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Mules, Mules and More Mules: The Adventures and Misadventures of a First Time Mule Owner

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Mules, Mules and More Mules

The Adventures and Misadventures of a
First Time Mule Owner

Introduction
by Meredith Hodges

ROSE MILLER



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Cover photograph

Rose and Grand Canyon Charlie at Phantom Ranch
Photo by Robert Whitney

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction by Meredith Hodges	1
Chapter One: “His Name is Charlie”	3
Chapter Two: Down We Go	8
Chapter Three: The Kaibab Trail	24
Chapter Four: Mirabella.....	41
Chapter Five: Mirabella the Trail Mule	52
Chapter Six: Samson - One Big Mule.....	62
Chapter Seven: Miss Ellie.....	69
Chapter Eight: Four-Wheeling on a Mule.....	75
Chapter Nine: Samson Goes to a Show	84
Chapter Ten: Mirabella Comes Home	91
Chapter Eleven: Samson Makes His Presence Known.....	99
Chapter Twelve: Sugar n’ Spice	106
Chapter Thirteen: Miss Ellie Goes to Boot Camp	119
Chapter Fourteen: Maybellene.....	127
Chapter Fifteen: Adventure in Utah.....	138
Chapter Sixteen: Bryce Canyon and the Hoodoos.....	146
Chapter Seventeen: Mirabella Is Sold.....	157
Chapter Eighteen: Ornerly Samson.....	163
Chapter Nineteen: Reclamation	172
Chapter Twenty: The Cow Pony.....	181
Chapter Twenty-one: On Again, Off Again.....	184
Chapter Twenty-two: Soul Searching	188
Chapter Twenty-three: Ruth Ann.....	195

Rose Miller

Chapter Twenty-four: Born to Jump.....	214
Chapter Twenty-five: Not This Again!.....	222
Chapter Twenty-six: Rescues	229
Chapter Twenty-seven: Ah, Spring.....	232
Chapter Twenty-eight: Summer Daze	238
Chapter Twenty-nine: Divorce	242
Chapter Thirty: Lessons Learned.....	249
Chapter Thirty-one: A Solution for Ruth.....	253
Chapter Thirty-two: Lucinda	257
Chapter Thirty-three: Lucinda, Part Two.....	264
Chapter Thirty-four: Reflection	271

Chapter One: “His Name is Charlie”

It was a gorgeous morning. The grass was lush with spring green that only April can sport. My ride on Sunday Praise, one of my retired Tennessee Walker show mares, had been delightful, but carefully planned. The previous May I had tried to help a horse get up who was stuck down in his stall. When he lurched to his feet, he knocked my right leg, hyper-extending it. I was devastated, not only because of the excruciating pain, but it coincided with the birth of my first grandchild, a little girl. What kind of Grammy was I going to be? I could hardly hobble, let alone carry a new baby.

Over the next year, the knee slowly healed, but bending it to ride a horse was tricky. My stirrups had to be just the correct length and time in the saddle was of short duration, but to someone addicted to sitting on a horse, any time was quality time.

As I was unsaddling my horse, Bob walked into the barn with his dog Hershey.

“Hey Rose, what would you think of taking the mule trip down the Grand Canyon with me?”

I nearly dropped my saddle as I turned to look at him in consternation. I was barely able to ride my horse on flat ground, how could I possibly ride for the hours it would take to do the steep ups and downs of the Grand Canyon?

Bob, who had come to stay with our family while he completed his MBA at a local college, had never left. He was the same age as our oldest daughter, loved the farm and county life, and we all sort of adopted each other. Bob had a special love for the Grand Canyon and had hiked it three times.

Seeing my surprise, he grinned and said, “Well, you should really think about it—before you get any older!”

I was astounded he would be willing to ride a mule. He didn’t ride our horses; I never got the impression he even liked them. He preferred walking the farm trails with the dogs.

“Okay, let me sit down and we will talk about this crazy idea.”

“The thing is, we need to schedule a year in advance. The ride is very popular and has limited openings. If you can’t go when the time arrives, we can cancel.”

