

My First Mule Ride

By Marty Morris



*Marty Morris and his brother Mark packing mules near Cody, Wyoming.
Marty is in the center riding his mule "Jed".*

On a cold winter day a few years ago I had some young mules tied outside our barn. One of my grandsons who was about four years old at the time, walked by and noticed a fresh steaming pile of poop behind one of the mules and said, "It's still smoking, Grandpa".

Like my grandson, I was interested in my grandfather's mule when I was a young boy. His mule's name was Ben. Ben was used to cultivate row crops. He was never ridden or packed as far as I know. Ben was the first animal that I remember. We didn't have any household pets when I was real young. My father worked in the mountains in Oregon each summer and we couldn't keep pets there. We lived on my grandfather's farm during the winters.

There were certain rules that I had to live by on the farm. I spent a lot of time alone and there were places that I wasn't supposed to get into. I wasn't supposed to feed Ben or get in the pen with him. His pen was pretty far from the house so no one had any idea what was going on back there. Let's just say that old Ben and I became good friends.

We moved from Granddad's farm in late 1947. Ben was sold to a neighbor a couple of years later. One Christmas about that time, my grandparents gave me a small bronze mule to remember Ben by. My Grandfather died in the early 1950's. After that I would help one of his friends on his farm from time to time. The last time I saw old Ben was about 1958. He was in harness, cultivating a crop.

As I grew up, we had a milk cow and chickens but no mules. I never really got to ride a mule as a kid. I probably sat on one or two but didn't get to go anywhere. When I did ride, I rode horses or a pony that belonged to a cousin.

In the summer of 1963, I worked for the Forest Service as a back country patrolman and packer in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. The area I patrolled was a primitive area at the time. That was before the Wilderness Act. It became a Wilderness Area a few years later. My job was to pack in to my tent base camp and ride the country for ten days. I packed the trail crew on occasion, watched for fires, cleared trail when

necessary, helped anyone who was having a problem and so forth. I worked and camped alone. The job fit me pretty well at the time.

The high mountains were pretty quiet in those days. I would go several days or a week without seeing anyone. The use of the country has changed a lot since then. All of my cooking was done over an open fire. I don't think that open fires are even allowed in that high country any more.

During one of my days off periods late in the summer, I was home working with a colt. I got a message that a saddle horse belonging to a local pack station had broken a leg on one of the high country trails. I was supposed to get my pistol and be in a meadow a mile or so from my home late in the afternoon to fly in by helicopter and shoot the horse. How I was to get back out hadn't been figured out yet.

The helicopter was late in arriving for my pick up. The pack station owner was waiting with me and my dad was there too. When the helicopter arrived, the pilot told me that he would have to drop me off and get out of the area as it would be too dark to fly safely if he waited. Besides that, there would probably be no clear and level place to land.

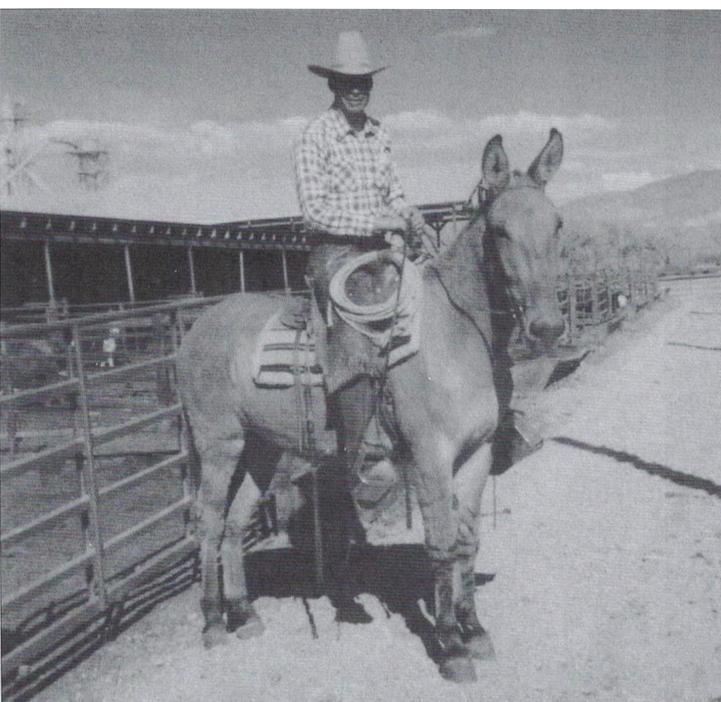
Allen, the owner of the pack outfit, told me to tell his packer to give me one of the pack mules so I could ride out of the mountains that night. He named the mule and said he would be waiting later that night with his stock truck at a specific trail head.

