

## **JASPER THE MULE**

MEREDITH HODGES - LUCKY THREE RANCH

- How Jasper the mule was created and his purpose
- Educating children about working with animals
- Jasper books appropriate for children of all ages
- Learn about Jasper going to Bishop Mule Days
- Jasper the mule on tour and more!

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Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

The mules are in the corral. Welcome to Mule Talk, and I'm Cindy K. Roberts, your host. And our author, TV personality and world-renowned mule trainer, Meredith Hodges, of the Lucky Three Ranch.

Okay. We are gonna talk about Jasper the Mule, but I'd like to know, how did all of this get started? Tell us, Meredith.

Meredith Hodges:

I started the articles in 1982, but by 1993, I had enough articles to put together my first book, *Training Mules and Donkeys: a Logical Approach to Longears*.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right.

Meredith Hodges:

I compiled all the training articles that I wrote, including the articles about the Psychology and the Philosophy, as well as the actual practice of the exercises to put in my first book, *TRAINING MULES & DONKEYS: A LOGICAL APPROACH TO LONGEARS*. People began writing letters to me and wanted to know more details than I had in the book. That's when I contracted the videographers to do the Training Mules & Donkeys Video Training Series of 10 videos. They had more detail in them at every stage and were arranged in a Logical and Sequential order. It was then I realized that there was much more to training than I had originally thought.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Okay.

Meredith Hodges:

In 1999 was when I produced DVDs # 9 and #10, I put the text and photos in a hardbound book titled *Donkey Training*. This clearly flushed out what things were different with donkeys from training horses and mules.

It seems that the more you learn, the more you find out there is so much more to learn! But there were a lot of other things like Disease, Aging by Teeth, about Hoof Care, about Breeding, and those kinds of things besides training that prompted my next book, *A Guide to Raising and Showing Mules*.

In the not too distant future, everyone was getting excited about *Natural Horsemanship* and they were asking me questions about that. I thought, "*Oh boy, I have to do another detailed training book!*" That's when I came up with *Equus Revisited*. Before this Manual, we did Corresponding Manuals to the first 10 videos, *Training Without Resistance* and *Equine Management and Donkey Training*. We sure hope these all help folks with their Management and Training.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

(laughs) You help.

Meredith Hodges:

The title pretty much describes what it is about, *Equus Revisited*. After I had done *A Guide to Showing and Mules*, and before I got into addressing the things that were different about *Natural Horsemanship* in this new world, I started thinking that we have young people growing up. I watching to see what kind of books they were reading, what kind of TV shows they were watching, and what kinds of things attracted the kids. This was about the time when video games started coming out.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Oh, yeah.

Meredith Hodges:

Celebrities were writing children's books and I thought Michael Bolton's book was particularly good because it was kind of a fantasy book. That's what kids seem to like. They like stories. They like fairytales. That's what I grew up with.

Meredith Hodges:

I started thinking that maybe I needed to do something a little different. When I spoke to my father about it, he said, "*Meredith, you would be really good at writing children's books, so why don't you write some children's books?*" And I thought, "*Wow, that's just the key that I needed.*"

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right.

Meredith Hodges:

I needed to write Children's Books About Mules and Donkeys and how to relate to them, because there are so many kids out there that had no idea how to relate to equines in general, much less mules and donkeys. By this time, it was getting pretty obvious that kids preferred to torture animals, especially cats. Society started taking a turn for the worse and a hateful way of thinking.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Oh boy.

Meredith Hodges:

I thought, maybe I could counter this with more fairytales about mules. So that was when *Jasper the Mule* was born.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Okay.

Meredith Hodges:

I conjured up my character, *Jasper the Mule* and partnered with Bonnie Shields who became my illustrator. I would write the stories and Bonnie would do all the illustrations for the books. After we'd done quite a few books, we decided that it would be good, to have a Video Alternative.

We partnered first with Bill Melendez Productions, the company that did the *Peanuts* videos. I got together with Bill Melendez and we did *Jasper, the Story of a Mule*. I thought that would be a really good place to start. And when I told Bill Melendez what I wanted to do, he was just thrilled to death. And he actually came out to the ranch to meet the mules and to learn about mules so that when they put the animation together to go along with our book *Jasper, the Story of a Mule*, they would be mutually complimentary.

