

THE SWAMPER

By Vic Otten



I had no idea what a 'swamper' was, and still am not entirely sure. But, with a quick stroke on the computer keyboard, I blindly agreed to be one; which had the potential of being totally embarrassing. After all, there will be thousands of people at Bishop Mule Days, and I had no idea what my 'swamper' job duties there would entail..... there are some really silly events at Bishop. Would I have to dress up like Dolly Parton, perhaps even wear a dress, or spill wildly out of control out of some rolling contraption?

Being from the city I knew nothing about 'swamping'. I grew up on a surfboard and not the back of a mule. I can drive a car, but not a wagon pulled by critters (at least not yet).

My predicament started with an e-mail from a friend in Arizona inquiring if I was going to attend Bishop Mule Days. She had just received the information packet for the event and was starting to make plans. Apparently, she and her husband are bringing a driving team to the event and need some help. Admittedly, I have always wanted to participate in the driving events, especially the chariot races, and was ready for whatever

she and her husband needed. Every year I watch, spellbound, as the hell-bent-for-leather driver on the "Fear This" chariot whips around the arena, putting his physical safety on the line for a ribbon and few seconds of Bishop Mule Days glory, and I think to myself, "darn, I want to do that".

Without much thought, I replied immediately to my friend's e-mail by inquiring just what will I need for swamping before heading to work. I really do not care what my duties would be, although I was secretly hoping it would be a speed event.

My approach to Bishop this year is going to be to totally engross myself into the event, 110 percent. There simply is no other way for me to do it---I gotta raise that bar---even the coon-jumping one. For those of you who make the journey year after year, you know what I mean.

After dinner that night I hopefully turned on the computer to look at my e-mail. To my relief, my friend had checked in and informed me her husband needed a 'swamper'. I had no idea what that meant, but instantly replied by stating, "Tell him I am up for it", whatever it was. Then, with a single stroke of

a keyboard I had blindly committed to being a 'swamper'.

Having no idea what I had just signed up for, I turned to the internet for help and ran a search using the word 'swamper'. Numerous web sites instantly popped up: tire companies, job postings, river rafting, ghosts and dogs, but nothing readily available about mules. The Merriam Webster On Line Dictionary defines a swamper as: 1 a: an inhabitant of swamps or lowlands, b: one familiar with swampy terrain, 2: a general assistant" (see www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/swamper). However, in Montana, a 'swamper' is nothing but a janitor in a mule-free casino (according to a job posting website). The term 'swamper' also brings up a website related to a gay river rafting company (www.gay-sports.com). To my dismay I was not having much luck with my initial internet search.

Next, I ran an internet search with the words, 'mule swamper' and a bunch of sites came up regarding the famous 20 mule teams. One website described the duties of a 'swamper' by stating: "Making life on the trail a little easier were 'swampers'. When the team made camp it was the swamper who unharnessed the mules, gathered firewood, cooked and washed the dishes. The rough route across the desert was often fraught with danger."(1) Had I just volunteered to be a free laborer, or would there actually be some skill or danger involved?

A second website made the job sound a bit more exciting. In dis-

cussing the 20 mule teams one article states: "The swamper usually rode the trailer, but in hilly country, he would be on the back action available to work the brake. From the trailer, armed with a can of small rocks, he could pelt an inattentive mule and send it back to work. Both men were responsible for readying the team, feeding and watering of the mules, and any veterinary care or repairs that needed to be done."(2) Although I was not about to throw a rock at a mule, I could certainly handle a brake lever. Bring it on.

Without delay I warned my trainer to "get ready", because I was aimin' to be a 'swamper' at Bishop Mule Days, but admitted I was not really sure what that meant. A wide smile came across her face

and ribbed, "That's the guy that jumps off the wagon, starts a fire and cooks the chili". Now it's been many years since I started a campfire and I am not much of a cook either. I started to sweat. Then somebody else at the barn told me with certainty that the 'swamper' was the person that keeps the chariot from tipping over when it goes racing around the corners, which is certainly more up my alley and something I could probably handle.

Even though I am still not exactly sure what my duties as a 'swamper' will be at Bishop Mule Days this year, I am fine with that. Part of the excitement is not knowing exactly what I have gotten myself into and just rolling with it, 110 percent. See you all at Bishop!

THE TENNESSEE MULE ARTIST CAN BE FOUND HERE IN '09

Bonnie Shields, The Tennessee Mule Artist has warned us of her partial schedule for 2009:

April 3-5 – Columbia, TN Mule Day

May 20-24 – Bishop, CA Mule Days

Sept 11-13 – Hells Canyon Mule Days, Enterprise, OR

Sept 24-27 – Draft Horse & Mule International, Sandpoint, ID

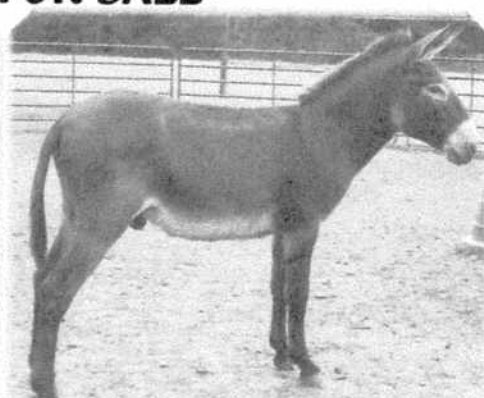
Dec 3-12 – Nat'l Finals Rodeo Cowboy Christmas, Las Vegas, NV

When you are at these events be sure and look up Mz Bonnie and say "Howdy"! You'll be glad you did.

SUGAR CREEK RANCH ~JACKS FOR SALE~

SUGAR CREEK PONCHO

ADMS #A11577
10 years old,
a large standard
and stands 54".
He has only
hand-bred
mares and has
sired excellent
mule colts



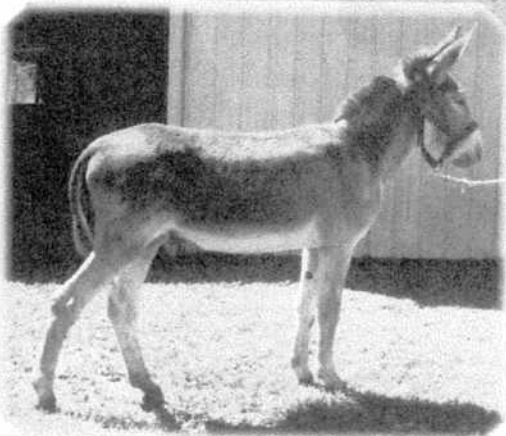
SUGAR CREEK WACO

ADMS #A14079
May 16, 2007
Chocolate brown
and has Peerless
and Calhoun
bloodlines

All of these jacks have an excellent disposition
and are handled daily.

SUGAR CREEK WILL

ADMS #A14113
August 11, 2006
Red Roan and stands 56"
now. He is a Grandson of
Oklahoma Diamond and
also has Czeschin
in his bloodlines



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