting her use to things. I'd be riding Jack in the lower Eagle Caps. I hadn't ponied anything off him yet and didn't plan to start this weekend. I brought Annie along so I wouldn't worry about leaving her alone at home and for the exposure.

We were gone too long for Annie's comfort. The story has it Annie flew over an 8 foot razor wire fence into the neighbors cow pasture. She fled through the herd of cattle, fire and smoke billowing from her Stretch Armstrong muzzle annihilating bovine in her death wake. It sure would have been a sight to see. Unfortunately I missed it. All I saw was one scared little molly standing wide-eyed in the middle of the pasture. I'm guessing she walked over the tattered fence in any one of numerous places in her quest to find Jack. She must have panicked when she discovered he wasn't on the other side. They managed to run her down on four wheelers and herd her back into the pasture. She just stood there with this weird, far off look in her big brown eyes.

I'd likely never catch her now. I should have left her halter on but I won't turn out a haltered animal. There was no round pen to confine her. *Here goes nothing.* Halter in hand, I crossed the pasture toward my hard to catch mule. I expected her to bolt as soon as I got within 10 yards of her. She did not. I took three more steps and stopped. Annie looked right through me and beyond to what I don't know. I took another step, "Hey girl...I heard you went AWOL for a spell." Annie pulled her gaze away from whatever it was that held her interest in the distance and focused on me. She twitched her ears in my direction. *Here we go – the chase is on.* She didn't move. I froze. Annie tentatively

crossed the last few yards between us and dropped her head
for me to halter. Well I'll be...

ANNIE

Chapter 6

Under Pack – and other Lessons Learned

Annie was never quite as hard to catch after the great escape of 2010. My theory was I'd become the least of two evils. She could either drop her head in the halter, or she could run around the pristine valley of Halfway Oregon as a wild mule at large...without Jack, and Annie don't go no place without Jack.

It was time to start putting my mule training skills to test. Since I had no mule training skills to speak of, it would be a test I was sure to fail miserably – time and again. I flipped through the pages of my cerebral training manual, the same manual I keep tucked away in the recesses of my mind along with other seldom used manuals. Manuals on how to make a battery out of a potato and how to survive a shark attack. Both of which I figured would come in handy long before I'd have occasion to train a mule.

Step one: How to pack your mule. After all, that is what I planned to do with my mule. I dreamt of packing into the wilderness leading my mule laden with gear enough to survive the perils faced by countless mountain men/girls before me. I'd packed goats before, how different could it be?

Even though I could not be accused of putting the pack before the mule, so to speak, I had gotten ahead of myself. I did not own a pack saddle. A quick trip to JR Saddle and Tack remedied that small oversight. I purchased a simple wooden sawbuck on the cheap and picked up a set of used canvas panniers off Craig's List. I was now into the whole mule experience for \$150.00 dollars and a shotgun. If it all

went sideways and I had to cut my losses, I'd still be able pay the light bill.

Annie stood tied to a post on the inside of the round corral. Jack provided moral support from the outside of the pen secured to the same post. I could pet and curry Annie from her face to mid girth with little fuss. Tensions perked up the farther I migrated toward her rear-end. Annie tilted her head and eyed me over her shoulder with skepticism. I peered back, stretching my arm, curry in hand, as far toward her rump as I could without putting myself within firing range. It would have helped if my arm were made of the same Stretch Armstrong material as Annie's upper lip.

I stretched – her eyelids narrowed – I leaned – her ears flicked backward. Standing on one foot now and resembling a teetering windmill – I gave one final effort to reach her tail-end without putting my vital organs in jeopardy. It all went south from there. The final millimeter stretch was too much for the physics of counterbalance necessary to perform this feat of athleticism. My body lurched sideways into an unintentional, yet perfectly executed, cartwheel. It was perhaps the most perfect cartwheel of my career...if not my last. Annie reacted as if this particular maneuver was intended to kill her and all of mule-kind. She leaped straight in the air, landed on all fours and skittered laterally in a side-pass that would have won her a blue ribbon in equine dressage.