Bill came out here and met all my mules. He got to know mules and what they were all about so that he could get the right flavor for the video. Bill had never had his animators animate a mule before. *This was how the Jasper videos got started. We wrote one book a year and wanted these books to be educational as well.* So we picked holidays and kept an Historical Theme to them. The first one we did was *Jasper, A Christmas Caper*. That was right after the lead-in book that is bigger and actually introduces the characters in the story. It deals with where *Jasper* was born and what his experiences were. Then we followed with *Jasper: A Christmas Caper* with a theme about Giving during Christmas.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Okay.

Meredith Hodges:

Then the next one we did was *Jasper: a Precious Valentine*. We brought in the theme of Love and what Love Is All About. Next was *Jasper, a Fabulous Fourth* where we covered celebrating Patriotism and Loving your Country. *Jasper: A Turkey Tail* came next and we celebrated the aspect of Giving to Others and Being of Service to others. That's kind of how the books were born and how they evolved.

Later, we decided to do one more called *Jasper: An April Mule's Day*. It has a twist with the *April Mule's Day* joke that turned out to center around the *20-Mule Team*.

We actually have an illustration in the book that reveals how the *20-Mule Team* can turn a corner with 20 mules and still keep the wagon going down the middle of the road and stay out of the ditch. It's really quite remarkable how they do it!

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Oh yeah.

Meredith Hodges:

We thought we needed a link between our *Jasper* Mascot that we took to events and the cartoon character that was in the videos. And so we did a video called *Jasper Goes to Bishop*, where *Jasper* starts out in the animation, but then he lies down, goes to sleep and dreams about going to Bishop Mule Days.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

(laughs)

Meredith Hodges:

The *Jasper* animation becomes the *Jasper* Mascot and is brought alive at Bishop Mule Days. He has to take the place of a Champion Mule in the events and he wins the various competitions. Then he gets so tired at Bishop Mule Days that he lies down to go to sleep again and wakes up back in the Animation Video. Everyone laughs at him when he says, "*Oh, I went to Bishop.*"

"*Oh yeah,*" Moxie says, "*Oh, sure you did.*"

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

(laughs)

Meredith Hodges:

Then everybody goes back to the barn and *Jasper's* left there in the field by himself, "I really did. I really did go to Bishop." About that time, the wind comes up and knocks a Blue Ribbon out of the tree. It floats down to the ground in front of *Jasper*, and says on it, "*Jasper, Champion of Bishop.*"

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Oh, cool.

Meredith Hodges:

I didn't want kids to be confused about who *Jasper* was. I had had a lot of people ask me, "Well, was *Jasper* one of your mules?" My thought was, "No, *Jasper* isn't really one of my mules. I met *Jasper* in my dreams."

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Hm.

Meredith Hodges:

After I met *Jasper* in my dreams, he wrote a letter to me. *Jasper* is here in the office with us today, and he would like to read the letter that he wrote to me himself. So I'm going to put you on the phone with *Jasper* and he is going to read the letter he wrote to us.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Okay.

Meredith Hodges:

Okay, here we go.

**(USE AUDIO RECORDING OF JASPER READING ON HIS WEBSITE AT [www.JasperTheMule.com](http://www.JasperTheMule.com) CREATING JASPER/JASPER'S STORY)**

Dear Meredith, my name is Jasper. I'm a three-year-old, 15 hands high quarter horse bred Bay Mule. I suppose by people standards, I'm really nothing special, but I'm still me. I heard my owners talking about you the other day. They said that if anyone could help set me straight, it'd be you. I didn't know there was a problem. I always try to do what they want me to, but sometimes that can be hard to figure out.

When I was just a foal, people used to come out to see my mother and me. We were pastured on a couple of acres that surrounded an old shed where we used to get in out of the weather. My mother was content to graze and doze day after day. She wasn't much on excitement. I used to love it when the people came and carried on about how cute I was, then they would scratch and massage my fuzzy little body. They even got a little playful when I followed them around, romping, playing and bumping them in my nose. "Oh, look how cute and friendly he is," they'd say.

One day when I was about six months old, the people came to play. I was feeling especially good that day and was glad to see some playmates coming to my pasture. I let them scratch and pet me for about 10 minutes. Then they started to leave. I didn't want them to go so quickly so I ran behind one of the older men, nipped him on the rear end playfully, and looped my forelegs over his shoulders. "Get outta here, you brat," the man yelled. I didn't understand. They always liked to play before.

