

Mule Manure
Memories of the Vipont Mine by Gus Erickson
Circa 1950's

Sooner or later everyone falls in love. I didn't think it would ever happen to me but it had. She was everything that a young man could ask for, good looks, shapely, large expressive eyes that held you like a magnet, her hair piled high upon her head with action and personality that were always in high gear, and to top it all she was a swede – hadn't Aunt Annie told me that when the time came to choose a mate to find a real Swedish girl and everything would turn out alright. Well, everything was alright except that I didn't have any money – they say where there is a will there is a way.

Our neighbor had taken a liking to me and quite by accident he had asked me to run his place that year 1921 on a 50-50 basis – like a man drowning or in love, I grabbed at the straw and went to work. It was a good year, lots of water, a good growing season tempered with hard work, a picture of my little Swedish girl standing the gate way of her home, the gate held partly open, an handkerchief in one hand, the other on the gate post – a sweater seemed to be protecting her from the chill of the season – on her face was that beautiful smile of hers tempting me. And what had she written at the bottom, just one word – “waiting”. A man needed no more to spur him on. From daylight until dark I labored. When the harvest season was over the stack yards were full of hay, the granaries full of grain, but the pocketbook had no money in it. It was a depression year, good crops, no money.

When a man is in love he finds a way, nothing was going to stop me; that “waiting picture” was to me like Ethyl gas to a regular gas motor.

My younger brother was working at a silver mine in Vipont, Utah, driving miles on the mule train hauling the ore from within the mine to the ore bins outside. I wrote him and he said I could get a job there at the mine as a mucker, \$4.50 per day, so away I went. The first evening there I signed on and went to work as a mucker, first having bought a cap with a miner's lamp attached. These were filled with carbide at the mine entrance. You checked in at the office, was given a dog tag with a number and when you came off shift you turned it in to the foreman, that way they knew if all men were out of the mine.

The first trip into the mine was a very nerve racking experience; we all filed in, single file, our lamps flickering in the dark tunnel until it looked like a small parade of weird men going into the depths of the earth. I was assigned a stope with a big pile of waste rock or muck as it was called and I was to shovel it into an arena that had been mined out; shovel, shovel, the pile didn't get much smaller because a miner up on the next level kept dumping a fresh car of muck onto my pile and all I had to do was keep it away – it was back breaking work. The flicker of the lamps bothered me no end and I would keep wiping imaginary cobwebs from my face. The foreman came by on his rounds, swung his hand lamp around my stope, looked the deal over and said: “Looks like you're keeping up with your work”. We'd file out of the mine at 11:30 PM eat our night lunch,

then file back and work until 4:00 o'clock in the morning. This went on for three nights, on the 4th night when I checked in, the foreman said: "You go on the mule train with your brother tonight – these bowdunks don't know how to harness a mule let alone drive one or make it pull".

I was happy beyond words, no more mucking, a mule skinner was looked up to. He had the right-of-way in and out of the mine; it was the mule train that was the life blood of the operation; for that reason this was a contract job, 20 cents per car or ton, as each car held a ton. The day shift consisted of four men, the night shift two, so therefore the day men each got a nickel, the night men a dime apiece for each car pulled out of the mine so I was one happy young man at the end of the first night, my earnings \$7.70. I was sneaking up on that little swede girl pretty fast from that night on.

The mules for the mine were purchased from a rancher in the valley - he helped us in the mine their first trip, then they were turned over to my brother and me for further training, etc. We were as proud of those mules as men could be, saw to it that their harness was in good repair, that they had plenty to eat, oats were in front of them at all times, a fact that worried me as a horse would have foundered right now, but not a mule – they eat only what they wanted, then left it until they felt the urge to eat again. We trimmed their tails, clipping close at the top with a couple of bells clipped in on the way down – they looked really classy (the ponytail has become a classic for the ladies hairdo.) If some enterprising hair stylist would start a mule tail trend, they would set a new fashion that would catch on like wildfire and be copied the world over.

