

## ***A Muleskinner's Story***

My maternal grandfather's name was Millard Huey Rhodes. For as long as I knew him, I never heard anyone call him Millard and I never heard anyone call him Huey. Most people that knew my grandfather called him Abe. I don't know why. The rest of the people that knew and especially those that knew him best called him Buster. Again, I don't know why. Those exempted from using one of these two names were his grandkids. We called him Abie. We did until we got older and too cool for Abie, so then we called him Buster also.

Buster was a simple man. He, along with my grandmother Eva, reared six children. As far as I know, he never owned a house. He never owned a new car. He never traveled. He never had a lot of money. He had a hard life. He worked in the timber industry, which sounds glamorous but actually it wasn't. He worked for various small sawmills. In a sawmill operation, trees are cut down, taken to the mill and cut up into boards or cross ties. It was hard work and the pay was small.

Buster's job with the sawmill was a muleskinner. Of all the job titles that I am aware of, muleskinner has to be one of the coolest sounding jobs titles ever. Despite what images that the term muleskinner conjures up in your head, actually a muleskinner is someone who drives mules. A sawyer would cut down a tree and the muleskinner would direct a mule to drag the tree down to the mill. It was hard and dangerous work and Buster was one of the best.

Buster, by the world's standards, was not a successful man. He was a good man but he was not a perfect man. He was not a great business man, the family always struggled financially. He cursed often. He drank a bit. He caroused with the boys a bit and yes, on occasion, he caroused with the ladies a bit. As I said, he was not a perfect man, he had his demons that he fought.

One of the things that Buster was blessed with was his ability to relate to children. Kids loved to hang out with Buster. He loved kids and they loved him. As children, the reason that we loved to be around Buster was that he made you feel special. Ironically, he made kids feel special by not treating them special. He treated them like anyone else. He treated them like adults.

Buster would not talk down to kids. He would talk to them like he would to an adult. It didn't matter if you were 6 or 16 or 36, he treated you pretty much the same way. He would listen to kids as he

would an adult. This was amazing to us when we were children. To be thought of as an equal was great.

I will admit that not everyone was as happy with this equal status that Buster afforded us kids as we kids were. My mom and her sisters would occasionally complain to Buster allowing us to do certain things. He was not a disciplinarian. That wasn't his job. His job was grandpa. Especially in our teen years, if you wanted to drop a curse word on occasion, he didn't have a problem with that. If you wanted to try a sip of a beer, he didn't have a problem with that. Pretty much anything that he was willing to do, he would let you do. In his mind, anything else would be hypocritical. Our parents, however saw things a little differently.

Buster passed away several years ago. Did he change the world? No. Did he leave us with a pattern to live our lives by? Not exactly. Like I said, he was not a perfect man. What he did was, for a group of us kids, he made us feel special. At a difficult time in our lives, while some people didn't listen to us and it seemed like everybody was telling us what we needed to do, Buster made us feel ten feet tall and bulletproof. Could he have been a better example to us kids? Most people would say yes but to us kids, he was the best. He was one of us.

Jeff