"I guess we'll have to start halter breaking his mule and teach him some manners," another one said. A few days went by before they came back. I was more cautious this time. I wanted to be scratched and loved, but I didn't wanna make them angry with me. Out of nowhere, they began trying to wrap this thing around my face. Didn't even gimme a chance to see or smell it. I felt trapped and scared to death. What were they gonna do to me now? Had I been worse than I had thought the other day? Did they wanna kill me? I'd seen them with my mother one time when she wouldn't go into that dark little room on wheels. She said it was best to do what they wanted. That room was so small, she wasn't sure she would fit so she hesitated. "People don't like it when you hesitate, so try to perform quickly," she said. My mother always helped me try to understand these humans and to appreciate the good things they have given us.

As soon as that halter thing was attached to my face, they tried to lead me away from my mother. That's when I saw the little room on wheels parked along the

pasture fence. We were going for a ride. I called for my mother to come. She took a couple of steps toward me when one of the two men shooed her off the other way. I was going along with these two guys, but where? Why? I got scared. I pulled, kicked, bucked to get away, but nothing worked. They were both bigger than me. And before long, I found myself locked in that little room on wheels all alone. I was frightened, but I was brave.

When they finally opened the doors to let me out, I came outta that trailer so fast I accidentally knocked one of the men down. Whoops. Before I could show him how sorry I was, he jerked on my head and laced me about the head and neck with a long, skinny stick. It stung like a bee. "Better stand still," I thought. Well, he didn't like that either. They were pulling on my head and hitting me on the rear with that stinging stick. If I followed, it released the pressure from around my face and the man with the stick would stop. So I followed.

That was the first day of what they called training. They put me in a small house they called a stall. It had a small yard outside, large enough to walk around it, but not nearly enough room to romp and play. Whenever the man came to take me out, I had hopes of finally getting a chance to stretch my legs and play a little. But every time I tried to play, he would only get angry with me and force me to stand still. Sometimes he would even time me up and leave me alone for hours. It was worse than being in my stall.

I tried to be good and do what he wanted, but there were always so many new things going on around me that I never really felt relaxed. Maybe I wasn't supposed to relax. Even the man who was training me seemed a little nervous and hesitant about how I would react. What was he nervous about? Why did he try to hide it? Is there something about all this that he wasn't telling me? Will I get hurt?

The day they put the saddle on my back when I was two was only one of many confusing times. I didn't really mind the saddle until they fastened the belt around my middle so tight that I could hardly breathe. I bucked and ran, trying to get rid of the nasty thing, or at least loosen it from around my middle. "He is going to be a real tough one," the man said to my owner. I'm not really sure what he meant. I learned pretty quickly that the bucking only caused more pain as the stirrups thumped against my sensitive body. It was better to move smoothly with that saddle on my back for sure.

It took me a while to learn to stop and turn when they pulled on that bit in my mouth. The worst part was trying to keep my balance through all of this. Didn't they know that I was still very young and growing and not really all that strong despite my size? They would ride me until I was stiff and sore, then put me back in that small area with no room to stretch and exercise. They gave me rest for days at

a time with no other exercise. It seemed like I was either overworked or over-rested. My muscles never really had a chance to become stronger. Somehow though, I managed to learn. I guess we all do, whether it's the hard way or not.

The reason that I'm writing to you is to ask you to let mule owners know that we mules don't mean to make mistakes. We love people. They know so many ways to have fun, and they can be so kind and understanding when they wanna be. I just wish they didn't think that we are deliberately trying to be bad. The only time I was ever bad was when I didn't understand what they wanted. Even when I was stiff, sore and fed up, at least I tried.

I met Mae Bea CT and Ciji at Bishop Mule Days this year. They said they have a wonderful life, equally balanced with training, pasture time, just plain fun and a lot of consideration for their feelings. Ciji said you were really mad at her for refusing all the jumps in the hunter under saddle class, but that you were fair. You made her do them in the jumping class, rode the English pleasure class, then let her rest for the remainder of the show since you knew she was in heat and feeling crampy. Ciji admitted that she can sometimes be a little stubborn and unfair herself so she tried to make up for it by doing her very best in the English pleasure class that brought her fourth place in some very stiff competition.

I wish my owners would be a little more fair with me. I'm only three years old, and they have already been riding me for a year. If they would only slow down and explain more carefully, maybe I wouldn't make so many mistakes. And maybe if I had more play time, I wouldn't get impatient with them. And maybe if they learned to balance and control their own bodies, they won't throw me off balance when I'm trying to do what they want.

I really like my people, and like most mules, I really wanna please them. Bea and Ciji said you know how to speak mule. Wish everybody did, makes it easier to communicate when you speak the same language. Do you think you could teach more people to speak mule so we can all enjoy our lives with our owners as much as your mules enjoy you? I hope so. Sincerely yours, *Jasper*.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Wow.

