

# LUCKY THREE RANCH

*Meredith Hodges*

## *Mule Crossing-November 1986 "Jack Copp and Joker"*

Jack Copp is a very special man with a very special mule. Jack was born in Fairfax, Oklahoma, about 45 miles south of the Kansas border. His father worked with mules in the oil fields acquired from the Osage Indians by the U. S. Government years before; though his father was familiar with mules, Jack was enamored with horses and, particularly with team roping. Jack, a congenial and responsible man, worked at his job for twenty-seven years and roped steers in his spare time. Then came the accident that changed his life; Jack was run over by a forklift that left him partially crippled for the rest of his life. He could no longer do the things he loved the most. In the midst of his depression, he met an old man who suggested that he get a couple of mules to mess with. "They'll git you on your feet," he said. Jack took the man's advice and bought "Joker," a sorrel yearling mule colt and his sister, "Sissy," a weanling molly mule in November of 1978. By May of 1979, Jack had taught "Joker" enough tricks to entertain the audience at Bishop Mule Days in California. This was where I first saw them; in six short months Jack had "Joker" (only 2 years old) stretching, sitting, laying down, carrying his feed bucket, rolling a barrel with his front legs, and had him walking on his hind legs. What he had done with that handsome young mule was remarkable, but what "Joker" had done for Jack was even more. Jack's life was given new meaning and his faith restored by this long-eared, little red mule, "Sissy," "Joker's" sister was sold and put into training with famed mule trainer, Pat Parelli of California, while Jack and "Joker" became the very best of friends.

Today, "Joker," sired by a Spanish jack called "Red Fox" who was killed by a hunter, and out of a Thoroughbred/Quarter Horse mare, captures the hearts of all who are fortunate enough to witness his performances. The bond between Jack and "Joker" is evident as spectator delight in watching a repertoire of thirty tricks to date. As Jack is a bashful man, "Joker" often has to push him into the arena to get things started; a good stretch to loosen up the muscles and "Joker" is ready to show his stuff. In top condition, "Joker" shows he can walk on three legs, then on two legs; this is pretty tough for a mule, but he does it out of love for Jack. "Joker" has no qualms about carrying his feed bucket to remind Jack of dinnertime, but Jack, a demanding trainer and concerned parent, makes "Joker" earn his dinner by rolling a barrel with his front feet. When rolling the barrel forward became boring, Jack taught him to roll it backwards with his hind legs. As if this weren't tough enough, "Joker" later learned to roll the barrel both backwards and forwards while straddling it! All this work is sometimes tiring, so Jack thinks a short nap is in order; "Joker" obliges his command by laying down; his rump makes a handy seat for Jack also to take a rest. At

Coffee Break time, "Joker" takes his shorter rests in a sitting position. Considerate of Jack, as a best friend should be, "Joker" stretches, lowering his back so that Jack can reach the stirrup easily to mount. "Joker" knows that tires are for traveling, but his only use for a tire is to plant his front feet on the tire while traveling around it with his back feet, or to plant his back feet on it and travel around it with his front feet. At the "end of the trail~" "Joker" places all four feet on the tire, exhibiting his excellent balance. Jack and "Joker" are patriotic Americans; "Joker" will fly the flag while walking on his hind legs, then Jack takes the flag while "Joker" bows to the audience in thanks for the applause! Not limited to tricks only, Jack removes the bridle and shows people how well trained "Joker" really is. Without the bridle, "Joker" performs pleasure, reining patterns, and trail obstacles with ease. No whips, no spurs, no bats; it's all done with patience and love you can feel as you watch them. They are quite remarkable! Jack believes that training a mule is like raising a child; if you slap them, bang on them, or worse, they will have no respect. They'll either be afraid of you or fight back. Of course, discipline is in order on occasion, but you don't have to keep doing it. Once Jack began training "Joker," "Joker" was not allowed to run with other animals; Jack was his only close companion. Today, others do not distract "Joker"; his best friend is Jack! Jack and "Joker" have performed at several county fairs and shows throughout the U.S.; they are both loved and appreciated wherever they go. The fees for these shows are minimal, just enough to cover their traveling expenses.