That made it a possibility, but what would my husband Hal think of this venture? For thirty plus years he had been extremely tolerant of all my horse activities, such as traveling miles with our daughters to horse shows and breeding and raising horses. Now that I had retired from both endeavors, I think he was hopeful life might be quieter and he could worry less about my exploits.

As it turned out, Hal just rolled his eyes and smiled, and another phase of my equine life was about to unfold.

We decided on the two-day ride, going down to the bottom and staying at Phantom Ranch for dinner and the night, and then riding back up and out the next day.

During the succeeding year, my knees made great progress, my back stayed together and nothing else happened to make me hobble. I researched all I could find on the Internet about the rides, and read several experiences of other riders. It appeared that I could do it, if only my knees would hold together. It is very stressful on knees going downhill as we would be doing.

Late evening on May 11, 2006, we arrived at the El Tovar hotel on the south rim of the canyon. Between car and air travel we had been on the road thirteen hours and I was exhausted.

“Look down there,” Bob said. “There’s the Tonto Platform with Indian Garden within it. That’s where we’re going and will have our lunch.”

I shaded my eyes against the setting sun. It looked so very tiny and far away—*down*. The Garden Creek area could be spotted by all the green cottonwood trees that were growing along it. It looked like an oasis in the middle of the desert. The Grand Canyon is actually two canyons: the upper one that can be seen from the rim, and the deeper inner canyon that can only be seen as a hiker, river rafter, or mule rider. We would be among a small percentage of Grand Canyon visitors who saw the inner canyon and the Colorado River.

Mules, Mules and More Mules

The sun was making spectacular shadows and sunlit areas on the canyon wall. I have seen many pictures of the sun rising or setting over the Grand Canyon, but although the pictures are beautiful, they cannot create the same feeling as seeing it in person. The canyon looked painted in light mossy green horizontal strips mixed in with the red of the rocks. The color was different from the clumped darker green of bushes and trees. I asked Bob what made it look like that. Was it like the famed Painted Desert, the color coming from sand?

“No,” he answered, “it is vegetation.” That was amazing. It looked as if it had been created by an artist’s brush. I would get to see for myself soon enough.

The next morning we were to be at the mule corral by 6:45. After waiting for half an hour, Bob pointed out the mules coming back across the road from their barn and pens. There were several wranglers each leading a group of mules. The mules were tied to each other with about two and a half feet of rope between them. As the mules came across the road, traffic stopped and waited—and waited. It takes awhile for thirty mules to slowly cross a road.

I wondered how they would all fit in the small corral, but the wranglers packed them in with only inches between them. Some mules had a few disagreeable looks for their neighbor, but mostly they stood, ears flopped off the sides with a sleepy look in their eyes. They’d been here before and seen it all. The wranglers poked and pushed mule butts over and squeezed in to tie them up with their rope halters. Each mule had his bridle hanging on the saddle horn.

Next, Marilyn, the petite blond mule boss, started her speech about the rules of the trail.

“Be sure you drink plenty of water from your canteens that you have been given. Dehydration is definitely possible because today is predicted to be in the 90s.” We all hung around the corral and listened raptly, not wanting to miss anything.

“The mules have the right of way,” she continued, “hikers must stand aside and let you pass.” She paused for emphasis and swatted her leg with a riding switch. “The most important rule is that all the mules must be ridden close to each other. A tight compact group is ninety-five

percent of the safety of the trip. If your mule lags behind, it will miss its buddies and will run to catch up. Then the ones behind that one will run too.”

I got the picture. Having greenhorn riders on running mules could be a disaster.

Marilyn continued waving her riding crop and said emphatically, “You have all been given a switch. We call it the ‘Motivator.’ You must use it to keep your mule close behind the next mule. No gentle taps will work; you need to *mean it*.”

That should pose no problem for me; I was, after all, a veteran horseperson.

I will remember *that* rule to my dying day.

I had already decided to not utter a word of my rather vast experience. I had ridden, trained, and shown horses for thirty years. I had bred mares, standing at stud seven stallions at one time or another, foaled mares, and broke young horses. At different times on our farm I had up to fifty horses for which I was responsible. Nope, I wasn’t saying a word. I thought if I did, they might give me a mule that could need some extra ability and I was on vacation. I didn’t want any kind of challenges.

