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The Horses and Mules

*Rural Buffalo farmer Evert Mainquist
rides his Percheron mule.
He uses the muscular animal
for some of his work at home.*

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My father remembered the names of his teams of workhorses and mules like they were nieces and nephews. Dad recited without hesitation the names of each of his teams starting with his last--Minnie and Molly. They were

Huck and Howard (mules from Iowa; I got to go on the trip to buy them with my sister Laurie. They were first named Ouis and Odell, but Dad changed the names because they were too hard to remember.)

Pat and Pearl (friendly blonde mules from South Dakota)

Jacob and Julia (big mules; one was abused, but learned to trust Dad)

Jack and Jenny (the mules my Laurie and I rode in high school)

Captain and Connie (a big team of horses I remember standing by the house while Dad had lunch)

Buck and Belle (Dad liked this team of horses, but not as well as Cap and Connie.)

Bonnie and Buck (Dad said nothing of them--a bad sign from a Swedish farmer.)

I love this litany of names stretching back in time to 1931 when my father began farming. He honored his animals by remembering them and made me feel a part of a long, unbroken line stretching back to the Depression.

The first riding horse my father talked about was Mike from his early childhood in Nebraska and Minnesota. "Mike was a bronco," Dad said. "They brought train loads in from Dakota to Magnet, Nebraska. They weren't too big of horses, and they were kind of wild. Mike was the buggy horse, saddle horse and workhorse and good horse. Dad had him a long time."

Even though Mike was only a medium-sized saddle horse, he worked in the field at first with a bigger horse named Bill bought at the same sale. When my grandfather could afford draft horses, Mike became strictly a buggy and riding horse because he minded well and he had looks and style. Bill stayed in the field.

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He was reliable, too--as long as no paper or blankets were flying. Then he would run away like the wild horse he was. Roy, Dad's brother, remembered, "Maggie and Will were coming home from town (Magnet) one night. That old robe fell out of the buggy. When Mike got scared, he bolted, and Will and Maggie fell out of the buggy. Mike ran home."

After Will and Maggie returned home, they found Mike standing in the barn door. It was just wide enough for him to get through, but too narrow for the buggy to pass. Mike was in the barn, and the buggy was outside. Mike was forgiven because this flaw endeared him to the Mainquists. They always liked a good story, too.

When it was time to put Mike down, Axel led him to a special spot in the pasture overlooking Mary Lake in Buffalo. He gave the horse oats and tried not to cry in front of his sons. Then the hardworking old horse found his rest, miles from his home on the wild Dakota prairie.



My father farmed with horses from 1931 to the late 1950s when the economics of mechanized agriculture demanded he sell his team. However, he never lost his affection for horses. So he bought Sugar, the first horse I remember. Dad got the quarter horse, at the same time Sandy Paumen, a saddle club buddy, bought her half sister, Spice, at an auction in Hutchinson. Sugar was a young, high-stepping sorrel, who had to be in front--whether it was the parade drill team or a trail ride in the woods.

When Dad competed in a field of twenty-one in barrels at the Minnesota State fair, he came in seventh with Sugar. (In the barrels competition, each rider raced his horse alone around three barrels in a cloverleaf pattern. The rider with the best time won.) Sugar and my dad won so many ribbons that my mother gave them to my sisters and me as rewards.

While Sugar was a good race horse, she also earned my father's affection for being a good kid's horse. When I stumbled during the sack race as I was leading Sugar, Dad dashed from the crowd to reach me. Sugar was standing over me, but I was all right. Another time my sisters and I made Sugar a bridle from her halter and twine. We then trotted her bareback in a circle around a fallen tree in the pasture. In the lush green pasture, we had the innocence of the Garden of Eden. We knew what we were doing was wrong, but it was fun and we felt powerful.

When Dad found out, he became angry and told us never to do it again. If we had fallen we could have easily broken a limb--resulting in an expensive medical bill. There was the possibility of breaking a neck, too. Riding, as well as the rest of farm life, was dangerous, and my father didn't want to raise his daughters to be fools.

Later he asked Sandy Pauman if he should buy a Shetland pony for his daughters. Sandy said, "No, you've got Sugar."

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When Dad took Ginger, Sugar's colt, to the neighbors to be weaned, Ginger's legs were caught in barb wire and were badly cut. I thought that the neighbors shouldn't have had wire in the pasture, but they were city people and they didn't know better.

