

## YOU BOUGHT *HOW* MANY DONKEYS???

By

Cindy Benson, Benson Ranch Miniature Donkeys

*You bought how many donkeys???* When I tell people about my purchase of the Cooke herd, almost without exception, this is the comment. Well, I bought eighty five donkeys, and this is one of the most challenging, and rewarding, times of my life. If this journey sounds interesting, read on!

I have been a miniature donkey breeder since 1994. I have extensive horse background, and am married to an equine veterinarian, so I bring a fair amount of experience to my donkey breeding endeavor. I feel strongly that a breeder has a responsibility to strive to improve on conformation and type with his parings; not just indiscriminately add to the gene pool. To that end I have gone to great efforts to fully understand the miniature donkey breed standard, conformation, and genetics, and have traveled all over the US and Canada to learn from the best. There is such a sense of satisfaction to me when I look out across my field of well conformed breeding stock. Also, when the next generations of donkey owners look back at the Benson Ranch contributions I want them to expect quality from those names in the pedigree.

I met the Cooke family, and the Circle C breeding herd, in the Summer of 2002. As I look back at it now it was the beginning of something incredible. I went to Cooke's Alberta, Canada ranch because I had repeatedly been told they were at the very top of the donkey industry and that if I wanted to learn from the best I needed to make that trip. I drove my truck and 18 foot horse trailer the 27 hours one way, spent about a week with the Cooke's, attended the Select Sale and the Calgary Stampede, and bought my herd sire "Circle C Silverado". I have been back every year since. That first year was so amazing to me. For one thing, I am a bit shy, but I felt at home there on the ranch in the first ten minutes. I had never seen that many donkeys of this quality in one place and it was a beautiful sight. I fell in love at every corner. The donkeys were in good health, their feet were trimmed, they had room to run and play, the pens were clean, and the donkeys were friendly and trusting of strangers. If I was a donkey I would be happy to live there. They were all treated like cherished family members.

The Cooke's are very gracious hosts. Over the years Grant, Sharon and Krista have patiently spent many, many hours helping me with my education. Krista took the time to teach me about conformation again and again, and every year I could understand and appreciate more of it. It really helps to look at lots of donkeys with someone as knowledgeable as she is to interpret and point out strengths and weaknesses. There are no perfect donkeys (Cooke's are close!) and she was very open and honest with me about her animals. They allowed me to be part of the family for part of every year, welcomed me into their home, and allowed me to assist with the preparations for the Sale and

Calgary Show. In the days following the Select Sale, the Calgary Stampede World Show takes place, and they even let me show donkeys for them. It was fun to win with Cooke donkeys! Sharon makes many trips out through the jennet herd during Sale time explaining to visitors about the genetics and performance accomplishments of her herd and I have shamelessly tagged along within ear shot whenever I could.

I also learned a little of the history of the Cooke herd, and what has gone into creating such a group of consistently superior donkeys. In 1988 Grant and Sharon went to visit Fred Hartman, a donkey breeder in the US, hoping to buy a few donkeys, and came home having purchased his herd. That was the beginning. They kept the top quality animals, purchased top quality donkeys when they found them, and were willing to pay good money to get them. They believe that quality begets quality, and Grant will tell you your money is better spent buying one top quality animal rather than three medium quality ones. He shared with me, somewhere along the way, the story of Red Lightning. Grant purchased him as a three year old at a donkey sale in the Mid-West. Sharon was not with him, and when he called home to tell her of the beautiful young jack he had purchased and what he had *paid* for him there was some discussion. I won't share here what that price was but even now it would be considered a very impressive amount of money. Now, fifteen years later, Red Lightning is himself a legend. In the show ring he was repeatedly a champion, and as a breeding jack he has been spectacular, having produced over 200 offspring; many, many of which are champions. Grant made a wise purchase indeed. Then came Motown, Future Link, and Desperado, who is a product of their breeding program. This breeding philosophy has benefited us all, as they have improved the quality of the miniature donkey gene pool by sharing these animals with the rest of us. Their influence is felt in breeding herds around the World.

Grant and Sharon are both third generation farmers and livestock breeders. They have bred and shown Arabian horses with great success, and have been producers of beef cattle most of their lives. They know a lot about the principals of genetics and conformation. I used to picture them having a quiet, peaceful time to rest up when winter came, but this year I have learned that I was quite mistaken! They expect 200 Angus calves this year over the winter months. They often have sub-zero weather during this time (sometimes 30 degrees below zero) so the calves need to be born indoors or they will freeze. Can you imagine housing and cleaning up after that many cows? Grant, Sharon, and Krista get up every three hours to check on the calving situation through the night, every night, and check all through the day, in addition to daytime chores. Don't forget that they have had as many as 150 donkeys to tend to as well. It's no wonder they felt the time had come to make their lives a little saner by parting with the responsibility of the donkeys.

I remember exactly where on the sidewalk I was when Sharon offered me the herd. We were headed into the Stampede grounds and I had been trying to get her to sell me a breeding jennet, (which she seldom does), and instead she suggested I purchase them all! I laughed because I thought she was kidding, and was stunned when I realized she was not. These donkeys are superstars to me! Now I have been known to dream pretty big, but never, never would I have dared to dream this big. When she gave me her reasons for

offering the herd specifically to me I felt special and privileged indeed. In part, she selected me because she wanted the herd to stay together and continue the Cooke legacy. Some of her donkeys have been friends all their long lives. She didn't want them separated, and she didn't want what it took the family nineteen years to create to come to an end. Sharon and I have very similar beliefs about ethics and husbandry, and are both passionate about donkeys. That my husband is an equine veterinarian had no small part to play in her decision I am sure. She also wanted them to be loved and cared for because of who they are, not only because of their economic value.

