

TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEWEE: Mark Meyers

INTERVIEWER: David Todd

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Google Voice [00:00:00] This call is now being recorded.

David Todd [00:00:03] All right, Mark.

Mark Meyers [00:00:04] How do we sound now?

David Todd [00:00:07] We're, we're good. And this this is darn near foolproof, So even people like I can't really mess it up. So, thanks for going to our back-up plan here.

David Todd [00:00:22] So, if you are ready, I think we can launch into this. I think we got the audio stuff pretty much worked out.

David Todd [00:00:31] So, what I'd like to do, with your permission, is just give a little introduction and then we can jump into asking you some questions and hear what you're thinking.

Mark Meyers [00:00:40] Absolutely.

David Todd [00:00:41] Okay. Well, give me a couple of minutes. I'm just going to do a little preface here and then we'll get into it.

David Todd [00:00:48] So, good morning, Mr. Myers. David Todd here. I have the privilege, as I said, of being here with Mark Myers, and with his permission, we plan on recording this interview for research and educational work on behalf of a non-profit group, the Conservation History Association of Texas, and for a book and website from Texas A&M University Press, and finally, for an archive at the Briscoe Center for American History at the University of Texas at Austin.

David Todd [00:01:19] And I wanted to emphasize he has all rights to use the recording as he sees fit. It is his.

David Todd [00:01:25] And I just want to make sure that is all right with you.

Mark Meyers [00:01:30] Yes, absolutely.

David Todd [00:01:31] Great. Okay, let's, let's get started then.

David Todd [00:01:34] It is Thursday, February 16th, 2023. It's about quarter of ten in the morning Central Time. My name is David Todd. I am representing the Conservation History Association of Texas, and I am in Austin. And we are conducting a remote interview by phone with Mark Meyers, who is based in San Angelo, Texas, area.

David Todd [00:01:59] Mr. Meyers is the executive director of Peaceful Valley Donkey Rescue, which he founded in 2000 with his wife, Amy.

David Todd [00:02:07] He is a former contractor and businessman but has spent the last 20-odd years involved with rescuing and providing homes for donkeys. Through the course of that work, he's published books, produced films, including "Forgotten: The Plight of the American Donkey", and made wildlife photos.

David Todd [00:02:28] So today, we'll learn about his background and experience and his insights about conservation of donkeys, especially wild burros.

David Todd [00:02:38] So, with that little introduction, I wanted to first of all thank you for participating, and then to ask you about your childhood, your early years. Were there any people or events in your youth of that might have influenced your interest in animals in general or burros and donkeys in particular?

Mark Meyers [00:03:00] Oh, absolutely not. I had no background in donkeys whatsoever.

Mark Meyers [00:03:06] The biggest influence was Jim Fowler. People of my age grew up with Marlin Perkins sitting in a jeep selling insurance and Jim ticking his hand down snakes' mouths, if you remember - Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom every Sunday. And I was glued to the TV to see what Jim Fowler was going to catch next. I was just fascinated by him. Big influence. And so I was like every other kid in suburban America, just fascinated by wildlife.

Mark Meyers [00:03:41] My background is in music. I was a musician for all of my youth through school, and then I went on to play professionally, which had a big impact on the rescue because I was good in front of people. And a big part of what I do now is fundraising, because without money, the rescue would not be successful because it's very, very expensive. And so that has played into making films, public speaking. Everything I do is really in front of people. And so my musical background did play well into that.

Mark Meyers [00:04:18] But, I had absolutely no experience with donkeys until the very first one, Izzy, jumped off the trailer and into our lives, and that was over 20 years ago. And we still have her.

Mark Meyers [00:04:31] By the way, if you make your way to San Angelo, Texas, you will get to meet Izzy because she is probably 25-plus years old and she's still out there.

David Todd [00:04:43] That's great. Well, good care, I'm sure.

David Todd [00:04:47] So, you mentioned the Mutual of Omaha Wild Kingdom. Were there any other kinds of books, movies, TV shows that might have given you an inkling that you might be in this line of work?

Mark Meyers [00:05:04] We've always had animals growing up, always dogs. I've always been a big dog person, to this day. I mean, right now we're recording this for my home, before I go to the office, and we've got six dogs. My wife and I have six. She has hers, I have mine, but just always been a big dog person. When I travel into the desert, I have two dogs with me everywhere I go. I just always been, had a huge heart for animals that was probably instilled in me from my father. He's always been a big dog person.

Mark Meyers [00:05:39] But animals have just always played a big part in my life. And I don't know, just, there's never been a time in my life I can remember where I didn't have animals to care for. And that's something that was always ingrained in me that, you know, you take care of animals, that's something that you just do.

Mark Meyers [00:05:59] And so, my wife's always had the same heart. She had a horse, and that horse needed a friend. She had it, bought it. And when we bought our first small ranch, that that horse needed a friend. And so she found Izzy on the Internet. And so she bought Izzy sight-unseen on the Internet. And Izzy jumped off that trailer. And that was our very first experience with a donkey. And it just, well, here we are 20-some odd years later, and it just blew our minds. It opened our world into this, this whole new experience.

David Todd [00:06:40] It's funny: these turns in life you don't expect.

Mark Meyers [00:06:44] Oh, yes, absolutely.

David Todd [00:06:46] You mentioned your dad as being one influence. And I'm curious if there were any other folks who were older than you, maybe teachers, that might have also encouraged what you're doing now or somehow influenced it?

Mark Meyers [00:07:03] My fifth grade teacher, Mr. Holmes, was a very unique character in my life. You know, everybody has that one teacher, and it was just definitely Mr. Holmes. He was, he was so far outside the box of every other teacher that I can remember. He's the one that made you think. He's the one that would close the book and set it aside and just talk to you like you were people. And of all the teachers I had, especially in grade school, he, he was the one that made you think. He just, he didn't just talk down to you. He made you think.

Mark Meyers [00:07:40] He's the one that we went out and we dressed up like Pilgrims and Indians, and we cooked turkeys and things like that. And, you know, we experienced what Thanksgiving was about. He was just that teacher to me.

Mark Meyers [00:07:54] You know, and it's funny the things you remember. You know, I had a sixth grade teacher who I couldn't stand, and he always, you know, marked me down on my penmanship. So to this day, I print. I don't use cursive because of that one teacher who I couldn't stand.

Mark Meyers [00:08:10] But, Mr. Holmes I loved, because he was all about encouragement.

Mark Meyers [00:08:15] And so, yeah, you know, there's, there's certain things that, you know, you pick up along the way. And Mr. Holmes was one that always encouraged. And he, he didn't look at things you did wrong as failures. He looked at them as opportunities, to maybe look at it in a different light. And so, yeah, he was a big influence in, in not being afraid to fail, I guess, which is very important because I'm not afraid to fail. To this day, I've had a lot of really stupid ideas, but I've had a lot of really, really good ones, and my wife is very supportive of that.

David Todd [00:08:52] Yes. It sounds like you learned some resilience from Mr. Holmes.

David Todd [00:08:58] So, I understood that you also, before you got into, you know, rescuing donkeys and caring for them and so on, you were in the contracting field and were a

businessman for quite a while. Do you think that brought you any kind of skills or inclinations that have helped you in this work at PVDR?

Mark Meyers [00:09:23] I owned two separate businesses. One was an electrical contracting business, and then I also held a general contracting license. And so, yes, I was very successful in business. Amy and I made a lot of money in the Los Angeles market, and I spent a tremendous amount of time on the Los Angeles freeway system. And I didn't have any fun, but we were very successful and we knew how to run a business.

Mark Meyers [00:09:54] And so, when we started the rescue, we had no idea about the non-profit world whatsoever. But we did understand the for-profit field. And so we ran Peaceful Valley Donkey Rescue like a business. We ran it with our heads and not with our hearts, if that makes any sense.

Mark Meyers [00:10:14] And so, to this day, we still run Peaceful Valley as a business. And that's why we are as successful as we are, because we never rescue a donkey that we can't afford to take care of.