There were two “day-ride” groups which would only go part way down, have a sack lunch and then return. Each group was called in to the center of the corral separately, lined up in a row, and a mule chosen especially for the individual rider. I don’t know how Marilyn decided who rode which mule, but later I would have reason to want to ask her that question. Next, we overnight riders were given our mules. There were two groups of six with their wranglers. These groups were limited in number because Phantom Ranch at the bottom could only accommodate a certain number of guests at one time.

Bob and I were in the last group of overnights, and were the last two to be assigned a ride. First Marilyn called Bob out for his mule, and I was wondering which of the remaining mules would be mine. As I stood alone in the middle of the corral, I turned back to look at Bob,

Mules, Mules and More Mules

who was now seated on Sleepy, his mule. I thought I discerned a fleeting look of “What the heck am I doing up here,” on his face.

Finally, Marilyn led a mule over to me. “His name is Charlie” she said, and I was about to embark upon a splendid adventure.



Rose and Charlie getting instructions

Chapter Eight: Four-Wheeling on a Mule

I'd owned Samson for two months when I got an invitation to go trail riding with Carolyn, one of my best horse friends, and several other people I didn't know at all. I was having a saddle fitting problem with Samson, and the one he liked best was a small English cut back show saddle. I wasn't real happy going trail riding with it, but I surmised we were only going on gentle paths. I was crazy about my big mule and wanted to show him off. I certainly did that, but not in the way I expected.

He was calm while we were saddling up, and calm while I struggled to get into the saddle. As soon as I got my rear in the saddle and took a hold of the reins, Samson was transformed into a true "jackass." Up went his head and out went his nose. In this position I had little control of his head. He stuck his tongue out the side of his mouth and unlike our rides at home, he wouldn't put it back in. His mouth felt like a slab of concrete. My riding aids to tell him to drop his nose and "get on the bit" were ignored completely.

There were twelve riders in the group and all were ahead of Carolyn and me except two. I followed Carolyn, and the lead horses were already moving at a good fast flat walk. One of the problems with riding in a large group is all the horses want to be together; seldom is an animal content to lag behind the others. The leading rider sets the pace and unless you don't mind being left behind, you go with the others. I had a gut-feeling this was going to be pretty awful—and it was.

Samson not only had his head above the bit, as the saying goes, he was rushing to keep up and he was *trotting*! My smooth gaited mule was trotting big time. It was like he had no brain at all. Where was all this mule wisdom he was supposed to possess? I talked to him. "It's okay, big fella. Easy now." I leaned down and scratched his neck. Ha, that was a joke. He was deaf and unfeeling. Hopefully, he was not blind

too. I hoped it was correct that mules can see better than horses, because he sure did *not* appear to be looking where he was going at all.

The trail wound through the woods, through mud and a corn field. All the while I was fighting with Samson to slow down, stop trotting, and watch where he was going. He didn't stumble a step, but I kept expecting him to go splat and take me with him. After about fifteen minutes, which seemed like much more, I was ready to give up. I felt like such a dummy and fool. So much for impressing anyone with my well-trained mule.

"Hey, Carolyn, Samson is being such a butt. Would you mind terribly if we went back to the trailer? I'll wait for you there and you can ride as long as you wish."

I had to ask her to go back with me because I have a terrible sense of direction and was already lost. We had just started on the trail, but it had a few off-shoots; all I needed was the direct path back. Carolyn had considerable talent in knowing just where she was—on the road in a vehicle or in the woods on a horse—at least I hoped so....

She turned around to look and said, "Maybe the halter we left on under the bridle is interfering with the bit. Let me take it off." Everyone had to stop while we made these adjustments and I wished I could crawl into the bushes and hide. Unfortunately, our fix didn't help. He stuck his tongue back out and kept on trotting.

Carolyn sympathetically agreed to head me back to camp. We passed stumps and other things we recognized, and then suddenly, we were no longer on that trail, but on a new one and going deeper into the woods. I had lost my chance to return. About this time, Samson settled down just a little, and when I realized I was continuing on the ride whether I wanted to or not, I decided to just let him trot and stop fighting with him. The ride would not last forever. I would survive it. He was not being dangerous, just exasperating.