It took me just over a year to make my decision to take Sharon up on her amazing offer. It was the opportunity of a lifetime but there was much to consider. For one thing, my husband and I had recently purchased a large ranch in Oregon. We moved from a populated area and a busy, demanding life to find tranquility and a slower pace on the new ranch. Having over 100 donkeys wasn't quite our vision. Could I learn to manage and live with that many donkeys, and did I want to? Was it fair to ask of my husband? He enjoys the donkeys but would never buy them on his own. However, he recognized how important this herd was to me and what a unique opportunity Grant and Sharon had offered me. He knew I would need his physical, moral, and veterinary, support. It is clear to me that he gave his blessing because he loves me, and he thinks I can do this! That's pretty cool. Then there was the financial aspect to think about, which was serious business. We had reached a point of hard earned middle-aged comfort, and this was a big venture. Also, Sharon leaves BIG shoes to fill. Would I be able to learn enough to hold the herd to her standard of excellence? Mitch and I finally made our decision to reach for the stars. Working with Grant and Sharon we came up with a plan, and in September of 2006 the herd became mine. Wow! Talk about a play of emotions. Sharon wanted her herd to stay together and continue her legacy, and she had accomplished that, but now she had to say goodbye to her precious family of donkey friends, which has been difficult indeed. I was to live with these larger than life donkeys, and had to figure out how to make it all work. I vacillated between fear and feeling awe struck; I still do that from time to time. Sharon has pledged to teach me all I need to know, and to work closely with me for the next few years. That commitment has made all the difference .

So, OK, how do we do this?? Sharon lives a 19 hour one-way drive from me. I have a 20" horse trailer, but it will only hold 11 to 15 donkeys at one time, depending on their age, size, and where they are in their pregnancies. I wanted them to be very comfortable during the trip to Oregon. I could have put them all in a couple of big livestock trucks and transported them quickly, but I could not bring myself to trust them to strangers. Then there was housing to consider. Our Oregon ranch is 360 acres of lovely meadows and woodlands; without a fence or barn on it when we bought it! We already owned seven horses, three mules, 15 miniature donkeys, and five miniature cows. We had been building fences and putting up barns as quickly as we could for the animals we had. We were far from prepared to house 85 more animals. We have lots of fences to build. My husband says that's why I married him – because he can build a great fence! There is some truth to that. .... It takes me the better part of five days to make a round trip to transport donkeys from Sharon's ranch to mine, partly because I like to spend a little time there to learn from Sharon, rest up some, and I like to give the donkeys time to rest and

eat along the way home. That's a long time away from my existing chores, and when I am gone it all falls to my patient husband. I married well.

I brought the first 15 donkeys home in late September. They consisted of mostly young jacks or geldings, so they fit pretty well in the trailer. The next two loads were not so large because they were all pregnant jennets, (and Desperado's Legacy, a seven year old jack), and I needed to give them more room. I was able to make three trips before the Winter weather became an issue. I am currently waiting for the roads to be safe and Spring to come before I bring the remaining 50 home. I make these trips alone because I need Mitch to stay home and look after the ranch, and because I am my own best company. The drive is beautiful. The country is wild and I see eagles, deer, elk, moose, and even a bear once. Thank you Sharon for living somewhere fun!

Here at the ranch we are getting ready for foaling to begin; with my original girls and the new Cooke jennets. I have two foals due in February/March, (as of this writing one of them is 29 days overdue), and the Cooke jennets begin foaling in late April, with as many as 30 foals due between April and September. As you might imagine, I have never *had* that many foals, and the logistics are a little staggering. I like jennets to have a nice bedded stall to foal in, with a run for the new foal to play in for a few days before they go back out to the herd, so slow up girls while we build more barns... Also, there is marketing and management to consider. I have not been idle through the winter. I bought an equine computer software program and recorded the information about the donkeys. I can now print out pedigrees, and can generate "to-do" lists for myself concerning breeding, vaccination, or farrier needs. Working with my graphic artist I have created a new business card, logo, brochure, and an advertising display. Money isn't why I bought the herd but it is something I need to think about or I won't be able to afford to keep them. I think it's possible to treat this as the business venture it is while loving and respecting these donkeys as individuals. I do enjoy the challenges of marketing, and really enjoy talking donkeys, so this part is rewarding too.

It has been a pleasure to get to know these jennets. Sharon is an accomplished horsewoman, and the manners of her donkeys reflect that. Can you imagine what it would be like to have to chase down, or wrestle with, this many donkeys? It would take much of the fun out of it. These jennets are so trusting; it is clear they have been well loved. They are easy to catch, and stand for hoof trimming and shots. I have enjoyed beginning to understand their individual personalities. For a while I was doing well if I could tell them apart, but now they are my friends as well as Sharon's.

There is a strategy required in keeping up with this many donkeys. Sharon has come up with many tricks along the way and one of my favorites is this: When she has hooves trimmed by the farrier she worms the donkeys and cuts off their manes. Then when she looks off across the backs of so many donkeys she can readily know when they were wormed and trimmed: so easy, and so clever. She also keeps a notebook with her through the day where she records EVERYTHING about the donkeys, and heaven help her if she were to lose it. I have decided to follow her lead, along with having records in the computer, for additional security. Sharon has kept a notebook for every year that she has

been raising donkeys, and they are fascinating to look through. For instance, she awards one to five stars for every foal born with regard to quality at birth. I looked up some of the more famous donkeys to see how she had rated them at this early stage, and she was right most of the time! I have a lot to learn.

I am looking forward to warmer weather so I can resume my transport of the herd. I especially want the pregnant jennets to be transported at a safe point in their gestation, and I don't want them to multiply while they are still in Canada. That would be working the wrong direction! I'll keep you posted through the Spring and Summer as the foals come and the learning curve continues.