Mark Meyers [00:10:28] And unfortunately, in our 20-plus years of existence, we have had to help shut down probably 50-plus rescues because they did just that. They ran it with their hearts and not with their heads, and they got in over their heads. And ultimately the animals suffered because they didn't have the money to care for the animals that they brought in.

Mark Meyers [00:10:52] And so, yes, those years as a contractor really taught me a business sense, which you have to have. I've got a donkey named Jobe who is over 45 years old. And so when gas prices surged and we were paying over \$5 a gallon for diesel, I went out to Jobe and I explained that to him, and he looked me dead in the eye and he said, "I don't care. I want to eat. I want the vet to come out. I want my hooves trimmed. I want my teeth done." He doesn't care. The animals don't care. They want the same care that they get whether diesel's \$5 a gallon or whether diesel's \$2 a gallon. Rescues have to provide these services regardless of where the economy's at.

Mark Meyers [00:11:38] And so, if we're going to be rescue professionals, we have to be prepared for that. We, we, we have to have the funds to do that. And so, the money is the most important thing, that we have on hand to pay for these things for the animals that we have agreed to take care of. And so we can't get in over our heads for the animals that we've already committed to, not the ones that are out there that need our help, but the ones we've already committed to first. And then we can go out and provide those services to the ones that need us.

David Todd [00:12:11] Gotcha. Yeah. You don't want to get out over your skis.

David Todd [00:12:18] Well, well, um, let's just pack up just a few hundred years, if you don't mind, so that folks kind of the context for why there are donkeys and burros here. I think that you had mentioned that donkeys crossed the Rio Grande in the 16th century, and I was hoping that you could kind of lay out that first arrival, first appearance, of donkeys in the United States.

Mark Meyers [00:12:49] So, the donkeys came across the Rio Grande in 1598 with a Spanish explorer Juan de Onate. And they were instrumental in the establishment of the Spanish trails. So they came across. They've been here ever since.

Mark Meyers [00:13:08] And so if you do the math, 1598, that's 90 years before the establishment of Jamestown, which was the first British colony. So as the British were establishing Jamestown, the donkeys were here to see it. When the Declaration of Independence was signed, that was 178 years after the donkeys were here. So the donkeys watched that being signed. So the donkeys have been here a very long time.

Mark Meyers [00:13:38] The donkeys built the Spanish trails, the Catholic mission system, the railroads. You know, the mules and the horses get all the credit. But it was the donkeys that carried the food for the workers. It was the donkeys that carried the explosives into the mountains, to pave the way for the bigger animals to bring the the equipment in.

Mark Meyers [00:14:00] The mining, you know, everybody's seen the prospector with his trusty donkey. Mining donkeys were instrumental in the gold rush years.

Mark Meyers [00:14:11] There's just so much that donkeys have contributed to the building of this country that is ... really their contributions have all been forgotten. But they were instrumental in so many areas of this country's history.

David Todd [00:14:26] That's interesting, because I think that, you know, the public perception about donkeys, from what I've heard, it's just not real positive. They seem to be treated like they're foolish or stubborn or, you know, have other kinds of attributes that people don't seem to respect. What's the story there?

Mark Meyers [00:14:48] Well, if you if you look at the way we were all brought up with cartoons, Bugs Bunny does something stupid: he turns into a donkey. Pinocchio, he's overindulgent: he turns into a donkey. These are ingrained. We call each other jackass if we're being stubborn.

Mark Meyers [00:15:07] So, a donkey is not, nothing at all, like a horse. A horse: if you put a piece of metal in its mouth and you pull back, it stops. If you put something sharp on your boots and dig it into its flank, it goes forward.

Mark Meyers [00:15:21] Donkeys are completely different. It's an intelligent animal. If you challenge a donkey in the wild, it will come at you. If you challenge a horse in the wild, it will run away from you. It's a flight reaction versus a fight reaction. So a donkey turns into pain, not away from pain. Highly intelligent animal.

Mark Meyers [00:15:42] I catch these things for a living. I just came back from the desert. Most of my job in the desert (I don't catch them anymore - I have people who do that): I go out and I find them and I count them, and I see where they move. And I do things like that. Highly intelligent animals.

Mark Meyers [00:15:57] So, when I first started going to Death Valley, I would get out with my large camera. I'm a professional photographer, so I have a very large camera, a very large lens. And so I'm kind of a big guy. I'm 6'4". I weigh about 250 pounds. I mean, you can't sneak up on a donkey.

Mark Meyers [00:16:12] So, I would get out, lumbering around, trying to get my shots. And so these jennets with their foals, they would huddle up. They would face every direction to make

sure nobody's sneaking up on them, keep the babies in the middle. And they would snort at me in a challenge.

Mark Meyers [00:16:26] When I come back the next week, they would do it again. I'd come back the third week, they'd look at me and say, "Oh, it's that guy". By the fifth week, fourth week, they're totally ignoring me. The babies are coming within a few feet of me because they're like, "That's that guy and he's not here to hurt us".

Mark Meyers [00:16:43] That's how smart these animals are. By that time, they realize who I am and why I'm there, and there's no danger from me.

Mark Meyers [00:16:51] They're highly, highly intelligent animals.

Mark Meyers [00:16:55] So, let's talk about being stubborn. They don't want to get in the trailer. Why? Because trailers are noisy. They're loud. And wherever they're standing is safe. That's safe ground. They know that. So you grab them and you're trying to shove them into this dark tube. That's not safe. If you take a human being and try to shove a human being into somewhere that's not safe, how is that human being going to react? Now, is that human being stubborn, or is it just acting out of self-preservation? That's not being stubborn. That's not.

Mark Meyers [00:17:32] You know, you see what I'm saying?

David Todd [00:17:34] Yes.

Mark Meyers [00:17:34] So, we want to paint a donkey in a certain light as being stubborn and stupid. No. That donkey's acting out of self-preservation. And so people ... they're just highly misunderstood in my book. So.

Mark Meyers [00:17:47] But. But we would rather see an animal acquiesce like a horse does. So what do we do? We beat on it and then finally it gives up and it jumps in the trailer. And that's, that's a well-behaved animal. Yeah.

David Todd [00:18:05] So, I'm curious how you first got acquainted with donkeys and learned about their intelligence and their other sort of traits. Sounds like you, you first met donkeys through Izzy. Is that, is that right?

Mark Meyers [00:18:22] So, we got Izzy, and she was young. I think she was, I don't know, about nine months old. And again, knew nothing about them, nothing at all. Knew horses, rode horses, knew everything about horses. So we get this, this donkey. And we tried to learn all about it and could find nothing that would agree with another source. Everything was different that we read.

Mark Meyers [00:18:44] And so, I would just get home from work and I'd sit out there and I would just spend time with her and get to know Izzy. And Izzy was more like a dog than any other animal I'd ever been around. She was playful, she was loving. She would take your hat off your head and run away with it. I mean, just, just like a dog.

Mark Meyers [00:19:04] And, probably within a few months of getting Izzy, Amy had found another donkey. It was at a feed store that would charge through the bars of the pen he had been in and try to bite you. And his chest was rubbed raw, he would hit those bars so hard. And he had green snot hanging out of his nose. He had some kind of nasal infection. So she

bought it. And she paid somebody to bring him to the house. And we spent like 1500 dollars in vet bills. And I would sit out every night and talk to him. And by the time the vet had him fixed and I had calmed down, he was just the sweetest. We named him Banjo.

Mark Meyers [00:19:48] And now I'm starting to get an idea of the donkey mentality just by learning from them. And by the time I had Banjo calmed down here, she had found two others,. And these had been beaten so badly that if you got too close to them, they would shake and fall down. That's how scared of people they were.

Mark Meyers [00:20:05] So, now I had to go out and talk to them every night, and I learned some more from them.

Mark Meyers [00:20:10] And so, the donkeys taught me about their nature. I didn't learn it from a book. I didn't learn it from Mr. Google. I learned it from them.

Mark Meyers [00:20:19] And so, Amy kept getting donkeys, and she and I would just sit out there at night and talk to the donkeys, and the donkeys would teach us about them.

Mark Meyers [00:20:30] And so, she got us up to about 25 donkeys before I looked at her and said, "We got a problem. We're going to have to find a way to move these donkeys through".