Meredith Hodges:

*Thank you, Jasper. It's so much better to have you read your own letter.*

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

That is cool.

Meredith Hodges:

Isn't that cool? Well, *Jasper* wrote that letter in 1990 before I had actually done the first training book. But that is what set me on the track of doing Longears books and videos. I realized how important it would be to do these children's training books and videos.

Since then, we decided that *Jasper* needed to make appearances at different events after we'd finished the *Jasper the Mule* series. But while we were writing the books, we thought it was very important to introduce children to mules, donkeys, horses, ponies and how to train them the right way, given the kid's ages and their ability. Of course, kids wouldn't know how to walk in good posture with them or anything that complicated. So in the books, the training is kept very simple, however it still reflects a good attitude between the characters in the book: *Jasper the Mule*, *Belle* his mother and his friends, *Moxie* the dog, *Molly* and *Jigger* the Draft Horses, *Valentine* the molly mule, and all the other people and characters that he meets along the way.

This has turned out to be quite a project and it just continued to grow over 14 years. *Jasper* became so popular with our whole audience that we decided he had to have his own website. He has all kinds of games on his website at [www.JasperTheMule.com](http://www.JasperTheMule.com) . There are introductions to all of the characters. It has biographies about me and Bonnie Shields, how we came to be together and what we were thinking about when we were doing all of these creative projects.

We took a lot of Photographs of the *Jasper* mascot at all the Events he attended and posted them in the Photo Gallery on the website. There are all kinds of games like Concentration using playing cards with the *Jasper* characters on them. There is a Maze and a game about learning the Different Parts of a Mule. The website is mixture of Education and Whimsy. We have made *Jasper* real. He's whimsical. He's a fantasy, but in our world, he's *real*.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Oh, sure. Yeah.

Meredith Hodges:

Making *Jasper* so real to the kids only adds more dimension to the books and videos. I see this combination lacking in a lot of the children's books today. *Kids just need to be kids without adult pressures while they are growing up.*

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Oh, okay.

Meredith Hodges:

These days they bring in adult themes at the Kindergarten Level when they first start reading. People have asked me for what age are the Jasper books appropriate? I can honestly say that the way I wrote this series it is appropriate for any age.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right. Okay.

Meredith Hodges:

Our first book, *Jasper: The Story of a Mule*, although it's numerous pages, it's a Complete Introduction to all the characters. It is a Bedtime Book that parents can read a Chapter each night at Bedtime. Each Chapter ends at a critical moment that leaves children wanting to hear more. The Chapters are about 10 pages long.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Okay.

Meredith Hodges:

Each Chapter is long enough to leave the child tired and ready to go to sleep. When the child becomes about one and a half to two years old, they are used to having this Bedtime Story and then they start paying more attention to the Pictures in the book. They still Listen to the story, but now they see how the pictures reflect the story and begin to Associate the Words with the Pictures.

By the time they're in Kindergarten they are learning their ABC's. While you're reading this Bedtime Story the Words and Sentences become familiar to them. They begin to Read what you are Reading and catch many of the Words that they Learned in school. They will begin to Read along with you.

Soon you can even ask them if they want to Read a few Words along with you. The book becomes a Teaching Tool. The better they get in school at reading, the more of the book they can read. As they learn to read they will actually go and pull the book out off the bookshelves themselves and read it when it's not bedtime. *It inspires learning the way that we did it when we were young.* I even included a Glossary at the back of the book so they could look up the Big Words easily to find out what they mean to increase their Vocabulary.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Okay.

Meredith Hodges:

*I think kids need to be able to learn in some kind of a sequence that makes sense to them.* At the same time we were doing the *Jasper* books, new books were coming out with adult subject matter. I sent the book out to a lot of Libraries and got mostly good reviews on it. The Libraries were mostly complimentary and were glad that we sent them Free Books to put in their Libraries. But there *were* Librarians, particularly on the East Coast that wrote back to me and said, "*Oh, this is a horrible story!*" I thought it was mostly because they did not understand the Rural Lifestyle.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Oh.

Meredith Hodges:

The other thing that didn't settle with them was the Rural Lifestyle language in *Jasper: The Story of a Mule* like when one of the men called *Jasper* a "Brat." When we did the books about Patriotism like *Jasper: A Fabulous Fourth*, they really didn't like that at all either. They had made up their own understanding of history in the USA.

When we did *Jasper: A Precious Valentine* and focused on Love and Giving, they liked that because it was fairly benign. However, in *Jasper: A Christmas Caper* about Serving Others and Gift-Giving at Christmas, when they wanted to ban Christmas, it caused animosity toward the *Jasper the Mule* series.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Wow.

