

## Meredith Hodges Makes Mules Her Business

Helen T. Hertz

About 1,200 miles west of here is a place called Lucky Three Ranch. Nestled against the Rocky Mountain Foothills on the outskirts of the Colorado city of Loveland, it's a pretty place, immaculately kept with a big, beautiful house, several barns and acres of pasture and crop fields lined with bright white fencing.

Meredith Hodges has called Lucky Three home for more than 25 years. A few other residents have as well, namely one champion mule named Lucky Three Sundowner, another named Lucky Three Mae Bea C.T. and one outstanding donkey called Little Jack Horner. Lucky Three is a mule ranch. It always has been and if Meredith has anything to say about it, it always will be. Currently 19 mules reside on the property along with Little Jack and five brood mares, mothers to many of Meredith's long-eared companions.

Lucky Three is also corporate headquarters for Meredith's business. Her days as a mule breeder are over, and she's retired from the show ring, but Meredith is in her office every day working harder than a lot of people half her age, with one goal in mind:

"I want as many people as possible to find the same joy I've found in my relationships with my mules and donkeys," she says. "These animals have been such good friends to me and done so much for me; they've filled my life. I want to share that wonderful experience."

So how's she going about it? Well, about 15 years ago, after she was well-established as a skilled mule breeder and trainer, she wrote her first book, Training Mules and Donkeys: A Logical Approach to Longears. Several more books followed along with a comprehensive, 10-video series called *Training Mules and Donkeys*. She established a web site, and wrote a regular column called "Mule Crossing," that appeared in the American Donkey and Mule Society's publication *The Brayer* and more than a dozen others. She even found her way onto television, first on Discovery and the Outdoor Life Network and, for many years now, on the increasingly popular RFD-TV.

Meredith approaches her business ventures the same way she approaches her training. There's a fearlessness about it—a powerful drive to reach the next level, to do the most and best that she can, and to achieve excellence. She takes her time and pays attention to detail. "Enjoy the journey," is her motto. But really, what choice do you have when you're working with mules?

As a novice mule-skinner, Meredith encountered plenty of bumps in the road. She experimented with a combination of horse-training methods and her own system of behavior modification techniques to find what worked.

"I figured out pretty quickly that I had to win the mule's trust before he would perform," she says. "Once he felt like I had his best interests at heart, then I could begin a systematic training process that would ensure his success."

That success came in many forms including a World Championship in Reining, Donkey Driving Championships, Single-Hitch Driving Championships, the International Side Saddle Organization's International Championship for two years running, and two Third-Level Dressage Championships.

Meredith excelled at the Western disciplines, but didn't stop there. She saw dressage as a way to improve her skills, but before committing herself and her mules to that level of training, she asked the United States Dressage Federation if she would be permitted to test her skills at local schooling shows. The USDF, while perhaps less than enthusiastic, gave their approval. Meredith was at the forefront of a small but impassioned movement to explore mules' full potential as athletes and competitors.

It was an exciting time, and, for Meredith, the highlight came in 1993 when her champion mule Mae Bea C.T. placed first in a combined training event against 56 horses.

"By that time we'd been competing for a while," she recalls. "A lot of people were rooting for us and when we won, everyone was so gracious. I'll never forget it."

Given all her achievements, it's safe to say that Meredith has learned a thing or two about how a mule thinks. She's eager to share what she's learned, and she's found plenty of ways to do it.

Meredith currently has more than 40 different half-hour shows that air during her weekly time slots on RFD-TV. The bulk of them are training programs taken from her video series, but in recent years, Meredith has produced a documentary mini-series titled *Those Magnificent Mules* that goes beyond training to cover other topics such as Meredith's own history with mules, the benefits of therapeutic riding programs, and the importance of proper athletic conditioning.

Among her shows, a fan favorite is the animated adaptation of her first children's book *Jasper: The Story of a Mule*. The Jasper series, illustrated by the one and only Tennessee Mule Artist Bonnie Shields, is designed to introduce kids to mules and donkeys and help dispel some of the old myths about these animals. The original story and holiday-themed sequels offer adventure and fun along with valuable lessons about life. Meredith plans to expand the series to include more books and more animated programs.

With so many balls in the air, Meredith might be forgiven for being tough to reach, but that simply isn't the case. Her equine training course is a correspondence course—the only one of its kind—and students are welcome to call or e-mail her with their questions.

"If someone's out in the field training and has a problem, they need an answer right away," she says. "We've got tons of information on the web site, but if they can't find what they need there, I get back to them as quickly as I can."

Meredith also spends a good chunk of time giving tours of Lucky Three Ranch. Her collection of longears-inspired bronze sculpture is a sight to behold, and the resident mules are always ready to entertain.

"Whatever I can do to get the word out about these wonderful animals I will," she says. And then, with characteristic certainty, she adds, "I can't think of anyone who wouldn't benefit from time spent with a mule!"

*To find out more about Meredith Hodges and Lucky Three Ranch, please visit [www.luckythreeranch.com](http://www.luckythreeranch.com) or call 800-816-7566.*