

## A Special Mule Memorialized in Bronze

By Helen T. Hertz

For many years Robin Laws has received deserved praise for bronze sculpture that captures the spirit and charm of the domestic animals on her southern Wyoming ranch. But this accomplished artist is likely to create an even greater stir with her most recently commissioned work. The piece is a life-size representation of one particularly gifted mule, named Mae Bea, C.T., pulling a meadowbrook cart and its passenger: the figure of an extraordinarily dedicated mule owner named Meredith Hodges. The work has already turned heads in Wickenburg, Ariz., at the Desert Caballeros Museum exhibition, “Cowgirl Up! Art from the Other Half of the West,” and Robin plans to show it at least twice more this summer, before it is permanently installed at Meredith’s Lucky Three Ranch in Loveland, Colo.

Lucky Three is much more than a working mule ranch. It is also home to the Loveland Longears Museum & Sculpture Park, a work in progress. While Meredith has spent much of the last 30 years breeding, training and showing mules and donkeys, she has also indulged a passion for longears art and created an ideal setting in which to share her collection with the public.

Within the equine industry, Meredith has made her mark as an educator, author and advocate. As a patron of the arts she has collected works by Robin, and several other extraordinary artists including Bonnie Shields, Dawn Weimer and Cammie Lundeen. She regularly welcomes visitors to Lucky Three and offers guided tours. Visitors get up-close and personal with Meredith’s mules and donkeys, learn more about life on a working ranch and enjoy fine art—a truly unique experience.

Meredith and her mother Joyce Doty began collecting bronze sculpture some years ago. Every other year Joyce, who displays her eclectic collection within her 240-acre botanical garden, Na ‘Āina Kai, in Kilauea, Kauai, joins her daughter in Loveland to shop for art at Sculpture in the Park and the Loveland Sculpture Invitational Show. When they discovered Robin’s work, they became instant fans.

“I saw Robin’s piece “Dee Dee and Libby,” and I had to have it,” Meredith says. “I was so excited to see an artist of that caliber using longears as subjects for her work.”

Meredith eventually had the idea to memorialize some of her own animals in bronze. She commissioned Tennessee Mule Artist Bonnie Shields to do the first. Bonnie and Meredith have collaborated on many projects over the years. An on-going endeavor is Meredith’s series of children’s books based on a character of her creation Jasper the Mule. Bonnie not only illustrates each sequel, she also produces storyboard drawings in preparation for an animated production of each story. Her storyboards were used to create the first animated program in the series, *Jasper: The Story of a Mule*, which has aired repeatedly on RFD-TV and is available on DVD.

Bonnie's first life-size bronze, a likeness of Meredith jumping her champion donkey Little Jack Horner over a stone wall, was installed at the ranch in 2005. That same year Meredith asked Robin to produce another life-size bronze that would depict one of her champion mules in crisp execution of a dressage pattern with Meredith astride.

Robin was eager to begin. Because she specializes in animal figures, she recruited friend and fellow sculptor John Taylor, of LaPorte, Colo., to create the figure of Meredith. She also brought in artist Tim Joseph on the project, and Tim's Fort Collins-based foundry cast the piece.

"Sundowner" was completed in the summer of 2005 and showed that year at the Loveland Sculpture Invitational. Meredith was so pleased with the final product that she immediately asked Robin and her team to begin work on the Mae Bea, C.T. piece. This was bigger than anything Robin had attempted before, but with typical enthusiasm she tackled the project.

"What was so challenging was the level of detail," Robin says. "Not only did we have to capture the likenesses and personalities of Meredith and Mae Bea, but we also had this extremely complex cart with all of its intricacies."

Robin called on John and Tim once again. While she focused her efforts on the mule and tack, John studied photos and took advantage of sittings with Meredith to complete a portrait of her in early 20<sup>th</sup> century dress. Tim put his artist's skills to work on the cart, and the skilled and fastidious Joseph Foundry staff produced the piece.