My favorite mule was a little mare mule that I called "Lady" because she was a lady in every sense of the word. She had style, looks, class and personality with a capital P. When she walked it was a running walk, some folks would call it single footing – no matter what it was, it made her different, those who knew mules would turn their heads to watch as she went by, smile and be on their way. I would harness her up, seeing to it that everything fit just right, buckle on a hand lamp to her lower hame strap which we lit before we entered the mine. Each evening when I came out of the barn with her there was usually a little black rooster with gold feathers around his neck and chest and a half dozen white hens hanging around because they got a lot of feed from spilled oats, bags, etc. , that they scratched up in their busy lives, just being happy they were alive and being able to enjoy one another's company – no integration problems here, just good old fashioned living. The rooster would scratch up a choice morsel, he would give his excited cluck cluck and the hens would rush to enjoy the feed. Nearly every time I came out of the barn with Lady she would go to a certain spot and hesitate a moment then lift her tail and discharge a generous pile of mule manure, and if I would permit it, she would often turn and sniff of the little pile just as if she was seeking a message or delivering one. It took a long time before I woke up to the fact that that was just what she was doing – she was telling the whole mule world that a classy little mule had passed that way and should any of her kind happen by she would be happy to have them call on her.

The rush season was on, plenty of silver to be mined, 350 miners digging out day and night so we mule skimmers were plenty busy. The miners had sunk an incline shaft deep

into the earth and at its head huge ore bins had been installed. It was our job to see to it those bins were kept empty so there would be no delay in the operations. Those bins and shift were about 300 feet off the main tunnel and track and came to a dead end just past the bins – just enough room for the eight ore cars and mule to get by. A huge pillar of solid rock seemed to hold up the entire mountain as there was a little tunnel running around it so as the mule could be brought around to the front of the train for the return trip out. The main switch was lit with a single light globe and another at the ore bins. It was hard work getting the cars past the bins so I taught Lady when she passed the main switch to hit her running walk as fast as she could go, when she got to the bins I'd slack her speed just a little, unhitch the chain and she would dart around the pillar of stone and come back to the front end of the train ready for the return trip. It got to be quite a sensation to watch her make the flying switch as we called it; foreman, miners and the hoist man often stood and watched as we did the stunt – the cars would come to a bumpety bump stop and there should be at the other end of the train waiting – strangers couldn't figure it out.

The miners (some had their families) were all a very happy and sociable lot. Life was wonderful – our little mining town was much much more than met the eye.

It was a beautiful day. I had spent the afternoon going for a hike enjoying the spring feeling – upon my return I met my foreman. He said: “Just as soon as the day shift comes get your mule and get to pulling much – we are really rushed. As soon as the shift came off “Lady” and I were ready and in we went for our first load. We were hauling waste – as we pulled onto the dump the ball teams were just leaving for practice at the little field we had cleared I the sagebrush a short way from the mine – kids were running about on the “Lord's Lambing Ground” as it was called, playing, laughing and yelling because they knew the day soon would be over. We made our second trip and as we came out of the tunnel, there by the machine shop was the nipper with his little flat car loaded with seven boxes of dynamite, drill steel, fuses, caps and all the things necessary for the miner's work. We saluted in greeting – as so as I passed he pushed his cart onto the track and headed in the mine.

The sun was just about to set as we started in the 3rd trip and I thought how beautiful to leave and go in that dark old hole. “Lady” and I went merrily on our way – her light and mine and my helper's on the rear end flicker against the walls and timbers as we clattered on. We turned towards the ore bins at the main switch – I gave Lady her signal (a little whistle) to speed up for the flying switch – there was no light as usual so I figured the globe had burned out. Lady was giving it all she had – I was ready to check her and unhook the chain when from around the bins came the nipper on the run, waving his light and yelling – to late I saw his little car loaded with dynamite, drill steel, fuses, caps and all – to late to stop. In my mind I could hear the deafening explosion, the collapse of the bins, my family, my dreams, all gone in that one split second. Lady gave a leap – jumped over the little car – our little eight car train came to a crashing halt – no explosion – no nothing – just unearthly stillness; with trembling hands I unhitched Lady, she walked to her usual place. Nipper, hoist man and we two mule men looked at each other – a miracle had happened and we couldn't believe it.

As I came out of the mine I was plenty sober – the ball players were just returning, the children had gone in their homes, the little black rooster and his flock were gathered round the door to the little grocery box chicken house hating to go in for the night. As I stood there taking it all in with my hand on Lady’s rump, I realized the end of the day had come – my thoughts were everywhere – I could see the picture of my little swede waiting for me – then I became conscious of the pungent odor of fresh mule manure – Lady had once more discharged a generous pile.

It was then I got the message – someone had been watching over me – helping me to make my dreams come true.

Thank you Little Lady for delivering the message,

Respectfully submitted
Gus L. Erickson *about 1950's*



Gus and Lawrence Erickson at Vipont Mine
Ca 1921