Meredith Hodges:

However, in Middle America and other places where all of us Cowboys, Farmers and Ranchers live, the books and videos sold like hotcakes.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Oh, good.

Meredith Hodges:

The kids enjoyed them because they could see their own lifestyles in the books. *Jasper* was a little mule that grew up on a ranch and the family had to sell *Jasper* in order to get the money to keep the ranch. These are common problems that arise in rural America when you're a Rancher or a Farmer.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Sure.

Meredith Hodges:

We cover the Training Process and how much it's abbreviated these days and how hard it is for a mule that doesn't know anything to get along in the world. It's just like a child that doesn't know anything who's forced to grow up too fast. With abbreviated instructions they don't get a chance to really Process what they're Learning.

That was another theme that ran through the books and made children who are reading the books aware that if they want to teach their animals something, they have to be Patient and Willing to Spend a Little Time trying to teach them. *Don't hurry and you will minimize the resistant behaviors that cause fear of mules in humans.*

***Kids are naive about things and in their innocence, they're not afraid.*** However, they do learn to be afraid from the Human Beings that are teaching them. A lot of times humans don't realize what they're saying when they're teaching kids how to ride and how to handle animals, particularly mules.

I decided that I needed to address the kids that were asking me how they could use a mule or a donkey in a 4-H Club Program. I didn't know what to say to them, so I went to the 4-H club leaders to ask about using mules and donkeys in 4-H Club Programs. They said, "*Oh, we can't let them do that. Those animals are too dangerous.*" I would explain to them how they really weren't dangerous and how innocent kids often get along with these big animals better than adults. They just need a little guidance.

Then I was met with the excuse that, "*Oh, well, we have a horse manual, but we don't have anything that you can use with a mule.*" That turned out to be one of the inspirations I used to create ***A Guide to Raising and Showing Mules***. When I decided to write the book, I got a copy of the 4-H Club Horse Manual. I read it, used it as a template and wrote my book in the same format. I just converted the references from horses to mules and donkeys. Then the kids would have all the information they needed about the Management and Training of Mules set up the 4-H Club way. Then the 4-H Club leaders said they wanted to approve my book before it got published.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

What?

Meredith Hodges:

I informed them, "*You don't have the experience with mules that I do. So it would be very hard for you to do a constructive critique of my book, not knowing anything about mules. So what I'm going to do is go ahead and publish this book. I'm going to say in my advertising that it's for beginners that are just starting out with mules and for 4-H Club projects. Then it's up to you whether you want to buy the book and use it for your 4-H Club groups or not. But I will not have you critiquing a book that you know nothing about.*"

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right.

Oddly enough, I had the same problem with my *Donkey Training* book. Donkeys tend to do things a little differently from horses and mules. Donkeys can be rather comical and they will force you to have a good Sense of Humor because it takes them so long to decide to do something. So, in the donkey training book, I put Cartoons illustrated by Bonnie Shields. We put cartoons in every chapter where we illustrated *with good, clean humor* what a donkey might think at that point in time. *For instance, one of her cartoons in the breeding section was one about "Teasing Mares." Two mares were standing in front of a sign that said "Happy Jack's Dating Service" and had pictures of three different jacks below the title.*

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

(laughs)

Meredith Hodges:

I submitted *Donkey Training* to the Independent Publishers Association to be considered for their awards. They told me it was an awful book and that it was totally out of line with those silly cartoons in it. I tried to explain to them that you have to have a Sense of Humor if you're going to work with a donkey. I thought the cartoons would lighten things up for people while they were reading the book. They might get the idea that being forceful, pushy and controlling might not be the way to go with a donkey. That was the purpose of the cartoons, but the Independent Publisher judges were having no part of it.

They would not reconsider the book. They just said, "*Nope, nope, nope. Too bad, so sad.*" I was not going to be discouraged, so I submitted the book to another Independent Publishers Awards program here in Colorado and they gave it First Place! I suppose it's just a matter of taste!

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Cool. (laughs)

Meredith Hodges:

They understood. That just shows you, some people *get* Longears and some people don't. That's why we mule people suggest that you let the mules pick YOU and not the other way around.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right, right.

Meredith Hodges:

There are a lot of people out there that want to be very controlling when training equines and that is what they teach the kids. I think that inventing the *Jasper* character and letting him become more real made it easier for people to accept him. They really like him and want to use the *Jasper* Mascot at their events because he is so good with children.