Mark Meyers [00:20:39] And you can't just sell them, because if you sell something, you lose the rights to it. The people could do whatever they want with it.

Mark Meyers [00:20:47] And that's what was the basis of the Peaceful Valley Donkey Rescue was that so we could set rules, that people had to follow if they wanted to take this donkey home. And one of those rules was, "if you can't keep it, if you have, if your life changes (people's lives change, they get job transfers or, you know, they have to move to town or whatever), the donkey just comes back to us and we can find it a new home". It's that simple.

Mark Meyers [00:21:12] But, that is the grounds of starting the Peaceful Valley Donkey Rescue.

David Todd [00:21:19] And when did that happen?

Mark Meyers [00:21:23] Well, officially, the corporation was founded March or I'm sorry, December 3rd of 2000 is the official corporate founding.

David Todd [00:21:36] Okay. So you're coming up on over 20 years now?

Mark Meyers [00:21:41] Yes. December this year will be 23 years.

David Todd [00:21:46] Impressive. That's a long time for a non-profit group.

David Todd [00:21:51] So, tell me, I mean, it sounds like you started this is kind of something to bail you out of a maybe a personal situation where you had more donkeys than you quite knew how to manage. But it sounds like you also were becoming aware of the plight of donkeys and particularly burros, you know, generally. Is that true?

Mark Meyers [00:22:15] Well, the more we did, the more we saw needed to be done.

Mark Meyers [00:22:22] Originally, this was just going to be like a little backyard hobby to teach our sons responsibility. They were in kindergarten and first grade at the time, and we wanted them to learn responsibility, you know, to have some chores to do before and after school kind of thing.

Mark Meyers [00:22:38] And then, it was someone that worked for the California Department of Corrections reached out to us and they'd found out that some land that the California Department of Corrections owned was going to get sprayed, aerial sprayed, for weeds. And they had a feral donkey population on this land, and they didn't want that land to get sprayed with these donkeys there. And so they contacted their boss and they convinced them to let us come catch them.

Mark Meyers [00:23:08] So, that was our first wild donkey challenge was, "Okay, now we're going to go learn how to catch wild donkeys". And that netted us about 25 donkeys. So it's like, "Wow, okay, now we're in the wild donkey business". So that was just kind of a big job for us.

Mark Meyers [00:23:26] And then, that led us to be put on the radar of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which is part of the Department of Interior. And that project ended up being a ten-year project in northern Nevada, which gets on the radar of everybody else.

Mark Meyers [00:23:42] And so it's just, we've continually grown over the last 20-plus years into what is now the largest equine rescue in the world. So we have three large rescue rehabilitation facilities. One of them is here in San Angelo, Texas, where we're headquartered. But we have one in Virginia, one in Arizona. We have 25 sanctuaries where we house anywhere from 1000 to 2000 donkeys, depending. 50-plus employees, based in five states.

Mark Meyers [00:24:14] I mean, it's just it's just blown up into this giant organization now that at one time just consisted of me, Amy, and our two boys.

David Todd [00:24:26] Wow. That's a lot of growth, a lot of change.

David Todd [00:24:30] Well, so tell me about the background of these donkeys that come into your hands. It sounds like you know, in the case of the California Department of Corrections there is this, you know, weed control campaign. What are some of the other sort of circumstances that the donkeys are found in (burros in particular), where you need to step in and do something?

Mark Meyers [00:24:56] Well, there's two sides to us. One side is the domestic donkey problems and the other side is the wild donkey management.

Mark Meyers [00:25:03] So, on the domestic side, typically we work with law enforcement and that is abuse, neglect, abandonment and hoarding.

Mark Meyers [00:25:13] And that is people that just aren't taking care of their donkeys. And so we see hoof cases where the hooves can be 18 inches long and just spiraling out of control because they simply won't spend \$25 to get the donkey's hooves trimmed. And it's, it's crippling. These donkeys come to us and they're crippled. And what could have been a \$25 hoof trim is going to cost us thousands. And it's going to take this poor donkey months, if not years, to get put back in anything close to normal conditions to be able to walk normally again.

Mark Meyers [00:25:50] Fortunately, we have probably the best farrier in the country when it comes to getting these donkeys back into shape where they can walk comfortably again. But it's sad.

Mark Meyers [00:26:06] The abuse, again, because people have it in their head that this donkey is being stubborn, and maybe if I keep beating on him, he'll eventually do what I want him to do. And so we've seen some donkeys come in that have just been horribly beaten. It's sad. We get involved in a lot of court cases where these animals have been treated horribly.

Mark Meyers [00:26:30] A lot of abandonment. Here in Texas, during the last drought of 2011, people were destocking their ranches, and so they would collect all their cattle and find out that they had 20, 30, 40 donkeys mixed in with their cattle. And you couldn't take them to a sale barn. The sale barns wouldn't let you unload them, because nobody would buy them.

Mark Meyers [00:26:50] And so, what they were doing, it's taken them a few counties over and simply kicking them out of the trailer or cutting the fence and dumping them in people's pastures.

Mark Meyers [00:26:59] And all of that fell to the county sheriffs to sort out. Well, the county sheriffs couldn't do anything with them, because according to the letter of the law, they had to find a place to store them and advertise them so that the owner could come claim them. Well, obviously, the owner wasn't going to come claim them, and the sheriff's departments were going broke. And so they would call us and we would take them, because with our identification system, we could prove that if that owner did come forward, we could point out which donkeys they were, that came from that particular case on that particular day, and we could return them to the owner, should the owner ever come to claim them. And we took in about 1500 donkeys in 2011 just from sheriff department abandonment cases.

Mark Meyers [00:27:43] Just this past year, with this drought, we actually had, I think, five donkeys come in from the drought. And that's because we took in so many from the last drought. There just weren't any that people were getting rid of this time, which I think that says a lot.

Mark Meyers [00:28:02] So, that's that.

Mark Meyers [00:28:03] And that's literally the lower 48 states from our three locations. We can be anywhere within 24 hours to respond to those kind of abuse, neglect, abandonment.

Mark Meyers [00:28:14] The largest hoarding case we ever did was out in Inyo County, California, and that was 144 donkeys, nine horses and seven mules. And it took us, once we had all of our assets in place, it took us a day and a half to get all those animals safely removed from that location to a place where we could bring all the vets and everybody in to start treating the animals.

Mark Meyers [00:28:41] So, that that's half of what we do.

Mark Meyers [00:28:43] And then, the other half is we manage just under 6 million acres of wild donkey habitat, and that's for the National Park Service, the U.S. Army, NASA and the U.S. Navy.

David Todd [00:29:01] Your plate is full, to say the least. That's amazing.

David Todd [00:29:07] You know, tell, tell us more about one other aspect that I think, before we get into the burros on wild lands. I think I'd read that some of the donkeys that are being found were used by drug smugglers. Is that true?

Mark Meyers [00:29:27] Yes. When I was working down along the Rio Grande, we would pick some up that had white bands around their fetlocks, just above their hoof. And what they do down in Mexico is they will hobble them with wire. And that wire gets so tight that it kills the color-making in the follicles of the hair. And so that's a sure sign that those donkeys came out of Mexico because they only do that down to Mexico. It's a cruel way to hobble. But you'll see that a lot.

Mark Meyers [00:30:04] For instance, you'll see pictures in like Tijuana where they paint the donkeys to look like zebra, and they tie them to carts where they sell merchandise off the back of the carts. But if you look closely, the donkeys' hooves are hobbled with wire.

Mark Meyers [00:30:20] And so, we've actually taken a lot, we did a lot of work with the USDA when they used to have wranglers working up and down the Rio Grande, and all the donkeys that those wranglers would catch would come to us. And I would say about a third of them had the marks of the, the wire along the fetlock.

Mark Meyers [00:30:37] So, what would happen is the smugglers would bring the donkeys across and usually they would just cut them loose, because at the time there was a bunch of donkeys that they could just turn them loose. They didn't even to reuse them.

David Todd [00:30:54] I see. And then they get a new herd or however many they might need back from Mexico.

Mark Meyers [00:30:59] Yes.