Robin has cast her work at Tim's foundry for at least 20 years. The modest, one-story studio on the outskirts of downtown Fort Collins might not look fancy, but its résumé is truly impressive. Projects include 20-foot statues of Vince Lombardi and Curly Lambough placed in front of the Green Bay Packers' Lambough Field; two 12-foot sculptures of Magic Johnson, one of which went to Michigan State University and the other to the Staples Center in L.A.; six life-sized mythological figures for Princess of the Sea, the flag ship in a fleet of Finnish cruise liners; and three 12-foot steel workers produced for Gary Centennial Park in Gary, Ind.

Like most large-scale works, the statue of "Mae Bea" began with a smaller mock up. Once the team got Meredith's approval on the maquette, they began work on the full-size piece.

"When you start any new project you have a vision of what you want it to look like," says Robin. "Meredith is just terrific that way. She knows exactly what she wants. She'll tell you, and then she'll turn you loose to create that vision."

The sculpture, composed of 250 parts, took approximately 3,000 hours to complete. Finally, in late March of this year, Robin, John and Tim delivered it to Meredith's ranch.

“I couldn’t believe it when I saw it,” Meredith recalls. “After seeing it in pieces for so many months, it took my breath away.”

“Mae Bea,” is truly impressive in scope. The statue sits on a five-foot by twelve-foot base and stands seven feet tall. Its weight of 3,000 pounds includes 200 pounds of 308 stainless steel armature, 800 pounds of bronze sheet metal for fabrication and 2,000 pounds of casting alloy. The team used state-of-the-art, computer-generated laser-scan enlargement technology to resize the quarter-size model to life size. Work on the piece consumed the artists for the better part of a year, and Robin and her team don’t disguise the pride they feel in the wake of such an accomplishment.

“I was lucky to have this wonderful team to help me in this truly collaborative effort,” Robin says. “We all worked on different aspects, but we looked at the piece as a whole. I feel that it’s my best work.”

Robin has already approached a few potential buyers to gauge interest in reproductions of “Mae Bea,” and she and her team have begun work on their next commissioned bronze for Meredith. It is of a mule, of course.

“Donkeys and mules have carried our burdens and been our buddies for centuries,” Robin says. “They’re a wonderful subject for art, and Meredith has such an admirable passion for them.”

For Meredith’s part, she is pleased to be able to make such a significant contribution to the city where she’s lived for more than 25 years. The Loveland Longears Museum & Sculpture Park will continue to benefit a town already known for its world-class sculpture shows and Benson Sculpture Garden, just as it gives Meredith endless opportunity to educate visitors and fans on the virtues of her favorite animals.

Robin’s work for Meredith and travel to various shows keep her busy, but one is also likely to find her perched in a director’s chair in her yard, watching her animals and waiting to capture the next antic that will inspire a work of art.

“I do what I love,” Robin says. “I find inspiration in the things that surround me in day-to-day life, and I love sharing those things with anyone who cares to take a look.”

For more information about Meredith Hodges and Lucky Three Ranch and the Loveland Longears Museum and Sculpture Park, please visit [www.luckythreeranch.com](http://www.luckythreeranch.com)

Robin Laws is represented by Deselms Fine Art, Cheyenne, WY; Joe Wade Fine Arts, Santa Fe, N.M.; El Prado, Sedona, AZ; Pitzers, Wimberley, TX; and Big Horn, Cody, WY

Caption: Mae Bea, C.T. meets her likeness at Lucky Three Ranch. Cheyenne-based sculptor Robin Laws and her team have recently completed a life-size bronze like no other for Meredith Hodges of Loveland, Colo. The piece depicts in extraordinary detail Meredith's champion mule Mae Bea C.T. drawing Meredith in a Meadowbrook cart.

Bonnie Shields' work "Leap of Faith" captures a remarkable event: a four-foot jump by Meredith's champion jack, Little Jack Horner, that still holds the record as the highest stadium jump by a donkey.

"Sundowner" by Robin Laws and her team was exhibited at the 2005 Loveland Sculpture Invitational, before it was installed at Lucky Three Ranch, where Meredith's champion dressage mule Lucky Three Sundowner is still in residence.