At Bishop Mule Days in California, I thought, "*They'll like to have another mascot out there.*" They had the clowns that put on a show during some of the classes like *Musical Tires*. But when I first took *Jasper* out there, the Show Committee said, "*Oh, he's too big. He is going to scare everybody.*" So I thought, "*Well, the only way to stop that is just to have Jasper walk through the barns, introduce him to people and see how the kids react to him before he gets in the middle of crowds.*"

Our *Jasper* Mascot guy is such an amazing man. He is a Marine, but more than that, he interacts well with children and has a wonderful Sense of Humor. He coaxes kids to him so naturally. Most of the kids recognize *Jasper* immediately and run to him for a BIG HUG! We observed that over and over at the Bishop Mule Days World Mule Show in California.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Okay.

Meredith Hodges:

We were there with our cameras and took pictures for the *Jasper Gallery* on the website to provide pictures for parents of their kids with *Jasper*. We always had people sign releases and we didn't charge for it. We gave the pictures out for free.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

That's very cool.

Meredith Hodges:

If they saw a picture that we took of *Jasper* that they liked and wanted, we would ask them what size they wanted and give it to them. After a few years, we developed a routine of *Jasper* walking through the barns, meeting all the exhibitors and spectators that were walking through the barns with their kids. Pretty soon they were all running up to us and asking, even when *Jasper* was not with us, "*Where is Jasper? Where's Jasper? We want to see Jasper?*"

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

(laughs)

Meredith Hodges:

Pretty soon *Jasper* would appear. Finally the Bishop Mule Day's Committee said, "Well, would you like to put *Jasper* in the Musical Tires Class and have him perform during the event with the clowns?"

Of course we said, "That sounds great." So we would have *Jasper* go out during that event with his own *Secret Service* to monitor him because it's kind of hard for him to see in that costume. We didn't want him getting run over by a mule!

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

(laughs)

Meredith Hodges:

What they do in the Musical Tires Class is put little deflated tires in a circle. The contestants ride their mules around the circle of deflated tires while the music is playing just like Musical Chairs. When the music stops, then they have to jump off their mule and lead him to a tire, put their foot on a tire and wait to see who is eliminated.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Yeah.

Meredith Hodges:

When the contestants ran to a tire and put their foot on the tire, the clowns and *Jasper* would run up to the tire and try to spook the mules away so they would drag their handler off the tire. Then someone else could steal it. This gave others a chance to get their foot on a tire and not be eliminated. They even gave *Jasper* some Silly String to spray all over and help spook the mules away from the tires.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right.

Meredith Hodges:

It was an amazing, funny and totally entertaining event for many, many years. But when we got the “Woke Society,” they thought everything was too dangerous, banned all the noise and confusion and wouldn’t allow *Jasper* to carry the Silly String. Then the Musical Tires Class got boring.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Oh, sure.

Meredith Hodges:

But it went on for several years, like I said, and many, many people got to know *Jasper*. Once they got to know *Jasper*, he had to do even more because during the other events, people were asking, “*Oh, where’s Jasper? Where’s Jasper?*” So we decided that it would be okay to release *Jasper* into the Grandstands to meet all the people while they were being spectators for all these different events. So when they filled up the Grandstands, *Jasper* went up there and walked around, up and down the stairs. Consider how hard this must be for a guy in costume to do that in 100-degree weather out in California.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Ooh, yeah.

Meredith Hodges:

It was often hot during Bishop Mule Days and other events, so when we had the Mascot Costume made, we had it rigged with a fan inside of it. He wore a vest with ice packs in it to keep him cool. Being a Marine, he was very durable and truly enjoyed his time with the kids! *Jasper* is a whole lot of fun for the kids and puts smiles on people’s faces everywhere he goes.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Yeah.

Meredith Hodges:

*Jasper* has evolved into a character that everybody recognizes and loves. Like I told you before, my dad told me a long time ago when I asked for his advice, he said, "*Find something you love to do and stick with it.*" And that's just what I did, not only with *Jasper*, but with Longears in general and I've had no regrets!

Mules and donkeys have taken me on a journey that discovered *Jasper* and developed *Jasper*. He made people happy so we could serve them and provide positive moments in their lives. It has become such a joy for all of us here at The Lucky Three Ranch.

Insurance got so expensive that doing Clinics here at the ranch with other people bringing in their animals, or even them coming by themselves for Instruction and Boarding other people's animals got so expensive that we couldn't afford it. As long as people were not allowed to go into the pens *with* the animals, we could have Tours. We have a lot of Assisted Living Groups that come here to the ranch, which is truly rewarding. These people have limited recreation that they can do and are always so delighted to come here! We do Private Tours at the ranch now.