The helicopter was one of those two people in a bubble kind. I had ridden in it before to look for lightning strikes. Unknown to us at the time, both the helicopter and pilot were to be lost a year or two later. The mountain wind moves you around quite a bit and those small helicopters didn't have much power at high altitude. Each ride in one was interesting.

The helicopter flew up the trail that the horse with a broken leg was on until we found it. The pilot dropped down close to the ground so I could jump out. As soon as I was on the ground, he was gone into the evening.

The packer had seen the helicopter coming and was making his way to the injured horse. The group had set up camp at a lake about a half a mile from the hurt horse. I gave my pistol to the packer who took care of the business at hand. The horse had slipped on some slick granite which was part of the trail and broken a hind leg. We managed to get it a few feet from the trail. We then walked to the camp and he untied the pack mule Allen had suggested I ride. I borrowed a saddle and bridle, saddled the mule and let out the stirrups for my long legs.

This was about timber line, not many trees, lots of granite and sort of barren except along creeks and lakes where there was some timber and brush high on the eastern side of the Sierra Nevada Range. The trail crossed solid rock in places when you were in the higher elevations. In lower areas there was mostly dirt trail with a granite grit that would wear out horse shoes quickly.



Marty Morris riding his mule "Banjo" in the Nevada Nile Feedlot near Lovelock, Nevada in the mid 1970's

I think the name of the mule I was to ride was Doc. I don't remember for sure. This particular string of mules were named after the seven dwarfs from the Snow White story. This mule was named after one of the dwarfs. He was dark colored, no white markings and was shod. He was about 15 hands tall and not drafty in build. I have no idea when he was ridden last. They just told me he could be rode.

I had been riding government horses and my own green colt for most of the summer. I had pack mules but they weren't broke to ride. My oldest pack mule, Banjo, had been in the army. No telling how old he was. The others were what ever could be bought cheap. They all did their jobs but none were mules that one would completely trust.

I was somewhat careful stepping on to this mule not knowing any more about him than I did. There was no reaction from him. He kept his head low and picked his way through the boulders as I rode away from camp. When I got to the main trail, I pointed him down hill and that is about all he needed to know. By the time I had gone the first mile it was dark. I had no flashlight. It was one of those dark nights when you can't see a thing. I couldn't see the trail or even the mule's ears. As we dropped elevation into some timber, I sensed trees as they passed close by. In some of the more open areas where there was lots of granite, you could almost see a glow from the rock for a while. That stopped as it got darker.

There were some trail junctions to navigate, switchbacks, some up hill and lots of down hill before we got to the trail head. Once in a while a steel shoe would strike a rock just right and a spark would fly which appeared quite bright in the darkness but probably lasted less than a second. I was simply sitting in the saddle and Doc did the thinking and navigating for both of us. If I had done anything else it would have been wrong. I was completely dependent upon the mule. This was rough country and I was taking one of the smoothest rides of my life. The mule was taking care of me as he took care of himself. I never brushed a tree or a rock. There were no buggers or shying. The miles and hours passed. As we cleared the top of the last ridge, I could see the lights from town, many miles away. Then we were headed down the last switch backs toward the trail head. Allen was on time and my first real mule ride was over.

