

Mud Sale Camaraderie

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Young ones are weaving their way through growing crowds of squishy-plump women, bean-pole teenagers and farm-rugged men whose sheer numbers make a threading game of children's tag as much fun as building tunnels in the hay mow of the barn back home. At this particular *Mud Sale*—so named because of past experiences with rain-soaked soil—the sun is shining. Five thousand people will fill the auction area today, but since early Spring rains haven't made their appearance this year there will be no thick, chocolate-colored field muck to tug at the bottom of rubber boots, a fact about which everyone is greatly pleased.

The cows are quiet, lined up in a large yellow tent and waiting to be sold and bought; the food vendors smile as they whip up pancakes for lines of early breakfasters; the auctioneers don't even complain about having to tramp from tent to tent selling household goods in one, small animals in another, farm implements in a third, and moving on to Amish quilts, Amish buggies, steel-wheeled tractors, and larger items later in the sale day. Everyone is excited to visit with friends and family, eat funnel cakes and sausage sandwiches, and bid on something new for the farm using the money they'll make by selling something old from the same farm.

Near the entrance of another yellow tent, where waiting mules are completely unaware they will soon be plowing for a new master, stands a gathering of three Amish males. The youngest one looks to be about six years old. He shoves his hands deeply into the pockets of his tight, black, homemade pants and stares down at the ground, scraping the dirt back and forth with his foot in silent participation beside the adults. Next to him is a medium-tall man with a long reddish beard who faces the sun and squints. The man removes his wide-brimmed straw hat and pushes back evenly cut, ear-length hair. With a sinewy hand made strong from years of physical labor, he resets the hat firmly on top of his head, then folds his arms across his chest and tucks his large hands in under his armpits. Straightening his back and firmly planting his feet, he strains the muscles of his face forward and focuses intently on the story that is unfolding through the body and soul of the second man.

Waving emphatically, this second bearded man is pulling his arms through the air in great strokes, first lowering one and then the other in a rhythmic pumping motion. His voice slowly rises in cadence with his movements. At once, he stretches both hands as high in the air as they will go and

wildly shakes his fingers. Then, with eyes wide and mouth extended, he punctuates his gyrations by loudly spouting out a phrase in his native Pennsylvania Dutch language.

For a few seconds the air turns quiet and he is a frozen silhouette against the sky, until his words and actions register in the brain of the first man, and both men double over in unrestrained laughter. The storyteller slaps his thigh as the reddish-bearded one holds his stomach and looses a high-pitched hoot. Though the little boy isn't sure why the men are laughing, he takes his hands out of his pockets and smiles broadly, staring upward in absolute admiration and awe. Red beard, gasping for air, loudly repeats the same Dutch line of the storyteller and sends them both back into another round of thigh-slapping, stomach-wrenching convulsions.

No one is certain whether the revelry of the men is the cause of the boisterous braying that erupts inside the tent at that precise moment. The whole assortment of mules is in a stomping ruckus. Cutting short their shenanigans to calm the unwilling herd, the men give a loud command that these mules seem to understand, since the stomping promptly ceases and the hawing slows to a low complaint.

The mules' interruption is enough to redirect the attention of the threesome. And as they slowly saunter away from the tent the boy grabs the hand of grinning Red Beard, who is shaking his head and quietly muttering the Dutch phrase. Storyteller chuckles and fans himself with his hat as they walk. Skipping alongside the men, the little boy eagerly waves to another boy passing by, who is also wearing homemade black pants and is also attached to a bearded man with a wide-brimmed straw hat. The other boy returns his wave and continues walking in the direction of the yellow tent where mules stand absentmindedly shifting from one foot another, once again oblivious to the grand amusements of Mud Sale camaraderie.