

There's Something About Wilbur

That only a lovesick donkey jack could appreciate.

Words and photos by Cheryl Baldyga

As caretaker for a small Wyoming horse ranch, my most important daily duty was to keep the stock healthy and fed. Simple enough, right? Well, more or less. But my job became slightly more complex when love arrived on four legs and six bald tires.

Named for the man from whom he was purchased many years before, Wilbur was a 1985 Chevy one-ton crew-cab dually long-box pickup in the formidable color of calf-scour yellow. His fenders and doors were bashed inward to various degrees and his passenger side mirror flopped and swayed, thanks to an encounter with a hungry Clydesdale. Wilbur was proudly adorned with a homemade grill guard featuring the Wyoming bucking horse. In his bed he carried a 100-gallon hand-cranked fuel tank. The fuel tank was essential because the old crippled-up truck was down to four cylinders and made approximately four miles to the gallon. Needless to say, you couldn't get very far without stopping to man the hand crank.

Wilbur was also equipped with a failing starter, which meant that the only time you could safely turn him off was after you returned home. If you shut him down or stalled out at the pasture, you risked a 10-mile hike back to the house. Although Wilbur's intended purpose was to facilitate the daily feeding of the stock, he was often more trouble than he was worth. Anything that could go wrong with Wilbur, did. Once he went so far as to try and kill me by pinning me against a haystack. That is a story for another time, but I will say it was lucky for me that I had my trusty pocketknife.

My other deterrent was a donkey—more specifically, a jack. For city slickers who may be unfamiliar with the terminology, this means he was “fully equipped.” Cracker Jack was his name, and causing trouble was his game. But Cracker Jack was governed by basic love and fear. To my knowledge, Cracker Jack's only earthly fear was of a white plastic grocery bag tied to the end of a stick. But his undying love was reserved for Wilbur.

Now Wilbur was not the quietest of vehicles and Cracker Jack, having tremendous donkey ears, would lie in wait, listening for his

true love. I could sometimes hear him braying nearly a mile away! By the time I reached the pasture gate, he would have himself worked up into a tizzy—sweating, frothing at the mouth, panting and grunting.

Getting through the gate was tricky. Cracker Jack's brays would alert the 27 horses



and three mules sharing his pasture to the arrival of their supper. They would gallop to meet Wilbur, who had to be left in neutral and the wheel blocked (the emergency brake didn't work) while I wrestled the gate open and chased the hungry beasts with the grocery-bag device. They would scatter easily enough, but as I retreated to pull Wilbur ahead I would once again be mobbed. After

guiding the wretched truck through the gate in low gear, I would allow him to idle along as I jumped out and ran to shut the gate. I would then sprint to catch up, jump in the bed, and spread two bales of hay in his wake as he chugged along on his own course.

These two bales served as bait and distracted the herd away from Wilbur, making it easier for me to navigate through another series of gates to the hay yard, where I would retrieve the bulk of their feed. But there was no distracting Cracker Jack. I would jump from the bed with the grocery bag gripped firmly in my fist and wave it in his face as I ran alongside the moving pickup. I would then attempt to return to the safety of the driver's seat without being attacked by the impassioned donkey. And this was no joke—a former caretaker had lagged too long and with too little persuasion from the grocery bag. Consequently, his wrist had been viciously bitten and broken by the dreaded beast.

The next step was to slam Wilbur into a higher gear and attempt to outrun my four-legged nemesis. My goodness, he was fast. He could keep pace with me at 35 miles per hour! I could always tell when he was really pushing himself to keep up because he would pin his enormous ears back in an attempt to be more aerodynamic. When he did this, I knew he was just about tired enough to let me get into the hay yard with minimal use of the grocery bag. But sometimes I would have to race him back and forth across the pasture three or four times before he'd tire. I always had my fingers crossed that Cracker Jack would run out of gas before Wilbur did.

You might be wondering for what purpose the ranch kept such a creature. The original idea was to breed Cracker Jack to some broodmares in hopes of raising nice mules. But the mares found him appalling, and he seemed to want nothing to do with them either. Cracker Jack's heart truly belonged to Wilbur, and he was eventually moved on to greener pastures without producing a single offspring.

This outlandish outfit no longer employs me, but I sometimes think of the old jack and smile. And sometimes I pass Wilbur on a country road. I raise my hand in a wave to the new driver, and quietly shudder to myself. ■

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