David Todd [00:31:00] Just replace them. I see.

Mark Meyers [00:31:02] Yes.

David Todd [00:31:02] They're running light, I guess. So you mentioned the issues with abandonment, drought, hoarding and the drug smuggling uses. And, but I think through what you were telling me, there were also these burros that that you found on on public lands that were run by BLM or NASA or the Navy - gosh, every agency. Can you talk about that sort of kind of feral situation where the donkeys have pretty much gone wild and are living on public land? How did that start?

Mark Meyers [00:31:47] Okay. Well, donkeys have pretty much been here, like I said, since they crossed in 1598. We know from the historical records that, from the beginning, they escaped. They were traded to the Indians. The Spanish explorer, Juan de Onate, eventually became governor of the region around the Pueblo Indian region.

Mark Meyers [00:32:16] There was a big battle, and that battle, the biggest battle was in 1675 when the Pueblo Indians revolted against Spanish rules. And they won this big battle, and the Spaniards fled. This was up around Santa Fe, and they left behind thousands of mules, horses and donkeys up around Santa Fe. And those animals, the Pueblo Indians had no use for

equines. They didn't understand their use. I mean, a lot of them, you know, they just didn't need them. And so those animals wandered.

Mark Meyers [00:32:51] You know, everybody wants to imagine this, you know, the prospector is releasing their donkeys from Death Valley and, you know, all this this romanticism. But truth be told, a lot of these animals were just released by the Indians who had no use for them. And so they wandered the plains and they followed, you know, the Rio Grande, for instance, down into the Rio Grande Valley.

Mark Meyers [00:33:14] And so, these animals have always been around. They've always been a part of the landscape for as long as there's been a landscape to be around. And so all throughout the Southwest has always had wild donkeys and wild horse populations. For as long as there's been people here.

Mark Meyers [00:33:34] Eventually a lot of the Plains Indians and the Northern tribe Indians, they became mounted. They became horse cultures. And so there's, that's just part of the history of our country.

Mark Meyers [00:33:49] And they did that to become more mobile. You know, here in Texas, the Apaches were a horse-mounted tribe that that allowed them to branch out into other regions.

Mark Meyers [00:34:01] So, but, you know, the donkeys, for instance, because they are a desert breed, you know, they evolved in the deserts of Africa. So they are a desert breed. That's the big ears, just like a mule deer or jackrabbit, the big ears, they catch the desert breeze and it cools the blood in their head. They can go five days without water. They can lose about a third of their body weight due to dehydration and gain it back at the next spring when they, you know, when they can drink. So they're very adept.

Mark Meyers [00:34:30] So, they migrate more to the more arid regions. And so they can thrive in areas where it's hotter than the horses can. And so the horses then, you know, they migrate to the more northern territories while the donkeys migrate to more southern territories. And so there's always been donkeys in the desert regions forever, really since the 1600s. I mean, there's just always been donkeys in the landscape.

David Todd [00:34:56] This is just so interesting. All news to me. Thank you for filling me in.

David Todd [00:35:06] So, you know, while we're talking about these donkeys in wild lands, I think you mentioned earlier that bringing them into to, you know, rescue them and try to treat them and so on, you've first got to catch them. How do you go about doing that? They're so intelligent.

Mark Meyers [00:35:27] So, most of the areas that we work in our arid deserts. So water is a premium to donkeys. So we have several 500-gallon water trailers. And what we do is we set up a big trap, basically a big corral, and the gate is fingers, and that's only, they're metal bars, but they're in the shape of fingers. And we put in water.

Mark Meyers [00:35:56] And we put in several different types of bait. And one of them is alfalfa. And alfalfa is terrible for donkeys, but they love it. And if you're going to catch kids, are you going to use chocolate cake or are you going to use asparagus? Right. So alfalfa is chocolate cake for donkeys and it has a really strong smell and it's just delicious.

Mark Meyers [00:36:18] So, we put in water and we put it in alfalfa and they, they see the fingers and with the fingers, I mean, if you put your hands and splay your fingers in front of your eyes, you see the gap. They can see the gap. They walk in. But when they turn around because their eyes are on the side of their head, they can't see their way out. And so it's a very gentle way to catch them without having to rope them, without having to chase them. They basically catch themselves.

Mark Meyers [00:36:46] And the testament to that is we're doing a radio-tracking collar study on them, and the ones that have the collar will actually enter the trap several different times because they know they're going to get breakfast and then they're going to get released. So it's such a gentle method of catching them that they're like, "Hey, let's go get a bite to eat, we'll get a drink of water. That guy's going to come by, open the gate and let us go again."

Mark Meyers [00:37:14] That's how gentle the whole the whole thing is. And so it's a very gentle way to catch them without bothering them. And so once they're caught that way, we back the trailer up, we open the gates, then we move the panel aside and the guys walk into the far side of the corral and the donkeys don't know people. And so they simply move away from the people and they jump in the trailer.

Mark Meyers [00:37:39] We close the gate, we take them to a temporary holding facility, and we wait until we have enough donkeys for the vet to fly herself in, draw the blood. When we get the results, then we move them to one of our facilities.

Mark Meyers [00:37:52] But, while we're waiting for the blood to come back, whoever is babysitting the donkeys, because we can't leave them alone, will spend their days with the donkeys.

Mark Meyers [00:38:02] And so, by the time the blood results come back, typically speaking, those donkeys are so used to people that you can pet them, you can actually go up because they've never once had a bad experience with people, which is way different than if we were out there on horseback roping them and dragging them, doing, you know, much like the government does when they catch them.

Mark Meyers [00:38:23] We use very, very gentle methods. They never get yelled at. They never get traumatized in any way. We're a very low-stress way to capture them.

David Todd [00:38:34] That's so interesting. I would have thought that being wild and needing to be independent and self-reliant, that they would be just very cautious of people and would run no matter how gentle and slow you were with them.

Mark Meyers [00:38:49] No, because ultimately our goal is to get them into adoptive homes, and so that the slower that we go and the stress-free we go, the sooner we can transition them into our training program and then eventually into an adoptive home.

Mark Meyers [00:39:05] Now, there are exceptions. There are some that simply, you know, maybe they're on the older side, or the grumpier side, and they're like, "Hey, you know what? I don't want anything to do with people."

Mark Meyers [00:39:14] And that's why we have sanctuaries. And so those guys can go out on sanctuary, and the sanctuary that gets them, they get the exact same health care that

everybody else. They get their hooves trimmed, they get their teeth looked at, they get their vaccines, they get everything that everybody else gets.

Mark Meyers [00:39:29] But, when they're not getting that, it's been the rest of the time, usually on 500 acres where they get the sense of freedom and they get to make their own decisions, but they're still having to have interaction with people four times a year.

Mark Meyers [00:39:47] And then, eventually, even those guys will come around and say, "You know what, people aren't so bad", and then eventually they will enter into the adoption program.

David Todd [00:39:59] It's interesting.

David Todd [00:40:02] So, one of the things that I wanted to get your views on are these, these points of conflict where, you know, the land managers for, I guess, mostly public lands have been concerned about too many donkeys in too arid a country, too sensitive a habitat. And there have been these instances where they've shot them. And I think that that happened in 2007, out at Big Bend Ranch State Park. And I think that your organization came in to try to make things better and find some solutions. Is that right?

Mark Meyers [00:40:40] Yes, yes.

David Todd [00:40:40] So, could you tell me the origins of that and what happened?

Mark Meyers [00:40:46] Yes. So, we came in and the problem with catching donkeys on the Big Bend Ranch State Park was we were limited to setting traps on existing roads, which are few and far between. And the donkeys make their own paths, and their paths are, I don't know, about 10 to 12 inches wide. And seldom do their paths intersect with existing roads. So the chances of setting a trap and having the donkeys go anywhere near it are nonexistent.

Mark Meyers [00:41:32] And so, what we did is we worked, like I said, with the USDA wranglers over the course of the time we were down there, and had great success. I think we probably pulled out over 50. Just working with them. And that only ended when the cartel violence got to be too much in the USDA pulled the wranglers out.