After a few more turns in the path, the group stopped, and I heard some exclamations from the head riders. Oh, boy, now what? We were too far in the rear to see what the comments were about, but it soon became apparent. The "what" turned out to be Devil's Drop—a section

where the trail simply disappeared from sight—unless you looked down—*way* down!

One by one the horses disappeared from view as they went down the very steep incline. Carolyn was riding a five-year-old gelding that had little trail experience, or even consistent riding. She was an experienced trail rider, but the horse was green. Up to now, he had done everything extremely well. He had put my trail experienced Samson to shame.

One lady on an inexperienced trail horse said she couldn't do it, but her friends assured her she could and as she headed her horse over the edge, I wondered what kind of fool people I had gotten mixed up with. The horses seemed willing to jump or skid into oblivion, I guess just because the others had gone ahead.

Carolyn's young horse couldn't wait to jump over the edge—literally. He wanted to gallop down it. He had no sense of what it was; he just wanted to go with the others. She held him back and he got turned sideways, a very bad thing as they can trip, tumble down and get hurt—or dead. Somehow she got him stopped and when he got his bearings, he went down more or less safely.

Meanwhile, Samson was having a huge snit right at the crest of the precipitous down-drop. He had been on Carolyn's horse's rear the whole ride, and he had no intention of waiting until it reached the bottom. He wanted to go *now*. I turned him in circles. I was too mad at him to be as frightened as I should have been. The two riders behind me assured me I could do it. "Just point his head down and let him go. Don't let him get sideways."

It all happened in a blur. Over the edge we went with Samson's nose still in the air. I don't remember the trip down at all—in my English show-saddle. Carolyn, who was standing at the bottom looking at our decent, told me it actually was quite nice. He did it just like a pro, even if his nose was in the air. I felt like one of the lemmings that follow each other off cliffs and into the sea where they all drown, except that I had made it, was still alive, and actually exhilarated, if the truth were known. What happened next is one of those strange little occurrences that I like to call providential.

When we finished our descent, because Carolyn was standing off the side, we ended up on the trail ahead of her and behind the other horses. Immediately, Samson became quiet. He put his head back down, tucked his tongue back in, and settled down into a sensible walk. I was almost afraid to breathe, expecting him to act like an idiot again. But he did not. For the rest of the ride he was a perfect mule and I had the most superb time.

This little riding episode wasn't shared with Hal. As "in the day," when my sister Linda and I were young and traipsing around the Pennsylvania state forest lands all alone with our wonderful horses, most of our escapades were kept to ourselves. It fell into the category of what "Mom and Dad don't know, they can't worry about—or tell us to stop doing it."

Why Samson acted so badly behind Carolyn's horse and perfect in front, is a mystery I can't answer for sure, but later after owning him for many months, I came to the conclusion it was because he is *very* dominant. He always preferred to be the leader, although, with our own horses and mules, he would acquiesce to follow when asked. In this instance, since he had trailered with Carolyn's horse, Samson felt he had to be the boss on the trail.

Another possible scenario presented itself when I read the April 2010 issue of *Western Mule*. Ben Tennison, the editor, wrote an article about "buddied-up mules."

He wrote that it didn't matter if two mules hated each other in the pasture, they could become inseparably in love on a trail ride, or on a trailer ride, even with a mule they have never seen before. Maybe that is what happened to Samson. He was afraid Carolyn's horse was going to leave him when it went in front, when it was behind, Samson felt secure.

Miss Ellie had entered our life with little fanfare except for the anticipation of great things. Bob had become truly fascinated with trail riding the mules, and as soon as fall weather and time constraints made it possible, we started hauling the mules about forty-five minutes away to different horse parks. Our first trip was one week after Miss Ellie had made the nine-hour trailer trip from Missouri to Indiana. She didn't

seem real interested in getting inside the trailer, but after a little coaxing and an apple, she acquiesced and popped in. Samson loaded perfectly.