I lay spread-eagle on the ground, gazing up the burning sun. "I've been hit!" How else could my body have propelled through the air landing six feet from the mule still tethered to the post? I patted myself down, feeling for lumps and broken ribs. Finding no injuries, I sat up facing my mule. Annie bent her neck around for a better look at this human sitting in the dirt, a glimpse of humor in her eyes. I swear if that mule didn't shake her head and roll her eyes.

After a few moments of pulling myself together, I realized Annie hadn't tried to kick me at all. I had simply lost my balance... scaring us both half to death. The only thing injured was my pride. I dusted the seat of my pants, pulled the striped red, white and blue saddle blanket from the corral rail and went back to work

“I guess your groomed enough, mule. Let's see how you take to a pack saddle.”

I tentatively rubbed the blanket over Annie's neck, shoulders and back. She flinched when it touched her rump. I gently set the pack saddle, with all its cinches, straps and buckles dangling here and there, on her back. She didn't seem to mind the weight. I carefully began to sort through the cinches and buckles taking great care not to let a wayward strap slap the mule in any way that might cause her duress. In other words, I treated her like a spoiled little princess. All she needed was a tiara.

What is that and where does it go? This pack saddle didn't look anything like the goat rigging I was accustomed to. I managed to get the front cinch secured – but the rest was a mystery. I ran in the house and downloaded an image of a mule in full pack gear. With the image in mind, I resumed my duties of dressing the little princess.

Parts were too tight – others too loose. Adjusting one section to fit properly threw another section out of whack. I yanked on buckles and tossed straps from one side of the saddle to the next. When wiggling the saddle from side to side failed to seat it correctly – I found myself pulling on the blanket from the back with arms hugging the mule's ample backside. The saddle seemed properly seated, but now the breast collar was too tight. I crawled under Annie's neck and went to work on more adjustments. There...that's better; now for the back cinch. I squatted under the mules belly reaching around to the cinch on the other side.

“Girl, you could lose a little weight in the belly region...I’m just saying.”

Done! I stood back to admire the finished product and it hit me. I’d just crawled around, over, under and behind that mule from every direction – all the while slapping her with straps and various other saddle rigging – and she never flinched. She never once moved or offered to kick my head in! In my intense focus on making adjustments to the saddle, I had totally forgotten I had been dealing with a fire-breathing killer mule.

An experiment was in order. The panniers lay on the ground outside the round corral. They were big, floppy and had long strips of leather hanging from all corners. They resembled giant, flat spiders with spindly legs. I picked one up and tried the tentative approach. Annie spied the bags warily and scooted sideways. “Easy girl...easy...” She wasn’t having any of it. In three minutes or less she had once again become the animal I had come to call my skittish mule.

I plopped the bag back down and exited the pen. I untied Jack and turned him loose.

“Hey Bubba, if my theory proves wrong and I get my head kicked in – there’s no sense in you being tied here until the neighbors find my dead body in a couple weeks.”

Back in the arena, I nonchalantly picked up the pannier and tossed it over Annie in one smooth, swift motion. She didn’t flinch. Could it be too good to be true? Without hesitation, I picked up the second bag and tossed it over the sawbucks. Annie showed slightly more concern with her right side than left. I could live with that. I slapped my palms over the canvas bags and made a show of pretending to adjust things. I flopped the bags back and forth across her back – all the while humming to *The Songs of the South - Zip-A-Dee-Doo-Dah. Zip-A-Dee-ay...*

It is rare when a person doesn't learn something when working with animals. This day I learned the power of confidence. Annie was feeding off my fear as I crouched and snuck up on her like a prowling cougar. What else could she feel but fear; certainly not that I was in control of the situation. When finally I approached her with non-threatening conviction and self-assurance, Annie relaxed as if she knew: Hey, this human has it under control. No sweat – no worries.

That's the wonderful thing about working with Annie. I set out with a lesson plan in mind and find that by day's end, it's the mule that's taught me a thing or two about life...if I'm lucky.

“Zip-a-dee-doo-dah, zip-a-dee-ay
My, oh my, what a wonderful day
Plenty of sunshine headin' my way
Zip-a-dee-doo-dah, zip-a-dee-ay”