Mark Meyers [00:41:52] So, then we shifted our focus and we worked with the ranchers, the private ranchers, around the perimeter of the park. And with that, we pulled out close to 200 donkeys there.

Mark Meyers [00:42:05] But, the problem with the state park is there might be zero donkeys on Tuesday and 150 donkeys on Wednesday, because they go back and forth across the river. So there's really no way to tell the ebb and flow.

Mark Meyers [00:42:19] But, let's talk about why we need to remove them. Why? What are the reasons that they give as to why the donkeys need to be shot, or why they need to be removed?

Mark Meyers [00:42:36] Do you know why?

David Todd [00:42:39] I guess maybe eating too much of the forage that's there for wild animals as well. But I'm just speculating.

Mark Meyers [00:42:47] Well, they say they're destructive to the ecosystem. Okay?

David Todd [00:42:56] Mm hmm.

Mark Meyers [00:42:57] To the natural habitat ... Well, I would counter that by saying, "There is no natural habitat without the donkeys. The donkeys have been there since 1598? Okay? So Texas was founded in 1845. The donkeys were there before there was a state of Texas. Big Bend Ranch itself, give or take, you know, it was purchased from different people and built up over time. But let's just say, 1958, the donkeys were already there. The state park itself founded in 1988. The donkeys were already there.

Mark Meyers [00:43:41] So, there really was no time that scientists could point and say, "Okay, that was the natural state of that landscape without donkeys because the donkeys were already there". So there is no state of that region, of that landscape, where there wasn't donkeys already there. So how can you say that donkeys are being destructive, if the donkeys were already there?

Mark Meyers [00:44:09] So, white people got introduced; the donkeys were already there. The white people introduced cattle. The donkeys were already there. So how can we say the donkeys are the one causing ecological damage if they've already always been there?

Mark Meyers [00:44:27] So then, okay, we've got to shoot all the donkeys. But, because the cattle have a historical significance, we're going to leave some cattle there. So that makes no sense to me.

Mark Meyers [00:44:39] Oh, well, they, they compete with the bighorn sheep. Well, I'm not a scientist. That's why we work with scientists. And we work with scientists that have big letters behind their name, like PhDs. And one of them does studies with bighorn sheep and donkeys and how they interact.

Mark Meyers [00:45:03] Now, bighorn sheep live at higher elevations that donkeys can't get to. So the idea that they're in conflict with bighorn sheep is preposterous. That, it's ridiculous.

Mark Meyers [00:45:15] I've heard that, "Well, donkeys won't let other animals drink from the same water source". Also preposterous. In this particular case, the water source is the Rio Grande. So the idea that the donkeys are patrolling the Rio Grande and not letting any other animal drink from there is just stupid. Let's just face that. That's a stupid idea.

Mark Meyers [00:45:41] So, the reality is they don't want donkeys because they don't like donkeys. And let them say, "We're going to shoot all the donkeys because we don't like donkeys," but don't make up non-scientific things if you can't prove it. And it's unprovable, what they're saying.

Mark Meyers [00:45:55] We have scientists that work ... See, part of my work, all of our work out West with the federal government, it's done at our expense. We don't take any government money, ever. The one stipulation is that they had to approve all of our research permits. That was it. It was research that they would never approve beforehand, but they had to approve it now, if they wanted us to remove the donkeys.

Mark Meyers [00:46:20] And our research has proved that donkeys are a benefit to the ecosystem.

Mark Meyers [00:46:26] Donkeys can smell water. A donkey will dig a hole up to four feet deep to access water. That water is then accessible to all other wildlife, including bighorn sheep, coyotes, mountain lions, birds, you name it. They can get down in that hole and drink that water that otherwise would be accessible.

Mark Meyers [00:46:48] In Death Valley, people think, "Oh, there's no water in Death Valley". No, there's springs everywhere. But the vegetation grows up so dense, nobody can get to it except for donkeys. They will tunnel through that vegetation to get into that water. Well, that tunnel is then available to all other animals.

Mark Meyers [00:47:05] Mountain lions - where there's a fragile bighorn sheep population, like Death Valley, when there's donkeys, the mountain lions have a choice. They can go after donkeys or bighorn sheep. You remove all the donkeys, the bighorn sheep population suffers.

Mark Meyers [00:47:23] So, there's a lot of benefit to having a healthy donkey population and a healthy bighorn sheep population. There are many benefits that we found of having both species coexist. So that's why, that's what our research has proven out.

David Todd [00:47:40] Well, that's really interesting. Thank you.

David Todd [00:47:45] So, I was interested that it sounds like there are of sort of legal niceties about where the burros are found. If they're on BLM land, they're protected, I guess, as living symbols. But if they're on National Park Service land, they aren't. Is that accurate or am I getting things confused?

Mark Meyers [00:48:13] So, 1972, Free Roaming, Wild Horse and Burro Act. It was signed by President Nixon and it protected all the wild horses and burros. And then almost immediately everybody said, "Well, except for here".

Mark Meyers [00:48:32] And what it boiled down to was the mission statement of each department.

Mark Meyers [00:48:38] So, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife said, "Well, our mission is to protect native species, and horses and donkeys aren't native species, so they're not protected on the land that we manage."

Mark Meyers [00:48:50] The National Park Service said, "Well, our mission statement is to protect these places, and the horses and donkeys aren't supposed to be in these places", which really doesn't make sense because those places may protect other things that are historical. And donkeys and horses are part of that history. So they kind of got to pick and choose what they wanted. That's why I don't agree with that.

Mark Meyers [00:49:17] And if you get into the backcountry of, say, Death Valley, which is pristine donkey habitat, it, there's no reason for them not to be allowed to stay back there. Manage their numbers, of course, but it just doesn't make sense.

Mark Meyers [00:49:33] But so, anyway, where Death Valley, if you look at a map of Death Valley, it usually shows up green because it's a national park, and then around it will be

usually a gray area. Well, that gray area is Bureau of Land Management land. And so there's donkey populations all the way around Death Valley.

Mark Meyers [00:49:51] So, I'm a donkey and I'm standing in the gray area. I'm federally protected. But I get to wandering and I wander into that green area, now I'm not. I'm no longer federally protected. And Mark has a contract to remove me and take me to Texas. But if I wander back in that gray area before Mark gets to me, I'm federally protected again. And that's basically how that whole thing works.

Mark Meyers [00:50:18] And on the Fort Irwin, where we work, it's a tank training center. That's where General Patton trained his tank corps, and the donkeys used the tank targets for shade. And that doesn't work out very well for them, of course, but it also doesn't work out well for the kids manning the tanks. They blow up the donkeys and they feel bad and it makes them hesitate, which makes the officers mad. So we need to get the donkeys out of there. So we take a lot of donkeys out of Fort Irwin.

Mark Meyers [00:50:50] And then in the summertime, the donkeys go into the town itself and they get hit by cars. We actually have a trap set up by the Burger King. We have a trap set up by the ball field, because they literally go into town.

Mark Meyers [00:51:03] And then, NASA Goldstone, it's the deep space communication center where they have a giant satellite to talk to, that's what talks to the Mars rover, things like that. And the donkeys use those for shade, but they get bored and they chew on the cables. So they're a nuisance there.

Mark Meyers [00:51:18] So, yes, they're federally protected in some places, but then on state lands, like the Big Bend Ranch, that's state land, the federal protection does not go there. So it's basically certain federal lands is where they're federally protected.

Mark Meyers [00:51:35] So, are there sort of public perceptions of, of these efforts by the state and the feds to control burros? I think I read that in 2011, when Parks and Wildlife here in Texas began shooting burros again, that people seem to notice and object. And I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about that kind of public attitude about the control efforts on burros.

Mark Meyers [00:52:12] Typically speaking, people don't care. You know, I live in San Angelo, Texas. This is a decent-sized town, over 100,000 people if you count the university and the military base. I have been on the front page of the newspaper probably a dozen times. I've been on the local TV news a bunch of times. I was a 2019 CNN Hero. We've got three billboards going in town encouraging people to come out and take a tour.