Dr. Held said she had to stay indoors until the cuts healed. Dad put Ginger in a dark stall in the hog shed because all the stalls in the barn were being used for horses. Dad made it Sheri's job to care for Ginger's legs, morning and night, for months. As Sheri groomed and fed Ginger, she talked to her, as Dad advised. When Dr. Held pronounced Ginger's leg healed, Dad waited until evening to let her go.

After he finished milking he gathered my family. As we sat on top of the hill, we faced green pastures and fields tinted with golden dusk. The pastures had old trees--some that went back to the homesteaders. In the northwest corner was a small stand of woods that had never been cleared. Nearby was a flat field we called the meadow. It was our land and we reigned over it.

When Dad lead Ginger from the dark barn to the summer light in the pasture, he quickly unsnapped the rope from the halter. She immediately cantered as free and spirited as a wild horse. Her head was high, and her flaxen mane and her tail flew in the air. I knew as a thirteen-year-old I was lucky to witness such a spectacle. Now I know I was lucky to have a father who staged it for me.

Since Ginger knew and trusted Sheri, Dad let her break the horse. He taught my sister, through advise and example, to change her voice to calm or discipline Ginger, as needed. Ginger became responsive to subtle cues, like a gentle squeeze with the knees. Then she would break into a soft canter for a smooth, relaxing ride.

I rode Jack, a nondescript black mule. Like most mules, he avoided cantering unless under extreme duress. He followed our lead horse Sugar, wherever she went--which was always fine because Dad rode her. Dr. Stan Held, told my dad a mule would follow a horse over a cliff.

Jack also rolled in a special spot of dirt in the pasture after a hard day of work--a trait so typical of mules it almost seems genetic. Like all mules, Jack also stopped when he became tired from working. All a driver could do was wait. When I was in high school, I tried riding him by myself--no other horses or mules. For the most part, I got him to go where I wanted, but he won in the long run. It was too much work to ride him so I quit.

My sister Laurie rode Jenny, Jack's mate. She was the sweetest mule you ever saw. Laurie rode Jenny because she was only nine or ten years old and Jenny could be trusted completely. One time in the pasture, Laurie was riding Jenny bareback, and she took her bridle off. She had no control over Jenny, but she was as safe on her back as she would be on a pew at Zion Lutheran Church. Watching Laurie, I was giddy with joy. No one I

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knew had an animal that could be ridden without a bridle or saddle.

Sheri did calisthenics on Jenny's back in the barnyard and slid off her rear. Sometimes I stood on Jack and Laurie stood on Jenny when we went riding. I was never frightened because Jack was reliable. However, when I was in my forties, I asked my dad if I could stand on Molly and have my picture taken, my father flatly said no. Apparently standing on mules is only for kids.

Many years later, Sheri brought home a blind roommate. Even though my father was always cautious with animals, he decided the blind girl could safely ride Jenny. My parents got out the black kitchen step stool, Dad held Jenny, and the girl's boyfriend guided her up the stool and on the saddle. Jenny never flinched or took advantage of the girl's blindness. It was a proud moment on Hillcrest Farm.

As gentle as the mules were, if something didn't make sense to them, they didn't do it. At the Wright County Fair, Dad and Johnny Bruens (another saddle club member) rode Jack and Jenny in the plughorse race. Since the two critters thought it was silly to run around in a circle only to return to their starting point, they took the short cut across the middle of the track. The two strong farmers pulled as hard as they could, but there was nothing to be done and the audience knew it. Although Jack and Jenny became the highlight of the show, my father never entered them in another race.

Dad took a picture of all three of us girls standing on Jenny's back. I don't know if he was prouder of his faithful mule or his game daughters. I was so proud of my family's interests that in eighth grade I gave a speech on why I preferred mules to horses. As I talked with enthusiasm about their longer lives and smoother gaits, Steve Pellinen, the smartest boy in my class, smiled and leaned forward in pleasure.

When Jack's feet got bad, Dad sold him. He kept Jenny because "she was like a cat. She didn't eat very much, and she was nice to have around." However, Dad could tell Jenny was lonely for Jack so he sold the beloved mule to Jack's owner.