Currently in 2026, we are now in construction with the main building to house all of our 50+ years of memorabilia for the **Loveland Longears Museum & Sculpture Park at Lucky Three Ranch**. We will still keep things Private by Appointment only and not subject ourselves to the regulations that come with being a public entity.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right.

Meredith Hodges:

When people come here to see the ranch, it's perfectly Handicapped-Friendly for wheelchairs, for people on oxygen, for blind people. The blind people enjoy being introduced to the 26 life-sized bronze Longears statues that we have dotting the landscape at the ranch.

We take them up to the statues on the shady side and allow them to touch them because bronze can get very hot. We take their hands and run them over the statues on the cool side so they can *feel* what everybody is *seeing*.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right, right.

Meredith Hodges:

It puts smiles on everyone's faces. Our Tour Groups often tell us that this is the best-kept secret ever. They never knew they could have a tour of the Lucky Three Ranch. When they were told they were going to be touring a ranch, they thought it would be a dirty old ranch, knee-deep in manure...like it was when I first bought the old sheep ranch that really WAS knee-deep in sheep manure! (Laughs)

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

(laughs)

Meredith Hodges:

This ranch is now anything but that. The crowning glory of the tours is when we let *Jasper* lead the larger children's tours. When we did that, we decided that the kids needed a different format from the adults. At the beginning of our adult tours, they watch a History of the Lucky Three Ranch and the History of Longears in general. At the front of their tour, the kids get to pick one of the *Jasper* videos to watch. The most popular request is for *Jasper Goes to Bishop* because the kids get to see the transformation of the Animated Character into the Live Mascot that they met at events and who they will meet after the movie.

We decided that *Jasper* had to have a place to live on the ranch. So we converted our employee mobile home into the *Jasper Bunkhouse*. It is decorated inside like the *Jasper* storybooks in red green, blue and yellow. It feels like you are entering a *Jasper* wonderland!

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Wow.

Meredith Hodges:

When they first get there, we have the kids stand out in the driveway in front of the bunkhouse and call *Jasper* out of the house. They go, "*Hey Jasper*," and he comes out dressed in his cowboy hat and his woolies chaps. *Jasper* will take the kids on the last part of the tour to the ***Old Western Town of ASSPEN*** where *Jasper*, *Kylie*, *Moxie* and *Belle*, his mother, are bronze statues at the *Longears Livery*. They get to walk through ASSPEN and meet some of the mules in the dirt pen right in front of the ***Jasper Bunkhouse*** before they go into the bunkhouse.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Oh, wow

Meredith Hodges:

When you walk up it says ***Jasper Bunkhouse*** over the front door. On the shutters are the profiles of all the characters in the books. When you walk into ***the Jasper Bunkhouse***, it's painted bright red, green, yellow and blue like the inside of the books. So you feel like you're walking into the storybooks. In the first room, we even have a diorama miniature of the *Happy Valley Ranch* that's in the book with all the characters miniaturized. Bonnie Shields painted a mural on the wall with *Bald Mountain* as the background for the *Happy Valley Ranch*. ***In Jasper: A Precious Valentine***, they rode up Bald Mountain for a picnic.

On this tour the kids will recognize the things that are in the books as they walk into the bunkhouse. Bonnie hid a small *Yeti* in the forest of the mural so we play a game with the kids called, "*Where's the Yeti!*" They have so much fun trying to find him.

*Jasper* has a dining room and the whole house is decorated with mule and donkey memorabilia. *Jasper* even has his own *Eeyore Collection* in the living room. He has all kinds of stuffed animals and we have donkey and mule pictures on the walls everywhere. We have donkey and mule bedspreads for the beds. It is also used as a real bunkhouse! Kids are allowed to come into the ***Jasper Bunkhouse*** after their outside tour for flyers and autographs from *Jasper*. We take them into the backyard where the kids all get to ride on the ***Jasper Carousel*** . Then they come back into the house.

Sometimes *Jasper* will say, "*Are you hungry? Would you like something to eat?*" *Jasper* will go into the kitchen and cook crimped oats on the stove. He puts them into a bowl and sits down at the dining room table and then he says his prayers. He also has a little bit of Grass Hay on his salad plate. He will sit at the table and show the kids good manners. Afterwards, he cleans up his dishes and puts them away. (laughs)

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

(laughs) That's good.