Mark Meyers [00:52:42] Every, almost every day, people will say, "I had no idea you guys were here". And it's because people have this blind spot when it comes to donkeys. And I don't know what it is, but it's really hard to get people to notice.

Mark Meyers [00:52:58] The first thing people see when they come off the airplane at our local airport is, is our sign at the airport. The local airport gave us a free sign to advertise tours. And so the first thing you see is a picture of a donkey when you come off the airplane, and people still don't know that we're here.

Mark Meyers [00:53:17] So, I don't know what it is, but people really just don't care about donkey.

Mark Meyers [00:53:22] So, I spend all my time traveling the country talking to people about donkeys, trying to get them to care. And it's been a 20-plus year uphill battle. I'm like that that one Greek god that's constantly rolling that giant rock up the hill. It is like never-ending.

David Todd [00:53:41] Sisyphus.

Mark Meyers [00:53:44] Yeah. There you go.

David Todd [00:53:46] Yeah. Good old Greek. Hard-working Greek.

Mark Meyers [00:53:50] Yes, but it's very frustrating because people just don't seem to care. And they've given so much to this country and they really just, they don't have a place in history and they deserve one.

David Todd [00:54:10] Yes. Well, so, it sounds like, you know, despite this kind of general, I don't know, indifference or apathy, the donkeys that did you did see a pretty significant outcry. I think there was change.org had some sort of a, I don't know, petition that was posted that got thousands of people up in arms. And I'm curious how that might have connected with the public, you know, the shooting campaign in 2011.

Mark Meyers [00:54:55] Yes, I mean, it definitely raised awareness and they pledged to not shoot any more. But, I don't know that it, I don't know if it's really going to make a difference because, you know, when they, the new director, comes in, you know, it's going to change hands again. There's going to be new management and all it's going to take is, "Well, let's do it again". Is there really going to be change in Texas Parks and Wildlife when it comes to that area?

Mark Meyers [00:55:28] I mean, that's a very remote area of Texas that nobody really is watching. So we're going to rely on the reporters down there to keep an eye on it for us. I don't know if you've ever been to that strip of, you know, it's a very narrow area on a very deserted road between Terlingua and Presidio that not a lot of people go to. And so they can get away with a lot down there. That's no man's land. And so if they were to start shooting today, who's going to know?

David Todd [00:56:07] And do you think that there are any non-lethal ways to control the burros if they find that they really are doing some kind of damage that they object to?

Mark Meyers [00:56:21] You know, catching them, but, down there, it's difficult. With the rules they have in place, it is, it's really, really difficult. The resources for us to go down there: it would be expensive. I would have to take probably ten people, and spend months to clean them out, because like I said, it depends on the day of the week too. They go back and forth between Mexico and that strip. And it depends on the time of year.

Mark Meyers [00:56:54] So, it could be done. We would have to go down there and do an assessment to see when they're coming and going. I mean, but it could be done.

Mark Meyers [00:57:03] When I was down there before, you know, it was when we were first coming to Texas and I was in a one-man show. Now, we definitely have more resources that we can put in the field and we could do it.

Mark Meyers [00:57:15] But, you know, shooting is a lot easier. You know - long rifle and a scope, you can do a lot more damage than you can when, you know, setting up traps and trying to entice, especially when you have to stay to the existing roads, which is what we were forced to do.

Mark Meyers [00:57:34] There's also, you know, we do a lot of work in the Caribbean islands and, you know, castrations and different things like that. But when you have a limitless supply coming across from Mexico, that also becomes a challenge.

David Todd [00:57:52] Gotcha. All right. I guess abutting Mexico and the cartel issues, that makes it a difficult area to work in.

Mark Meyers [00:58:01] Yes.

David Todd [00:58:01] I would imagine.

David Todd [00:58:06] So, I think you mentioned earlier a little bit about horses versus, or mustangs, versus burros, and that one seems to go towards the north, I guess the mustangs and burros towards the south. Are there other ways that you compare those two herds of equines?

Mark Meyers [00:58:31] Well, out West, there's an ongoing drought. I mean, a lot of people have seen pictures of Lake Mead and how low it is, lowest it's been since they built the Hoover Dam, actually. And there are horses that, in that region. And the problem is the horses don't do near as well in drought circumstances as they do, as the donkeys do.

Mark Meyers [00:59:00] Now, what a lot of people don't know is the Bureau of Land Management has over 60,000 horses in storage right now. And by storage I mean, horses that they've removed from the ranges and they have put on one of their many facilities that they're having to feed. And that accounts for one half of their budget is just feeding those animals.

Mark Meyers [00:59:24] The problem with horses is when people adopt a horse, they want something they can ride. The good thing about donkeys, when people adopt a donkey, they just want a pet. They really don't have expectations beyond a pet.

Mark Meyers [00:59:40] And so, the BLM can't get rid of these horses. And so now they're faced, "Oh my gosh, we've got a drought". So they really need to remove even more horses than normal because of the drought.

Mark Meyers [00:59:53] So, we play a big part in the Bureau of Land Management program because we buy any donkey that is over ten years old or has been offered unsuccessfully for adoption three times. It's called the Sale Burro Program. It's been going on since 2004 and we have bought thousands, as a result. We pay like \$20 a piece so that we can meet the letter of the law. We just, since, I want to say September, we have brought in 400 and the last 100 of the 500 contract that I signed will be here in two weeks. They're all males and castrated.

Mark Meyers [01:00:29] And, we do that because that takes the expense off of the government and puts it on us. So we pay for the castration and the hoof-trimming and all that kind of stuff. And it's because they just simply can't afford it. And so besides our wild burro capture programs that we do on the non federally protected ones, we also help the government in taking that expense off the Bureau of Land Management because their program is in trouble, quite frankly.

Mark Meyers [01:00:58] I mean, they, with all the horses that they have in storage, and now faced with this monumental drought that's out there, even with these heavy rains that have come through, that's still not putting a dent in the water deficit already in place out there.

Mark Meyers [01:01:15] Coupled with the amount of construction that's going on and all the houses that they're building around the Las Vegas area. Our yard is in Phoenix, Arizona, which is part of the Arizona strip. And when we built that, there was literally almost no houses around our ranch. And since that time it has built up ten-fold.

Mark Meyers [01:01:39] And now we have neighbors that are complaining about the donkeys that they built next door. So they, literally the donkeys watched our neighbors build their houses. And now those neighbors are complaining to the county about the donkeys that they're living next door to. It's ridiculous.

Mark Meyers [01:01:58] But, there's no water. They're complaining that the donkeys are drinking their water. It's like, "Wait a minute, you moved in next to them".

Mark Meyers [01:02:05] So it's, it's ridiculous what's going on out west. But they keep allowing all this construction, but there's no water for the animals in the wild. So it's really concerning what's going on out west.

Mark Meyers [01:02:19] But to me, the donkeys are the ones that are going to be all right because they can they can go further and further away from the water source to graze, but the horses can't. And so my concern is with the horses.

David Todd [01:02:34] Gotcha.

David Todd [01:02:36] Well, speaking of horses, and I know that's really your focus, but I look at old maps of Texas and they talk about the, you know, Mustang Island and the mustang lands of South Texas. And yet, there are none there now that I'm aware of. And I'm wondering if you know much about the history of mustangs in Texas and, you know, how they were once here and why they're no longer here.

Mark Meyers [01:03:10] You know, just like everything else - man. Anything that has value is either going to be eaten or caught and sold. And that's just the reality of it. Man is proven to be the great adapter of anything of value.

Mark Meyers [01:03:32] It was, it was the same that we learned in Australia when we went down to shot our films down there. Man is going to alter the landscape to benefit him. It was the same when the Indians were here. They either ate it or they captured it and used it.

Mark Meyers [01:03:50] Same with the white people. When the great cattle drives came up out of Texas, they gathered the cattle and moved them north to sell them.

Mark Meyers [01:03:58] So, the horses were part of that. Take the horses. Break the horses. Ride the horses. Sell the horses.

Mark Meyers [01:04:06] Anything of value. We're going to, we're going to use it to our benefit.

Mark Meyers [01:04:11] So, that's why they're not here. They had value.

