

One of the world's nicest mules!

By Linda S. Burnett

"I have never allowed mules at Walnut Hill," Bill Remley states emphatically from his small office at the Walnut Hill Farm on West Bloomfield Road in Pittsford, "but this animal is so unique and so wonderful that we started a new division last year, which is called the Trade/Commercial Division. John Henry (with owner Kathleen Conklin of Albany, NY) competed pulling a butcher's cart, a real butcher's cart with real meat in it! He did a spectacular job, and he absolutely won the hearts of everyone who met him. So we have invited him back again!"

Conklin humbly admits that she is very honored by the invitation. "I am just thrilled to be competing and participating in the greatest show in the country," Conklin states. "It is such an honor to be invited back to a show of this caliber that it's hard to express how delighted we are. John Henry and I can't thank Mr. Remley or the Pittsford Carriage Association enough."

John Henry is 1/2 Percheron and 1/2 American Mammoth Donkey. Since Conklin purchased John Henry back in 1995 from an Amish dealer in Lancaster, Pa., she and John have literally changed the world of competitive carriage driving. Instead of an ordinary work mule existence, John Henry has his own web page (<http://john.henry.org>), his own magazine column (in the mule and donkey bi-monthly Drayer), foxhunts (with Old Chatham Hunt in Chatham, New York), who receives fan mail from admirers, and one of the few mules in the country who together have cracked the horsehair ceiling for mules in competitive driving and driven dressage.

"John Henry is one of a handful of mules competing regularly in American Driving Society (ADS) rare driving shows and CDE's (combined driving events) against horses," said Conklin. "John Henry is the only half draft mule competing, and his wonderful dressage scores come from his calm and consistent draft half."

John Henry proved he had aptitude as well as good looks. When he first arrived at Conklin's home, he wouldn't allow her to touch him or stand next to him. By early summer, he was roading hounds, and by fall he was hunting first field (the fast, jumping group of a hunt) after only going out three times in the second field (the non-jumping group). The following spring, she taught him to drive and the two polished their driving skills with Jeff Morse of Green Meads Farm in Richmond, Massachusetts.

"And we haven't looked back since," said Conklin. "He is now competing successfully in driven dressage both at the preliminary and intermediate level. He was the first mule to compete at Gladstone, New Jersey (home of the USET) and he

won his division that year against all the horses in the training level CDE because he had the best dressage score and went clean in cones and the marathon."

Today Conklin describes herself as "totally immersed in all things John Henry," and while she concentrates increasingly on driving, John Henry is quickly becoming a well-known celebrity in the "equine world." He has become an artist's model, he was the Mr. November 2001 pinup mule for Bob Mischka's mule calendar and was again featured in the 2004 calendar, and he will be immortalized in resin by Bonnie Shields, the Sand Point, Idaho sculptor who illustrated Margazite Henry's last book "Brown Sunshine of Sawdust Valley."

John Henry was the first mule in the nation to complete 2,000 recorded combined hours under saddle and driving for the North American Saddle Mule Association [NASMA]. Articles and pictures of John Henry have appeared in over 28 newsletters, magazines, catalogs and newspapers. He was the 1999 representative of the American Donkey and Mule Society to the Western Horseman All-Breed issue.

Since 2000, John Henry has traveled to driving shows all over the United States and has brought home ribbons, awards and championships for his undeniable talents. Last year at Walnut Hill, John Henry was proclaimed Reserve Champion in the Trade/Commercial Division, and won the hearts of spectators and fellow competitors at Walnut Hill. That's part of the reason why John wears a nearly shaved heart on his hip.

"Mules are just so wonderful, they give you their heart," Conklin explained. "They come when you call them like dogs, and John Henry kisses, smiles, and bows. That age-old legacy about them being stubborn just isn't true at all. Mules are serious animals, and an awful lot of fun. They require a different approach than horses. They don't want to be drilled and drilled. My lessons are almost never more than 15 to 20 minutes long, and don't ever teach them something incorrectly because they remember what you taught forever!"

Mules are very intelligent, very cautious, and will bond with their owners like a dog. What is misconstrued as stubbornness is actually caution, which they inherit from the donkey side. You coax and show them, and they notoriously learn much faster than horses. Mules are also legendarily healthy and long lived. One of Conklin's friend's mules lived to be 50, and Conklin says they're easy keepers. John Henry gets a soup can of hay stretchers plus additives each morning and evening, along with his hay. John Henry's own accomplishments, tractability and good looks prompt offers from would-be buyers all the time, but Conklin says "No way!"



Kathleen Conklin delighted Walnut Hill audiences with the presentation of her mule "John Henry" put to to butcher's cart.

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