

THEM MULES GOT HEART

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'Writer's Corner'

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When I was a college student and was lucky enough to get a job working on Friday and Saturday nights at the Ryman during the hay-day of classic country music, those of us who worked back stage, sold trash and trinkets to the tourists, and fished the lost and lingering out of Tootsies for their set, had a habit of measuring the impending success or



failure of each new country song by this measure; "That song's got heart" or not. The songs that had heart were headed straight for the top of the charts, those that did not, were apt to be played a few times and die a gasping breath for lack of air or in their case air time. Uncle Hick judged mules the same way.

You see, mules were the standard by which everything else on a Middle Tennessee farm were measured. You could have the best land in six counties, and topsoil shovel handle deep, but if you didn't have one or more good pair of mules, well, you just didn't have much of an operation. Knowing how to "gear up" a mule was one of the measures of your passage into manhood and by the time you could stand on a stump or nail keg and lift a collar around Old Kit's neck, you ought to know how the whole sheband settled together. Where the britchin went, how the trace chains followed, what the breast chains were for and when their use was appropriate, how to hook up a set of plow lines, ect. The ownership of good mules was such a standard of measure of importance, I remember the story that was often repeated about a Peyton's Creek farmer who was heard to proclaim at the funeral of his lately departed wife, "I'll tell you boys, she was a goodun, I'd druther a lost my best pair of mules." And keep in mind it was regarded as a compliment by all standing around and they nodded their heads in agreement.

Well Uncle Hick had a pair of mules he had recently acquired and was in the business of teaching them gee from haw and whoa from giddyup when one of the fellows from the next farm down stopped by and said, "uncle Hick, you reckon them mules is ever gonna be any account or are they just gonna grind oats for ya?"

Uncle Hick swelled up with pride and not a little indignation and said, "I tell ye boy, them mules is gonna be a prize pair. Now, truth be told, I don't think they are ever goona be big mules but they are stout and wirey and most important they got heart. See, I hooked em up to pull a stump yonder in the corner of the field, somewhat against my better judgment."

(Everybody knew you had to be careful about using young mules to pull stumps because if they weren't strong enough for the task, there was a chance they might become

disheartened, quit pulling, and never made good mules. No, you had to be careful with young mules.)

“Them mules started to pulling on that stump and it was cracking the dirt a little, but she wouldn’t come aloose, having them big roots and all. They kept straining and pulling until their belly’s was right down to the ground. I commenced to wonder if they was big enough and had I made a mistake when the nigh mule reached out her neck jest as far as she could and hooked her chin around one of them chestnut sprouts. Well, don’t you know that gave her just enough leverage to break that stump loose. Them mules got heart.”

Uncle Hick loved those mules because they kept on going when everything seemed to tell them they ought to quit.

Now I didn’t see the mule hook her chin on the sapling but I have no reason to doubt Uncle Hick, and besides I know that there are times when that is what we have to do. When it doesn’t seem like we are up to the task and we could become discouraged to the point we might quite and be ruined forever, we just have to find something to hook our chin on and pull a little harder. Yes sir, mule farming, those were the days, although I must admit I appreciate that culture more now that I did when we had to pick those cockburs out of those mules tails by lantern light after a long day of gathering the “down row.”

Have a blessed day, and find something to hook your chin on.

*Read more stories by Robert Rodger Chaffin at:

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