

MULES -- ALIVE AND KICKING IN THE UPPER CUMBERLAND

by Megan Trotter

BAXTER — In the “old days” mules were an important part of farm life in the Upper Cumberland. They transported heavy loads, plowed the ground for gardens and carried the fruits of their labor to the market to be sold. When tractors and trucks started becoming common sights on the farm, mules started disappearing in many places in the United States.



“It has died out a little, but, to me, it seems like it’s coming back,” said Corey Mills of Baxter, who still keeps a pair of mules, though they are more hobby than necessity now.

(Pictured: Corey Mills harnesses Jack for some work around the farm).

Mills got interested in working mules because of his late grandfather, Carl “Preacher” Mills. Preacher was an expert on raising and training — or “breaking” — mules and was excited to pass along his passion to his grandson, getting started before Mills could even walk. Preacher started working mules early in life, too.



“Best I remember, from hearing stories and stuff, my grandpa wouldn’t stay at school (when he was a kid),” Mills said. “He’d go to the third grade and take his sister to school, and then he’d leave and go do whatever he wanted to. His dad told him if he wasn’t going to go to school, he said, ‘You see that pair of mules? Go work ‘em.’ And that’s what he did.”

(Pictured: Corey Mills disks his field in Baxter with his mules, Jack and John.

Mills started training his current pair, Jack and John, when they were about a year old. He started by getting them used to wearing a halter and worked them up to being led around. Sometimes, when the mules are just starting out, it's difficult to make the mules understand what a driver wants them to do — and sometimes even when they do understand, they don't cooperate.

"They want to either stand there or run off," Mills chuckled.

According to his grandpa, the best solution is to use a second, more mature pair to help teach the younger pair.

"He'd hook an older mule to a younger mule to work them, because the older mule had more experience than the younger one. So if that younger one wanted to act up, the other one could keep him straight where he couldn't run or stop because the older one would drag him or hold him back. That's handy, because when you hook two young ones together, they don't know what to do," Mills said.

He remembers the time he borrowed a neighbor's more mature mule to pull a sled around the farm while he picked up rocks.

"That mule would just walk up and stop when I told him to stop. I'd pick up the rocks, then he'd walk forward, I'd pick up rocks, he'd walk forward. He was broke. Mine, they would just have walked off with it," he chuckled.

Of course, maturity isn't a guarantee that the mules won't cause trouble. Mills remembers hearing about a wagon ride his grandfather took with a friend that went disastrously wrong.

"(The mules) did good from his house, past my house, going in the woods, but they got into a yellow jacket's nest and ran away," he said. "Being that he just had the back breaks (on the wagon), he'd put those on and he'd just slide. On asphalt it would bounce, but on dirt it just slid. (The mules) actually threw him out of the wagon and threw the other guy in the back. It hurt my grandpa. I don't think he was hurt anything serious, but he was bruised up."

Once they got the mules under control and tried again, the mules bolted a second time.

"That's the bad thing about them. If they do it, they want to do it again," Mills said. "They figure out they can get away, and they'll do it again."

Weather permitting, today Mills and about seven other wagons carrying family and friends plan to take a ride through Baxter in honor of Preacher, who passed away two years ago today — and even had a wagon drawn by a pair of mules to take his casket to the graveyard. The riders will take the route that Preacher frequently took.

"But I'm going to do it backwards from what we used to do because my mules are

younger — and a couple of the other guys' are too — and that way we went, it's a steep hill, and I don't want to make them pull (the wagon up) it.”

The wagon train will take Highway 70, go down Hwy 56, down Hulon Ferrell Rd. and through Bloomington Springs, before heading down Martin Creek Rd and back toward Mills' home.

After the memorial ride, Mills plans to keep his grandfather's tradition alive by continuing to train his own pair of mules and showing them at local fairs. His grandfather has a whole drawer of prize ribbons, mostly for first and second place. Mills has started earning his own ribbons, and though it is not up to the scale of his grandfather's collection yet, Mills hopes he will be able to follow in his grandfather's footsteps.

“I'm just slowly getting into it,” Mills said. “He went all over the place, getting ribbons.”

Herald-Citizen, Cookeville, TN: 16 February 2014

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