

Mule is a collection of award winning short stories 150 years in the making. These True Life Tall Tales date from the Civil War, through the Great Depression, and up to the 1960's. The central character throughout the book is the author's father. The stories are about Mule, his family, and friends. You'll find these stories to be inspiring and enlightening, and a few of them will make you laugh.

Mule

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MULE



Life and Times

of a Country Boy

from Smith County
Tennessee

By Allen Russell

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Introduction

This book was made possible by my Dad, Louie Allen Russell, the greatest story teller I've ever known. I have been working on this project for more than fifty years now. I didn't know back then I would ever put them in a book, but I was always listening, absorbing, and cataloging these stories in my mind.

The stories in this book are about Dad, me, and our family. Some of these stories have been handed down for more than two-hundred years. They originate from the hills and hollers of Smith County, Tennessee, the Civil War, the war-torn countryside of Europe during both World Wars, and beyond to some of the great adventures that I shared with Dad during my childhood.

These stories are all true. They're about real people and things that actually happened; at least I think most of them actually happened. What I'm trying to say is; I didn't just make all this up.

I was personally involved in some of these stories, but most of them I heard while sitting around with Dad at family gatherings. Some of the people in these stories, I knew first hand, many were long-gone before I was born. A few names have been substituted for those lost over time. A few of these people; like my Dad, I'm happy to say, are still around today.

The title of this book came from Dad's nick-name. He has been called *Mule* since he was five years old. His uncle, Willie Boston, gave him that nick-name. Uncle Willie must have hit the nail on the head because it has stuck for more than eighty years.

There were a lot of bits and pieces that came to light when I started putting this book together. Dad and I spent several afternoons and evenings with me writing down names and places as he filled in blanks for me. Many of the things we talked about were only brief occurrences and just too short to warrant a whole story. I found out I was related to a genuine Moonshiner. Every writer worth his salt should be, especially those from Tennessee.

Uncle Tom had a whiskey still way back in Russell Holler. Dad could remember spending the night with Uncle Tom when he was a

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kid. After Tom thought Dad was asleep, he would open a trap-door in the bedroom to get to the whiskey stored in a small room under the floor. He used to make his deliveries in a long black coat with dozens of pint-sized pockets sewn in the lining.

Tom tried to dig a well in his front yard one time when Dad was young. After a dozen feet or so he began to smell something strange. He struck a match in the hole and nearly blew himself up; he had tapped a pocket of natural gas. Tom abandoned the well project and covered the hole with boards, but any time he needed a little excitement, he would light off the hole to see how high he could blow the boards.

Two of our ancestors were Hessian soldiers. The Hessians were German's working as mercenaries for the British during the American Revolution. Deciding they preferred the Tennessee countryside to Germany, Author and Andrew deserted the British and skipped the boat ride home. Instead of using their German surname, they went by Hessian when they married. When the census of 1800 was taken, their names were recorded as Hesson by the census taker. My great grandmother, Margaret Evelyn Hesson, was one of their descendants.

Margaret's grandfather, John Nelson Hesson, was accidentally killed late one night in 1872. He was coming home from Lafayette and must have been dozing in the saddle. When his mule walked under a low-hanging Beech tree, John got hung-up in a forked branch and broke his neck.

Then there's my great uncle, Clive Boston, the youngest and smallest of the Boston brothers. I got to know him better than the others when I was growing up. Uncle Clive was so good with a slingshot he could knock flying birds right out of the air. The neighborhood dogs knew to give his yard a wide berth or suffer the consequences.

Some of the characters that I've heard about for years and were reportedly part of our family really can't be confirmed. Like the one who fought for the Confederacy until he was captured, then swore an oath of allegiance to the Union and spent the rest of the war fighting for the North. That wasn't the only dual role he played; when he died many years later, his wife applied for his soldier's benefits. The problem

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arose when she found out another wife had also applied. Neither of them knew about the other.

I can't confirm exactly how closely we were related. I'm not a genealogist and I have no desire to become one. Genealogy really isn't the point of this book. It was written for my children, grand children, nieces and nephews.

My grandfather, Willie Russell, or DaBoo, as I called him, was a craftsman who could take a pile of old cedar fence posts and turn them into a piece of fine furniture. From my earliest memory I have called my dad's parents MaBoo and DaBoo. I've heard two different stories as to why that came about.

