

Meredith Hodges Brings Mule Days to Millions

By Helen T. Hertz

As you enjoy all that Mule Days has to offer this year, keep your eyes peeled for Meredith Hodges and her camera crew. They'll be on the move, filming every facet of this awesome event in order to bring the excitement and action of Mule Days to an audience of millions through Meredith's long-running television program on RFD-TV.

From her first visit in 1979, Meredith has been a Mule Days regular. Over the course of nearly three decades, she's made her mark here as a competitor, trainer, advocate and author, and she's also made some wonderful friends. Now retired from the show ring, Meredith continues to make the annual pilgrimage to Mule Days to show her support for this important event.

The last few years have been particularly special. In 2005, Jasper the Mule, star of Meredith's books and DVDs for children, was named Grand Marshal of the Mule Days Celebration Parade. The following year Meredith had the pleasure of seeing both her good pal Tennessee Mule Artist Bonnie Shields and her champion mule Lucky Three Mae Bea C.T. inducted into the Mule Days Hall of Fame. In 2006 she also brought Jasper the Mule along as well as a camera crew. The crew filmed for several days, and Meredith also teamed up with Mule Days videographer Mike Kerson, a.k.a. Video Mike, providing commentary as he shot footage.

The result: three new half-hour television programs including a two-part presentation of Mule Days highlights from Video Mike's 2006 production of *Love Those Long Ears*, and a continuation of Meredith's documentary series *Those Magnificent Mules and the Lucky Three Ranch*. The documentary features archival footage from past Mule Days, interviews with participants and organizers, and a look at Meredith's long-running relationship with the biggest mule show in the country. These programs premiered on RFD-TV in late April and early May and will air again, so watch your TV listing.

Meredith's TV show, *Training Mules and Donkeys*, has aired on RFD-TV for the past seven years. During that time, she has taken advantage of the extraordinary exposure and produced several new shows in addition to her training programs. An animated

adaptation of her children's book *Jasper: The Story of a Mule* and a "making of" program titled *Jasper: A Labor of Love* have aired regularly and more animated programs based on the sequel books in her children's series are on the way.

Last year, Parts 1-3 of her documentary series *Those Magnificent Mules and Lucky Three Ranch* explored not only Meredith's journey of discovery with mules and donkeys but also the history and development of the animals themselves.

It made sense to Meredith to turn the camera to Bishop Mule Days next. By sharing her favorite mule show with an even broader audience, she hopes to spur more people to take an interest in her favorite animals.

"Over the years, I've watched Bishop grow into a truly world-class event," says Meredith. "First as a competitor and now as a supporter and advocate, I've always valued Bishop as an outstanding venue in which to showcase our long-eared friends."

This year Meredith's crew plans to capture even more events, interviews and fun and games. Jasper the Mule is along for the ride, so keep an eye out for him as well. Kids can catch him at Bonnie Shields' booth in the Home Economics building. He'll be signing autographs and posing for pictures with his young and not-so-young fans throughout the weekend.

The film crew will also raise the bar this year by filming in "Hi Def." High definition is the wave of the future, and RFD-TV has plans to establish a separate channel for HD programming. RFD-TV, recognized as *the* 24-hour network for rural America, reaches more than 28 million homes in the U.S. and another 19 million in Brazil. Meredith's show airs four times per week, so check your local listing. Hers is the only program dedicated to mules and donkeys and her long, successful run tells her that she must be doing something right.

"My goal is to make sure that mules and donkeys are always well-represented," says Meredith. "I want to make sure that kids are finding out about these wonderful animals the right way and that those who train them have the information they need to do the job right."

If you haven't caught *Training Mules and Donkeys* on RFD-TV, be sure to check it out. If you're a cable customer and your cable company doesn't offer this terrific

station, please request it. More cable outlets are adding RFD-TV all the time. Oh, and if you spot Meredith and her crew on the grounds, please stop and say hello.

For more information about Meredith and her RFD-TV programming, go to www.luckythreeranch.com or call 800-816-7566.

Sidebar

Plan a Tour of Lucky Three Ranch and Meet Mule Days Hall of Famer Mae Bea C.T.
By Helen T. Hertz

What makes a star? Talent? Attitude? Perseverance? Most would say all of the above, and in the case of one particular mule named Lucky Three Mae Bea C.T., they'd be right.

This 25-year-old molly mule, owned, trained and loved by mule and donkey enthusiast Meredith Hodges, has enjoyed a remarkable career as a competitor in Western, English, Dressage, Combined Training and Combined Driving events. She's a World Champion who not only made her mark in competition with other mules, but with horses as well. She went on to star in Meredith's training videos and RFD-TV program *Training Mules and Donkeys*, and in 2006 she received her greatest honor to date when she was inducted into the Bishop Mule Days Hall of Fame.

The longears equivalent of an Oscar for Lifetime Achievement, this award marks a show career notable for its diversity and excellence. Meredith hoped for this day for years, and she couldn't have been more pleased.

"Bea is such a special individual," she says. "We've been through so much together, and she's always been such a lady."

Meredith describes Bea as a perfectionist. Never one to roll in the mud or lose her cool, this mule has an unflappable, "lady-like" nature well-suited to an amazing variety of equine activities.

Meredith trained Mae Bea from the beginning, and she'll be the first to admit that things didn't always go smoothly.

"I was really just learning how to do this when I worked with Bea," she says. "She had to go through some tough times with me while I figured things out, and she was really happy when I got my act together."

Meredith began showing Bea at halter as a two-year-old in 1984. She went on to show in Western Pleasure, English Pleasure, Hunter Hack, Hunter Under Saddle, Jumping and Side Saddle. Her awards at Bishop include:

- 1984 Reserve Champion 2-Year Halter Mule
- 1985 Single Mule Driving Champion
- 1986 Reserve Champion 4-Year Halter Mule
- 1987 Reserve Champion Single Hitch Mule
- 1987 Reserve Champion Drive & Ride Mule
- 1988-89 World Champion Youth Pleasure Mule
- 1990 World Champion Jumping Mule
- 1994 World Champion Side Saddle Mule

- 2006 Inducted into Bishop Mule Days Hall of Fame

In 1986 Meredith and Bea began dressage instruction with Fort Collins, Colo.-based USDF instructor/trainer Melinda Weatherford. That same year Meredith petitioned the United States Dressage Federation for permission to take her mule into competition. It took some convincing, but the organization agreed to allow them into lower level schooling shows.

Melinda also schooled Meredith and Bea in Cross Country and Stadium jumping.

“Bea loves to jump,” Meredith says. “The dressage training helped a lot and really melded us into a team. She was willing to try almost anything.”

Meredith and Bea moved on to Combined Training events (dressage, cross-country and stadium jumping). In their first year at the Abbe Ranch Horse Trials in Larkspur, Colo., they came in eighth in the Pre-Novice Division. The second year they placed second in the Novice Division, and the following year they took first place in the same division, against 56 horses!

Mae Bea is one of more than 100 mules that Meredith has trained and perhaps more than any other, she has given Meredith insight into and appreciation for the mule’s sensitive, intelligent nature.

“Everyone loves Bea,” she says. “She’s a wonderful animal and one of my biggest stars. No one deserved this honor more.”

If you’d like to meet Mae Bea C.T. and Meredith’s other champion mules and donkeys and visit Meredith’s one-of-a-kind Longears Sculpture Park, you can schedule a tour of Lucky Three Ranch in Loveland, Colo. Just go to www.lukythreeranch.com and click on Ranch Tours or call 800-816-7566.