David Todd [01:04:16] Okay. Well, let's shift gears a little bit and talk about the donkeys do end up in your care. It sounds like that's a lot of responsibility between feeding and tending their hooves and medicating them and castrating them and tracking them. Can you sort of run through some of those tasks that you have to take on to support these herds?

Mark Meyers [01:04:51] Yes. So, usually, under Peaceful Valley's care, we have about 15 ... well, nationwide, we have about 3000 donkeys under our care, and that includes the sanctuaries. That includes our three main ranches, our satellite adoption centers. And so, that's, that's a lot of hooves that have to be trimmed.

Mark Meyers [01:05:16] Here in our San Angelo facility, we usually have around 1200 donkeys. And so we use a tilt chute, which they walk into, it squeezes them, it lays them on their side. The farriers step up, trim their hooves. There's two farriers. And so, the donkeys are in and out of that box in about three and a half minutes. No, no sedation, no nothing. Three and a half minutes. Boom, They're done. And so the farriers are usually doing about 100 to 120 donkeys per day. All the donkeys are either on an eight week or ten week trimming cycle. So everybody's getting trimmed on a very regular basis.

Mark Meyers [01:05:53] Everybody gets de-wormed twice a year. We do fecal studies to make sure that we're getting all the right parasites treated. Everybody gets their annual vaccines. When they come in, initially, they get their boosters and their vaccines or deworming.

Mark Meyers [01:06:10] Everybody gets freeze-branded on both shoulders because the donkeys belonged to the rescue for life, even if they get adopted. So that is one of the best ways, that way we can always make sure our donkeys are our donkeys and they never end up in a sale barn. We also microchip them one in the neck, one in the ear. We're going to be switching over to what's called a lip chip. It goes up in their upper lip, because they don't migrate as much.

Mark Meyers [01:06:38] And as far as feeding goes, here in San Angelo, we feed about 15,000 pounds of hay every day, along with about 800 pounds of bag feed.

Mark Meyers [01:06:48] So, yeah, it's a very expensive operation.

Mark Meyers [01:06:52] Plus the payroll, plus we're just like any major company. We have car insurance, truck insurance. We have, you know, vehicle maintenance, we have payroll taxes, we have liability insurance.

Mark Meyers [01:07:04] You know, it's a very, very, very expensive operation.

Mark Meyers [01:07:08] And this is nationwide. So I don't, I don't sleep much. I, I wake up in the middle of the night a lot and trace out the numbers on the ceiling of my bedroom, a lot.

David Todd [01:07:23] Oh, boy. I can see. I can see. It's a lot to have on your mind.

David Todd [01:07:29] I understand you've had some interesting partners that have helped with some of this care. I think at one point you worked with Texas A&M and then more recently, Texas Tech, the veterinary schools there. What do they do for you?

Mark Meyers [01:07:45] For years, we worked with Texas A&M Veterinary School. And so what they do is they bring out their fourth-year vet students and their staff and we do castrations. And it's an amazing program, really, because these kids, I mean, they're kids to me, and they watch a few of the procedures and then they cut them loose and their first one or two, they're very apprehensive. They work in pairs. But by the 30th castration, they're like old pros. And it's amazing to watch.

Mark Meyers [01:08:18] And I was doing a job with the Crockett County Sheriff's Department, and they had said, "Oh, you know, come pick up the donkeys. They're going to be at this vet's office." So I went to the vet's office. I went to the front desk and I checked in and say, "Hey, where's the donkeys?" And this young girl comes out and she says, "You don't know me because you weren't there that day. But I went out to your yard and I learned how to castrate there. And as a thank you, I went ahead and castrated the jacks for you, for free."

Mark Meyers [01:08:49] And I thought that was so awesome that, you know, because this program has been going on since 2009. And so, you now, several hundred of these kids that have come out to the yard to learn how to castrate.

Mark Meyers [01:09:02] So our liaison professor that was at Texas A&M is now at Texas Tech, which is been there, going to be coming up on their third year of having a vet school. So now we're going to be working with Texas Tech. But, we've work with Kansas State. We've worked with Colorado State. We've work with Cornell University, UC-Davis, out in California. So we work with a lot of vet schools.

Mark Meyers [01:09:29] We do a lot of donkey-specific research. In the past, all, if you run bloodwork on a donkey, you get the comparison to a horse. So now, we're actually doing donkey-specific research with these universities, which is just fabulous - so excited to be able to do these kind of things that are just for donkeys with legitimate universities. We've done a lot of research.

David Todd [01:09:57] What sort of research?

Mark Meyers [01:10:00] Well, Erick Lundgren is a PhD. We've known him for years. And he's the one who does a lot of the field work as far as the donkey water, digging the holes, doing the mountain lion research. We're doing the radio tracking collar studies with UC-Davis and Colorado State, combined, and we funded it. And so we're doing different tracking on jacks and jennets to see when they're moving, how they're moving, what areas are they moving to when the jennets are pregnant? Are they eating certain types of diets during certain phases of their pregnancy?

Mark Meyers [01:10:43] Just all sorts of fascinating research like that. It's just, it's amazing. Nobody's ever done it. And just some of the stuff we're learning is just mind-blowing.

David Todd [01:10:57] That is really neat.

David Todd [01:10:59] Well, I gather that part of your set-up, is not only with these, these vets but also with amateurs who adopt animals. And I'm curious how you find them and the relationship that you have with this network of adopters.

Mark Meyers [01:11:21] So, what we're looking for is people that have an appreciation for the nature of donkeys. So it's not unlike people that want to adopt a dog. We want people that want to interact with the donkey - people that want a pet, basically. We don't want them to take our donkeys and turn them out in a giant field and forget about them because we put so much work into them, so much love.

Mark Meyers [01:11:46] To be adoptable, the donkeys have to be friendly. They have to take a halter. They have to walk around behind you on a rope. They have to pick up their hooves for trimming.

Mark Meyers [01:11:54] So, they're, they're lovable. They're big, old, lovable animals that we put all this work into.

Mark Meyers [01:12:01] So, we want our adopters to continue that love.

Mark Meyers [01:12:06] And we have a satellite adoption center network that literally spans the country. And these are these are volunteers that take our donkeys into their home and place them locally. So if you're interested in adopting, you can find one that's in your community and we find the donkeys that are perfect for you and we put them in your home and we follow up with you to make sure it's all working out and you can reach out to us. And there's this huge network of help, and it's just a tremendous organization.

Mark Meyers [01:12:41] And Facebook, I'm not a big Facebook guy, I'll be honest. But fortunately, everybody else in the organization is. And that's how they all work, like this big donkey family on Facebook where they ask each other questions and they share pictures. And it's just, it's great.

Mark Meyers [01:12:57] And that's, but that's typically how we find our adopters is through Facebook. And that's how they keep in touch and that's how they ask questions.

Mark Meyers [01:13:06] And we also have this great feature on our website that's called, "Ask the Donkey Doctor". And a good friend of mine, Eric Davis, a veterinarian from UC Davis. And he called me one time, and Eric never uses profanity. And this one time he called me and it was profanity-laden. And it's because he had actually answered a post on Facebook that was a veterinary question. And 12 people followed him up with non-veterinary responses. And it made him mad because he's actually a veterinarian giving medical advice. And these other people are not giving veterinary medical advice.

Mark Meyers [01:13:46] And so, I said, "Eric, why don't we actually put something on my website where people can ask veterinary questions and they'll get a legitimate response?" And he thought that was a wonderful idea.

Mark Meyers [01:13:58] And so, we have a network of actual veterinarians. So if you ask a medical question, we put it out to these veterinarians and they respond back to you with actual veterinary advice. And it's been great. So people can actually get donkey advice from actual donkey veterinarians through our website.

Mark Meyers [01:14:18] And that's, stuff like this has never been done donkey-specific before. It's always just been, you know, it's like a little horse. Just treat it like a little horse.

Mark Meyers [01:14:27] And so, it's very exciting what we've been able to do since we've become what we've become.

David Todd [01:14:35] And so, these folks who end up adopting the donkeys and, you know, you mentioned that they become a friend or a pet. Are there other uses that donkeys are put to or roles that they have in these people's lives?