The first relates to the fact that my granddad would fold his hands and blow through them to make a sound like a train whistle. I supposedly was trying say whoo-who and it came out boo. So he became DaBoo and my grandmother became MaBoo.

The second story goes that my granddad was always hiding behind something, jumping out, and yelling boo to scare me. Either way, I take full credit for those names. All the following grandkids, great grandkids, nieces, nephews, and everyone else called them MaBoo and DaBoo for the rest of their lives. I've been told my granddad's habit of jumping out to scare me got him in trouble one time.

From the time I was two-years-old, up until right now, I have been a Roy Rogers fan. Back then I was Roy Rogers. I referred to myself as Roy Rogers. I had a Roy Rogers six-gun that was full-sized. I wore the holster over my shoulder, Poncho Villa style, just to keep it up.

One night my granddad jumped out from behind the couch and yelled boo, unfortunately for him, I was armed with my Roy Rogers six gun. I cracked him across the bridge of his nose and drew blood. He wanted to spank my little butt, but MaBoo wasn't having any of that. Regardless of what anyone else might say, I was always her favorite.

DaBoo passed away from emphysema when I was twenty-three. He smoked Roi-Tan cigars all the years that I knew him and I suppose that had something to do with his demise. At the funeral, the preacher related a story on my granddad that I had never heard before.

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DaBoo was in the hospital and was absolutely forbidden to smoke. The preacher had come for a visit, but before he could get to the room, one of the nurses pulled him aside and read him the riot act. She explained my granddad was a sick man and she could not believe the preacher had been so thoughtless to have smoked in granddad's room on his last visit.

The preacher was flabbergasted. He certainly had not smoked in the room or anywhere else. In fact, he didn't smoke at all. The nurse explained that just after his last visit she went in the room and it was full of cigar smoke. DaBoo assured her it was the preacher who had been smoking.

I come from a long line of real-life characters. There are soldiers from every American war, outlaws, moon-shiners, bond-servants, post-riders, preachers, sharp-shooters, railroaders, Indians, hunters, deserters, and heroes. A few of them died young, but many of them lived long productive lives.

The record holder for longevity was our Great Aunt, Mahala Cole. Kidnapped in England and brought to Maryland as an indentured servant, she finally married and ended up in Smith County. Mahala was born in 1697, lived across the span of three centuries, and died in 1812 at the age of 115 years. I hope a few of her genes made it down to me.

The central character throughout this book is my Dad. I've been doing research on him for more than sixty years. I don't know what forces were present in the universe when the Almighty made him, but he's an original. I'm quite sure there will never be another like him.

I could use a lot of clichés to describe him, but I'll spare you all of that. Dad was born in Difficult, Tennessee and his nick-name is Mule; that should pretty much say it all. I hope you enjoy meeting my dad, my family and friends in the pages that follow.

- Louie Allen Russell Jr.



The Difficult Kid

The Difficult Kid

My dad, Louie Allen Russell, was born in Difficult, Tennessee in 1921. Dad's parents moved to Nashville when he was six-weeks old. Jobs were easier to come by in the big city and they both went to work at the Carter Shoe Factory. In spite of living in Nashville, Dad went back to Smith County on a regular basis while he was growing up.

After settling in East Nashville, Dad got to know Raymond Gentry, a young boy that lived just across the street. The two of them grew up as best friends and remained close for many years.

When they were eight years old, Dad and Raymond would take a coaster wagon and haunt the back alleys of East Nashville looking for scrap lumber. They collected broken boards, discarded crates, anything made of wood.

After breaking it up into short pieces and tying it into bundles, the little entrepreneurs would peddle the kindling door-to-door for five cents. Dad and Raymond used the money earned during the week to get in the Saturday matinee at the local movie house, where they could watch their cowboy idols ride across the silver screen.

One of Dad's boyhood heroes was silent film star, Tom Mix. Dad was an official member of the Tom Mix Rangers. He had a ranger outfit complete with hat, guns, and chaps. Dad dreamed of being a cowboy, but real cowboys were scarce around Smith County and so were horses, there were however, plenty of Tennessee mules.