After Jack and Jenny, Dad didn't have as much luck with mules. Pat and Pearl, a pretty blonde pair from South Dakota was especially troublesome. They were young and full of pep. Contrary to the stereotype of mules not moving, these mules would not stop. When Dad and his friend Jim Bonk were driving them, the tugs came loose and the mules ran away. The mules weren't mean; they just were full of energy. Finally my dad got an idea. He had a muddy field on low ground, and he borrowed a sulky (riding plow). After the mules pulled that plow one row in that muddy field, they stopped. They were good natured animals, but they needed a younger teamster. Dad sold them, but he never spoke ill of them.

Dad bought a jumping mule named Frank. Jumping mules are used for raccoon hunts

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at night. The rider gets off the mule, leads him to the fence, and the mule hops over it. The rider remounts and the hunt continues. Dad was excited about the novelty, but Frank easily jumped over pasture fences to feast on my father's crops. The mule then stayed in the barn. Frank developed a twisted intestine which is often fatal. Dad didn't sell him to the slaughterhouse. Instead he let him die in dignity on the farm.

None of the other mules seemed to work out. Either they were too big or too ill-behaved for my father. Dad was always careful about safety, but as an old man he became even more so. Any injuries from driving or riding mules would be more serious. He needed a smaller, better trained team.

He bought a fine small team named Minnie and Molly from Tom Kvistad. Since the team had a fine local reputation, Dad had no doubts about them. Tom hated to let them go, but he had a large family to support. Not surprisingly, his children are as well behaved and good natured as the mules.

Now, Minnie and Molly reside at my sister's home in Stillwater, Minnesota. I write about mules for *The Draft Horse Journal*. I even corrected an entry on mules in the *Oxford World Encyclopedia*, but I don't consider myself an expert on the animals. I simply have an abiding affection for their peculiar ways which resemble my own.

"Blessing of the Fields"

During an interview for Minnesota Public Radio in 1985, Dad talked about farming with his horses. The interviewer, Mark Haisted, used parts of the interview for a program called "Blessing of the Fields," broadcast for several years at Thanksgiving. The following is excerpts of the interview with my father.

A team I raised was the best team I ever had. I called them Cap and Connie. They were Belgians; they were big horses. They were 1600 pounds a piece and at least 16 hands tall. Very well matched. They were full brother and sister. I did a lot of work with them. They would whip pillars, dependable in every way. I thought the world of them. Buck and Bell would stand good, too, but they were flighty otherwise.

Training a team takes work. You won't do it in a day, and you won't do it in a week or a month. It takes time. It's good to have one experienced horse to train the younger horse so the younger one follows the older. They have to work hard, and you have to work them thin before they're going to be trained. It's hard work. That's all.

You can raise replacements for horses, but you can't raise replacements for tractors. I raised quite a few colts, and I enjoyed having them around. It's fun to see little colts when they're born. I still raise a few from my riding horses now. I raised a mule colt a year ago last summer. I enjoy him.

It's relaxing. When you ride behind a horse, you're satisfied with the gait. When you get on a tractor and hear the noise of the motor, you always want to go a little faster. It's more relaxing to work with a team. You can talk to them.

Sometimes though you had runaways. You could leave a team standing, they would get scared and take off and run as hard as they could go with a wagon. I know one guy had a load of cordwood in his wagon and it was unloaded all over the pasture. I heard one time in South Dakota they threshed with bundle teams [teams pulling wagons with bundle of oat or wheat]. One team got scared and about eight different wagons loaded with bundles took off and unloaded bundles all over the prairie. (Most likely this story was passed by word of mouth farm to farm from South Dakota to Minnesota.)

I've had runaways, too. I remember one time, I left the team, and I went in the house for something. When I come [sic] out, they were gone. One of them jumped the fence and the other stayed on the other side, and they took out a bunch of fence.

An average horse would last 18, 20 years, some longer, some less. They'd have heaves, they'd get in trouble with dusty hay. They'd get too much water or feed when they were hot and they'd founder and get crippled in their legs. Mules would sometimes last 30

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years, sometimes longer than that.

I've heard quite a few people say that it's hard to get rid of horse after you've worked with him for quite a few years. Just like a dog, they get quite fond of them. They don't like to see them go. I know one guy, he shipped his horse to the fox farm, and he cried when the truck picked him up. You work with an animal for 20 years, you get kind of attached to them, just like you would to people.