

JEDEDIAH'S MULES

Jedediah Payson lived on a ridge overlooking Clinger Holler in the Cobalt Mountains. His little piece of heaven on earth consisted of 160 acres of mostly rock. His family came by the land honorably with one of the homestead acts, but by the time Jedediah's pappy got to the area, others had snatched up all the good land. Those who knew old Jedediah might describe him as a free spirit kind of guy. Since he didn't have a wife or any children to support, he eked out a living on his small farm. His closest kin lived way back in West Virginia. So, with no loved ones nearby and with only a meager life from Payson Acres, it was kinda hard to see what motivated the man to continue.

While it's true that Jedediah had little in the way of material possessions, the man did have two mules that went by the names of Hannibal and Norman. But it didn't matter, because Jedediah's motivation came as a grand idea. You see, up where he lived the preferred method of transportation, in fact, happened to be the mule. The creature was much more sure-footed than the horse in the terrain

of the mountains. Consequently, Jedediah figured he had a good market for “trained” mules. He didn’t mean just trained in the traditional sense, such as hauling a pack. No, Jedediah’s plan went way beyond that.

His plan centered on the hope that he could reach the point where he could say, “Hannibal, take this load over to Josh Gibson’s place” or “Norman, take these apples to the Edwards’ farm” and, of course, those mules would do exactly as they were told. He spent seven years teaching those mules how to understand words and how to read maps. Why, he spent so much time working with those mules, it almost seemed like he had two sons.

Well, eventually, the big day came for Hannibal and Norman. Jedediah said to Norman, “Pull this cartload of timothy hay over to Old Man Evans in Finch’s Gully.” Then he told Hannibal, “Take these packs of corn meal over to Milt Howard in Liberty Junction.” Just to make sure he had everything covered, he drew a couple of really big maps for them to follow with their destinations marked with big red circles. He figured he’d better do that

because, after all, they were mules, and everybody knows mules won't stop to ask directions.

Old Norman took to studying his map for a few minutes, and then he dutifully started heading for Old Man Evans' farm. Hannibal looked at his map, and then he looked up at Jedediah. With an insidious grin that only mules can give, he bolted off in the opposite direction, kicking up his heels and leaving Jedediah to fume at his orneriness.

The dejected trainer figured he would have to walk over to Milt Howard's place and try to explain why he would not get that load of corn meal. He spent the next hour walking and mumbling to himself about that miserable mule. When Jedediah approached the front door, Milt's wife, Rebecca, greeted him and said Milt was out back unloading the corn meal. When Jedediah saw Hannibal out back, he started feeling mighty bad about all the things he had thought about that mule. He figured he had seen the last of Hannibal.

Since he already had an hour of walking time behind him, he figured he was close enough to Old Man Evans' place to merit seeing if Norman had completed his task. When he approached the gate,

the old man came out and tore into him like a badger. He wanted to know what had happened to the load of timothy hay he had ordered. Jedediah apologized profusely and backtracked the route that Norman should have taken.

About halfway down the mountain, Jedediah heard a terrible noise somewhat akin to when Bes-sie Mae Stoddard went into labor. He glanced off to a big pine tree on a little knoll. There he saw Norman leaning up against the tree just snoring away, the load of hay still in the cart behind him.

Now any good mule training program (and Jedediah had him a good one) would have a provision for disciplining the trainees. Old Norman found himself to be the first and last probationary member of the disciplinary provision. Tragically, he never rose above that status and so, on any cold winter night, it wasn't unusual to see old Hannibal laying by the fire in Jedediah's cabin, a cozy blanket over his legs and a bowl of corn right in front of his nose. And Norman, well, he often stood out in a lonely pasture in the freezing rain, chewing on some bitter wire grass.

I reckon we all have a little of Old Norman in us, but when it comes to the last day, the best hope we have is that the Almighty remembers all our Hannibal days and forgets all our Norman days.