Its common knowledge—to country boys anyway—that mules are stubborn, ornery, and hard-headed. The most difficult-to-deal-with critters God ever put on this earth. Actually God didn't put them here, he probably knew better. It took mankind to come up with a combination of critters to produce the mule.

Mules are hybrids and as such are sterile, they cannot reproduce. A mule is produced as a result of breeding a male jack to a female horse, usually a draft breed like the Belgium. The offspring are usually large powerful animals.

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Dad's uncle, SJ Pettross, owned a big red mule named Sam. Dad was allowed to ride Sam on occasion, but he had to climb up on the fence in order to get on the big mule's back. Sam wasn't a riding mule; he was always in harness when he was working, so Dad rode him bareback.

Once in a while, on a Saturday morning, SJ would tie two sacks of shelled corn together and throw them over Sam's neck. It was Dad's job to take the bagged corn down to the grist mill and have it ground into meal. Dad would ride Sam down through the city of Carthage to the swinging suspension bridge that spanned the Cumberland River. The grist mill was in South Carthage, across the river.

There were two narrow strips of planks running parallel to the bridge for the trucks and automobiles to run on. The diagonal flooring under those planks had gaps in it. In places, you could see down through the gaping holes to the river. A horse or a mule that placed a foot through one of those open rifts would be in serious trouble—to say the least.

When Dad got to the bridge he was instructed to drop the reins and give Sam his head. The big mule would deftly walk the narrow planks all the way across the bridge. The return trip would be done in the same fashion. Over time, Dad grew comfortable riding Sam around the farm and Sam got used to having the kid on his back.

One summer day while SJ was at work, Dad discovered an old saddle hanging in the barn. Seeing his chance to be a real cowboy at last, he found a length of rope and went to find Sam.

Dad managed to throw the rope over Sam's neck and lead him back to the barn. He got the saddle up on the fence and maneuvered Sam close enough to throw it on and get aboard, overlooking the fact there was no cinch strap.

The now well-mounted Difficult Kid rode his trusty steed out to where some of SJ's cows were peacefully grazing in the sunshine. They were blissfully minding their own business, completely oblivious to the pint-sized rustler that was headed their way.

After picking out a likely looking victim at the edge of the herd, the Kid made a run at her. Actually it was a slow walk; old Sam was seldom in the mood to run.

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As he approached the herd, the Kid decided he couldn't hold the reins, throw his loop, and hold onto the end of the rope, all at the same time. He tied the loose end of the rope securely to his saddle horn; just like he thought the cowboys in the movies did it.

The cows saw Sam coming at them, but they were used to him being in the pasture, so they didn't give it a second thought. They failed to notice the Kid sitting on the big mule's back.

When he got close, the Kid built himself a loop and gave it a toss. As is turned out, he was a much better cowboy than anyone had ever given him credit for. The rope hit his intended target and fell around her horns.

When the loop landed on her head, the cow rolled her eyes around and panic erupted in her little-bitty bovine brain. She decided she needed to put some distance between her and the snaky-looking thing that was trying to crawl around her horns.

An instant later, it became obvious to the Kid that he was coming to the end of his rope—so to speak—as he watched his lassoed doggie disappearing in a cloud of dust.

No problem, he'd seen this kind of thing in the movies. That cow was about to be taught a lesson about trying to run from a cowboy. He got a good grip on the saddle horn just as the rope snapped tight.

The Kid's head popped back between his shoulder blades and his arms were nearly snatched out of their sockets, but he managed to hang-on as the saddle was launched up the big mule's neck and out over his head.

Like a true buckaroo, the Kid was still riding that saddle when it hit the ground, right in the middle of what was now a full-blown stampede. Those Smith County cows weren't used to airborne cowboys, however small, falling out of the sky right in amongst them; especially when one of their own was already headed for the tall timber.

With a death grip on the saddle, the Difficult Kid rode it through the now rapidly departing herd of cattle, a blackberry patch, and an assortment of rocks before finally figuring out faithful old Sam had deserted him. Being a bit smarter than the Kid, Sam decided he had seen enough. His cowboy days were over and he headed for the barn.

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Battered and bloody, the Kid finally dismounted, only to watch his saddle disappear into the proverbial sunset. It took him the rest of the day to retrieve his saddle and get the rope off the frazzled cow before SJ got home.

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