Russ Forest was absolutely gorgeous. Just a little color to the leaves made it even better. The weather was a wonderful 70 degrees. On the trail were two bridges, one regular size and another quite narrow—more for people. Bob rode Samson because I trusted him to take care of a new trail rider, and I rode Miss Ellie. Bob came to the first wider bridge and Samson put on the brakes and started backing up right into me and Miss Ellie. That was odd, because several weeks before I had been there with Samson and he'd been faultless, never hesitated at the bridge at all. After standing still and looking at it a couple minutes, Samson decided to cross. Miss Ellie wasn't sure at all.

Bob was talking and cheerfully riding away from me, and didn't notice I wasn't right behind him. "Hey, wait!" I yelled. "Come back!"

With Samson waiting on the other side of the bridge, Miss Ellie crossed. When Bob spotted another very narrow bridge, he muttered, "Oh no!"

I said, "Don't slow down or hesitate. Keep going and know Samson will go over."

On my earlier outing I'd ridden Samson over that bridge too. Bob and Samson crossed with no problem. Again Miss Ellie was certain she would not fit and surely should not tempt fate. After some minutes of checking it out and a slight encouragement by my small spurs, she started across, putting her nose to the ground. She took a step, sniffed, took another, sniffed more and in like manner crossed to the other side.

The rest of the ride was uneventful except when we headed back to the trailer. From quite a distance off, we heard children yelling and laughing. As we rounded a bend in the trail, it was clear what the noise was all about. Fifteen or so little pre-schoolers were on an outing in the park, shrieking happily as they swarmed down the middle of the road toward the mules. Bob wondered what we should do. Samson seemed to sense they were not harmful, but Ellie wasn't at all sure.

When the children spotted the mules, they started running to us, flapping their arms in their brightly colored coats and shrieking even

louder. Now, that *was* a sight! About the time Ellie decided that it might be a great idea to turn around and leave the vicinity, the teachers and helpers got the little ones under control and along one side of the road.

Back at the trailer, we unsaddled and started to load the mules. Samson was to be first and he refused. What the heck was this? Thinking that he didn't want to leave Miss Ellie who was still tied to the trailer, we loaded her first. We tried again with Samson and got nowhere. It is a bad feeling to be ready to go home and not be able to. Much better to have the animal refuse to load going away from home in my mind. At least you are home.

Samson didn't misbehave; he just stood there, letting me pull his head inside the trailer, but nothing more. Apples had no effect. I had heard you couldn't bribe a mule. Don't know if it is true—Miss Ellie seemed to bribe quite nicely, but Samson was having none of it.

I stood there, all kinds of thoughts rushing through my mind. I knew there was no forcing this big mule into a trailer. It seemed like a long time that I stood there pulling his halter, but it really was only five minutes. Then, without warning, he quietly jumped into the trailer. One of the things that came into my mind as I stood there was the other time Samson and I had ridden in Russ Forest with Carolyn and her horse.

It had been a warmer day and we'd ridden quite a bit at a flat walk—equivalent to a slow trot. Our animals had worked harder and consequently were hotter. He popped right into the trailer that day. When we arrived at our destination which was only fifteen minutes down the road, and opened the trailer door, both animals were dripping with sweat.

They had been warm, but certainly not sweating when we put them inside. I felt really dreadful. I was surprised they hadn't cooled down with the open windows and the air blowing through as we went down the road. Did he remember that incident and not want to repeat the uncomfortable ride? I think so.

Okay, this ride should be fine and hopefully he would forgive me. A person who had worked with mules for fifteen years had recently told me that contrary to the saying that mules will not forgive a bad

experience—or the person who caused it—they would if they liked you. I sure hoped that was true.

Our next venture was to the home of the lady who had purchased Mirabella. She lived next to an abandoned gravel pit where wildlife abounded, and mowed trails wove between and over the hills. Both Ellie and Samson loaded without problem. Now, however, I didn't quite trust my big boy. I wondered if we would be coming home as easily.

This ride would turn out to be a fantastic experience on another glorious fall day. Miss Ellie showed her mettle in taking great care of Bob, and proved I had made an excellent purchase. Samson was his usual mellow self. This was our first outing with others since his terrible exhibition when I rode with Carolyn and her friends.