We have *Jasper* postcards and coloring color book sheets for all the kids. *Jasper* will autograph them all before they leave. They go home after that. The ***Jasper Bunkhouse*** has made this ranch quite unique. And *Jasper* is a favorite character everywhere he goes. The tours for the kids are getting more numerous all the time!

Meredith Hodges:

Many school groups like to come. A lot of 4-H Kids, FFA Kids and even Little Britches Rodeo Groups enjoy *Jasper*! We had one FFA group of 50 kids that came all the way from Missouri several years ago. *Jasper* has evolved into quite a character. *Jasper* has his own website and we encourage kids to go to the website at [www.JasperTheMule.com](http://www.JasperTheMule.com). There are a lot of things for them to do. There's even a game where they can build their own storybooks and print them out with the *Jasper* characters. We have all realistic tack and equipment. They can capture it and put it on a *Jasper*, *Valentine* or *Pete* characters. They can hitch up *Molly* and *Jigger* to a four-wheel wagon or a two-wheel cart. They can have the characters under saddle and either English, Western or Side-Saddle.

The creations that the kids make, can actually be printed either as a colored picture to make a book, or they can print them out in black and white as coloring book pages. The ***Jasper the Mule website*** is quite a creative endeavor that we've done.

*Jasper* is still going strong. He leads the Tours upon request. When we book tours it gives people the opportunity to enjoy *Jasper's* world: reading his books, buying his books, getting up on the website to learn and play games.

Kids have the opportunity to engage with *Jasper* and take full advantage of this creative opportunity. This offers kids so much more than single books with adult themes could ever do. The main thing is, is that we really want kids to enjoy their childhood the way I enjoyed mine with all of my animals and everything that went with them. I spent hours growing up with the equines and built my own ranch in the dirt with my plastic horses long before I could even ride the real horses at eight years old.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Sure. Sure.

Meredith Hodges:

I built things with sticks and whatever I could find. It inspires Creativity. It inspires Entrepreneurship. Those kinds of things are sorely lacking these days. But this is something that we can provide and do provide, that makes kids, their parents, their teachers and everybody happy, educating them about these big animals. It lets them know that they're not so frightening after all. And, you learn so much as you go along. You learn new lessons every day.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Yeah. And it's more appropriate, it's just a Healthy Perspective to life. I love it. This is really neat. This is cool. Well, you are amazing. I have extended my childhood until further notice, so this is really good stuff.

Meredith Hodges:

You know, there's nothing like having the kind of childhood that we had and the Freedom and the Creativity that went with it. We learned all about the satisfaction of Building Long-lasting Relationships with our animals. Can you imagine all the things that you have instilled in the friends that you meet and the things you inspired them to do?

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

I know, I know. Oh, Meredith, this is great stuff. It is lunchtime, so I guess we'll break away, and we'll talk soon.

Meredith Hodges:

Sounds perfect, Cindy. This is so enjoyable, and we never run out of things to talk about.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Meredith's website is [Luckythreeranch.com](http://Luckythreeranch.com), and you can call her at 1-800-816-7566. And I can be reached through my website, [everycowgirlsdream.com](http://everycowgirlsdream.com).

Gotta go. My mule is looking for me.

Speaker 3:

Mule Talk is an Every Cowgirl's Dream production.

## **RESOURCES:**

**WEBSITE at [www.LuckyThreeRanch.com](http://www.LuckyThreeRanch.com) /TRAINING:**

- 1) Another Augie & Spuds Adventure
- 2) Chasity's Challenges
- 3) Longears Music Videos
- 4) Mule Crossing Articles
- 5) Mule Facts
- 6) Podcast Appearances
- 7) Training Tips
- 8) Rock & Roll: Diary of a Rescue
- 9) What's New With Roll?
- 10) Video On Demand
- 11) Wrangler's Donkey Diary

## **BOOKS/VIDEOS IN THE STORE:**

- 1) Training Mules & Donkeys: A Logical Approach to Training
- 2) A Guide to Raising & Training Mules
- 3) Donkey Training
- 4) Training Without Resistance
- 5) Equine Management & Donkey Training
- 6) Equus Revisited Manual

- 7) Equus Revisited Video
- 8) Rock & Roll Documentary
- 9) Building the Jasper Carousel
- 10) LTR Hay Production
- 11) The Road to Bishop
- 12) The Bishop Experience
- 13) The Bishop All Stars
- 14) Walk On: Exploring Therapeutic Riding
- 15) Building of a Nation
- 16) Give Your Equine the Athletic Edge
- 17) For Children: [www.JasperTheMule.com](http://www.JasperTheMule.com) for books & videos