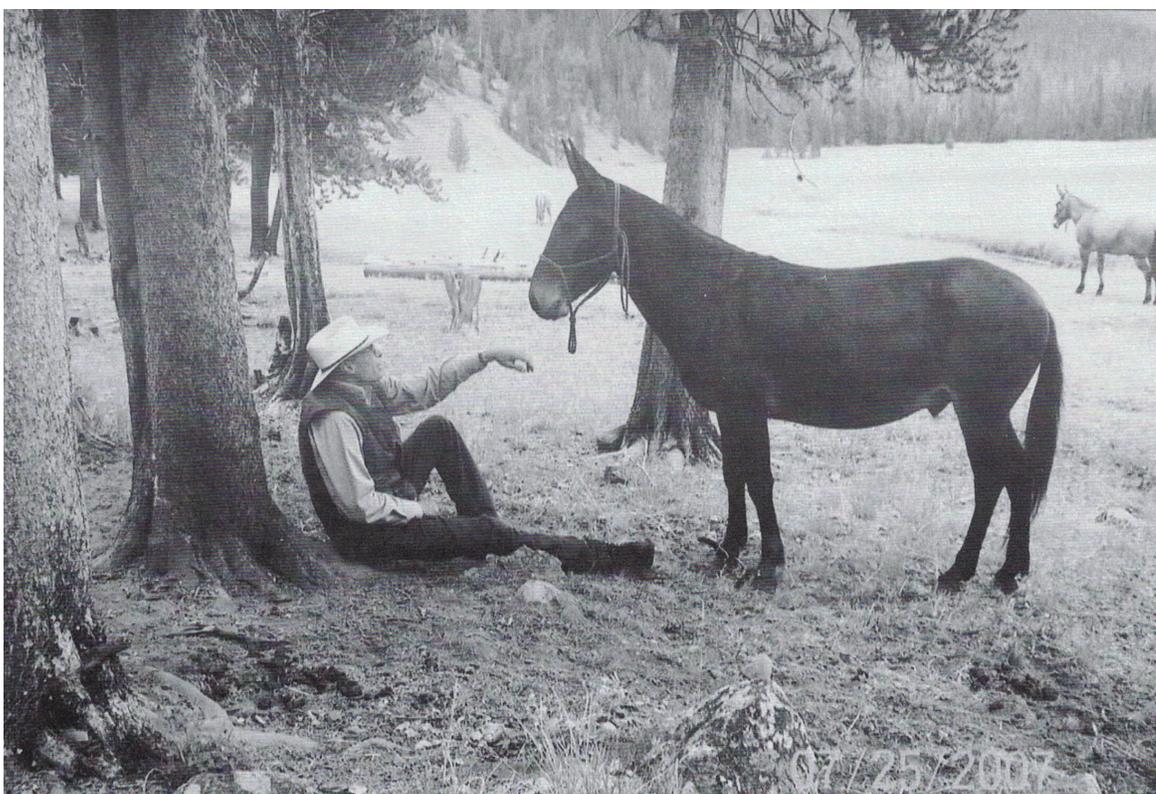
A few days later I packed up to the dead horse and cremated him until there was nothing but horse shoes left. The slick rock in the trail got blasted out and made safe.

Most of my life was spent in the cattle business, many years horseback working tens of thousands of head of cattle. I had some mules along the way, even raising a few, but I mostly rode horses.

Now that I am older, my reasons for riding have changed. I ride frequently, almost daily for pleasure and in some rough country. I had a wreck on a horse a few years ago that was a pivotal point for me on what I choose to ride. It was a long ride out of the mountains with 10 broken bones. For me now, with the right kind of mule, I feel very safe in tight spots. I get a smoother, safer ride with a mule than I got with horses. Recently I rode head on into a grizzly while mounted on a mule. Had I been on a horse, the wreck would have been on. I would have been scattered down the mountain side again. The mule did not particularly like the situation but handled safely and well.

Old Ben and the mule named after the dwarf, Doc, are both in mule heaven by now, so I have a couple of good ones waiting for me.

This article was published in the February, 2008 issue of *Western Mule Magazine*.



Marty relaxing on a summer pack trip in the mountains close to Cody.

The mule near Marty is "Little Joe" who came over to make sure Marty was doing OK.