We rode up and down gentle hills, saw wildlife and much beauty. Samson walked fast, being long legged, and no one cared if he was in the lead. He loved it there. He was the scout, looking for anything that might be dangerous and require a stop and look. Miss Ellie, who was on his heels, had her ears flopping off to the side and popping back and forth as she walked. Samson was on alert; she didn't need to be worried.

We had so much fun that when we were asked if we wanted to trailer another hour into Michigan and ride at The Bluff, we quickly agreed. Samson loaded slowly and I apologized.

"Heck," my friend Connie said, "this is nothing. I once had to leave a horse that wouldn't load and go back for him the next day." Not exactly the words I wanted to hear.

Riding at The Bluff was a little more difficult in places. It had been raining off and on for weeks and the ground was quite muddy in certain places, but it was a very beautiful spot. More fall foliage, a lake and a stream with a covered bridge, a mini pine forest and a cliff that made "Dead Man's Drop" look easy. This one was steep and very slippery with mud.

Samson and I were in the lead and before I knew it, we had gone over the edge and were on the way down. Samson was oh-so-careful

and very good. This time he was looking where he was headed—which seemed to be straight down in gooey, slimy mud. I knew he was picking his way slowly, but he seemed to gravitate toward the edge where the trees were and it was less slippery, but also no room for my knees. I had to gently guide him back to the greasy mess.

Bob, who was following closely, later told me it was interesting to watch his descent. Samson picked up a foot, placed it in the mire and if it didn't slip, then brought another leg forward. In some places we must have been close to dragging our butts in the mire because his tail looked like it had been soaked in mud. After we completed the slope, I heaved a sigh of relief and accomplishment. My relief was short lived because all too soon, we came upon another muddy slope. Being more or less accomplished "mudders" by now, the second one was easier, but all the same I was glad to hear that was the last of them.

Samson loaded slowly, but after a few tugs, and dire threats, we were on our way back home. When we arrived, Bob remarked the mules looked like ATVs that had been driven through the wilds. With mud streaked flanks from being flicked by muddy tails, and mud to their knees, our trusty mules were a dirty mess.

Samson was the first to come out of the trailer, as he'd been the last in. I walked up to his left side and untied his rope from the trailer ring. Before I could utter the words "back up," Samson had whipped his head to the right yanking the lead from my grasp and nearly spun around to go out head first. Fortunately, Bob was standing right at the door and grabbed him as he exited.

Brother was I mad! I really didn't think it possible for a mule as large as Samson to have the room to turn around and whirl out the door. I snatched the lead rope from Bob and started pulling, yanking and yelling at my mule. How *dare* he?

Despite his size, Samson wasn't normally a belligerent, ornery or obstinate mule. (Later I learned he could be ornery *and* obstinate....) After three minutes, or even less of this berating, he calmly hopped back into the trailer! I was just as surprised at this action as I had been at his unorthodox exit. I shut my mouth, which was hanging open in

Mules, Mules and More Mules

near shock, led him back to his tie, and then quietly backed him out the proper way.

After the problems with loading him into the trailer the last few times, his polite and easy entrance was another mystery. Had he and I had a breakthrough of some kind? Would he now enter nicely and give me no grief? I wanted to check it out and I planned on having a practice session, or maybe more, as I did my foals and young horses. I really wanted to feel sure he would hop into my trailer whenever I asked.

A few days later, I was talking to another mule friend who had been living with them for many years. I told him what had happened. His words of advice on practice loading were, “Don’t do it. He did it once. That is usually all it takes. Just practicing on something a mule has done right only pisses them off!”

Well, I sure didn’t want that, so I never did my practicing. Anyway, winter came and the “hauling off to trail ride” days were over. I guess I would see just how long his memory was when it came time to load again in the spring.



Samson and Miss Ellie

Ride along and learn the fascinating differences between horses and mules as Rose Miller shares her down-to-earth experiences with these captivating, long-eared hybrids, starting with a thrilling ride down the Grand Canyon, to the purchase of her own mules. If you don't already own a mule, you will be tempted to look for your own "perfect companion." A book for all animal lovers, young and old.

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