Mark Meyers [01:14:51] Well, donkeys can do all sorts of stuff. Myself, I used to pack with mine. They, donkeys can typically carry 20% of their body weight in dead, what you call dead weight, like equipment, supplies, things like that, or 30% live weight, if it's a rider. So a 500-pound donkey can carry 100 pounds of packing stuff or a 150-pound rider.

Mark Meyers [01:15:24] They can pull a cart. I used to, I used to have a few that would pull a cart, like say in a parade, things like that.

Mark Meyers [01:15:33] They can jump. I've done a few competitions where I was a judge, and there's a thing called, "'coon jumping". Typically, it's mules that would do this. If you were an avid 'coon hunter at night and you were riding your mule and you came to your neighbor's fence, it would be bad form to cut your neighbor's fence. So, what you would do, is you'd take off your red flannel jacket, you would drape it over the barbed wire so that the mule could see it and the mule would jump over. And so that's, that's where the, that's where the term, "'coon jumping", comes from.

Mark Meyers [01:16:06] And so, they have these competitions where from a dead stand, the mule or donkey just jumps over. And, and donkeys are very good at jumping. They can jump very high from a dead stand.

Mark Meyers [01:16:20] And so, yeah, there's a lot of things they can they can do in that nature.

Mark Meyers [01:16:24] But, I used to pack mine in Death Valley. The donkey I mentioned earlier, Jobe, who's in his forties now, he used to be my guard donkey. And so while the other donkeys were hobbled at night, Jobe would patrol the camp to fight the wild jacks out of camp, keep them from coming in and molesting my girls. He was quite successful in his younger years.

David Todd [01:16:48] That's great. Sounds like they're a good companion in every way.

David Todd [01:16:52] Do you find that some of the donkeys become almost like therapy animals for folks who need a little bit of emotional support or other help.

Mark Meyers [01:17:03] Oh, yes. They're cheap therapy. They are. My wild burro project manager was an airborne ranger. He did three combat tours in Afghanistan, and he will be the first one to tell you that it is great therapy. He's been, if he's not in the desert, he is out on the yard in Arizona doing nothing but sitting on the ground with his favorite donkeys, just being in the moment with them. It is definitely, definitely good therapy. They are, donkeys are the most Zen animal in the world. They're just always in the moment. Definitely.

David Todd [01:17:47] That's great.

David Todd [01:17:50] So, you know, you're really good at explaining the world of donkeys and burros to people like me who don't know much about it. Tell me about some of the books and and films that you've worked on to try to explain it to folks who don't have the option to actually talk to you one on one.

Mark Meyers [01:18:11] Well, my first book series was called, "Talking with Donkeys", and I wanted just to kind of explain my experiences with donkeys and with donkey rescue. And it was, it was actually very successful. Two of the books sold out entirely. And we only sold them through the website. We didn't sell them through Amazon or anything like that. And all the money went straight to the donkeys. I don't take anything for my work. And they've been really successful in just kind of sharing my heart.

Mark Meyers [01:18:49] And along the road of the rescue, I learned photography. And I did it so that ... I wanted people to see donkeys the way I see donkeys. Most people who take pictures of donkeys, they shoot them down. They stand up and shoot down at them to make them look diminutive. Whereas I lay on the ground and I shoot up to make them look majestic.

Mark Meyers [01:19:15] And, just ... it was an outdoor magazine, it was a national magazine that saw my photography. And they're like, "Wow". And they bought two of my photographs. And I thought, "Well, that's kind of cool". And so, I took photography more seriously after that.

Mark Meyers [01:19:37] And, for the past eight years, I've been published, I don't know, fifty times nationally with my photography. And so, now, any time I take a picture of a donkey, it gets licensed directly to the rescue. I don't take any compensation for it. The rescue can use it for whatever they want.

Mark Meyers [01:20:03] But, now my book series are, "Today's Donkey in the New World". And the first one was "Donkeys of the Caribbean". A lot of people don't realize this, but almost every island in the Caribbean has a donkey overpopulation problem and literally almost no advocates down there for the donkeys. There's a few rescues, but they're few and far between. And big problem down there. We've gone down to a few islands and helped out. Huge problem down there. So "Donkeys of the Caribbean" kind of talks about what's going on down there.

Mark Meyers [01:20:37] The second one of the series is "America's Wild Burros". I kind of tried to talk about where the donkeys are, kind of explain how they got there, and the challenges, and the different agencies that are involved.

Mark Meyers [01:20:53] And then, my films, my first film was "Forgotten: The Plight of the American Donkey".

Mark Meyers [01:21:03] Then we did a film on Australia's, "The Eradication of Australia's Wild Donkeys", which, if you all remember, a year before the pandemic, big news was Australia was on fire and that was directly related to them, killing millions of herbivores - horses, water buffalo, camels and donkeys.

Mark Meyers [01:21:23] So, I don't know. It seems like my work is never done.

David Todd [01:21:29] What was the connection between exterminating the donkeys and other animals and these fires?

Mark Meyers [01:21:36] Well, Australia decided that they didn't want all these imported species. Here in the United States, they drew the line at Columbus. So if you weren't here before Columbus got here, then you're, you're non-native. And that's as arbitrary a line as it is. So if you weren't here before Columbus, then you're not native. Down there, it was James Cook. If you weren't there before James Cook, then you're non-native.

Mark Meyers [01:22:05] And so, they had millions of donkeys, millions of horses, millions of camels, water buffalo, all these things. And one day they decided, let's get rid of them. And so they literally just shot everything. And so in Western Australia alone, they killed 4 million donkeys.

Mark Meyers [01:22:24] Our film is about a family on a cattle station that was trying to save 150 donkeys because what they were doing was trying to restore the landscape using cattle in one area and donkeys in another area, and then they would rotate them, and that was helping to rejuvenate growth of the land. And it was working very well.

Mark Meyers [01:22:43] So, anyway, they killed all these herbivores and there was nothing to tend the grass. And so the grass kept growing and growing and growing, until it caught fire. Then the whole continent basically burned, and it put the koala bear on the endangered list, the fires got so out of control. And it was directly correlated to the fact that they killed all the herbivores and there was nobody left to tend the garden.

David Todd [01:23:15] Hard to meddle with Mother Nature.

David Todd [01:23:21] Well, this education work and then the care that you give the animals is, is all expensive. And I'd be curious how you managed to raise the funds to pay for everything from, you know, trimming hooves to feeding animals, to promoting the work, paying for the insurance, paying for fuel. It's a lot. So how do you secure the money as a non-profit.

Mark Meyers [01:23:54] Well, like I said before, I will not take any government money at all, because if I took their money, I would have to give them a seat at my table and I will not give them a seat at my table because they are not good at what they do. Our wild burro project is 1/10 of what they cost to do the exact same thing. So I won't give them a seat.

Mark Meyers [01:24:15] And so, what I do is my, my fundraising is what's known as relationship fundraising. Our donors are a bigger part of what I do than what I do. Okay? Without them, we can't, we can't rescue the animals. And so, it, we reach out. I sit on a lot of couches and I drink a lot of sweet tea, and I tell a lot of stories about donkeys. The internet is great, but most of our donors appreciate the personal touch. They, they want to feel like they're a part of what it is we're doing.

Mark Meyers [01:25:03] So, there's a lot of handwritten notes. And right now, I'm sure I've got a stack that's about three feet deep that I'm behind on, because I haven't been back to the office since coming out of the desert this past week and a half.

Mark Meyers [01:25:17] But no, it's, it's, philanthropy is very personal. And so I have to ask for money. I have to ask for money to get money. And so, but it is very expensive. We send a

lot of letters and we make a lot of phone calls and we love it. But you have to ask it in order to get it. And I have to tell a lot of stories in order to get people engaged. And that's the reality of it.

Mark Meyers [01:25:50] But, you have to have the stories in order to tell the stories. And the stories have to be true. There's a lot of charities out there that make up stories, and that doesn't work well. But when you have as many animals as we have and you have as many adventures as I have, you don't have to make them up. You just have to start talking.

David Todd [01:26:18] These are great stories and you do a fine job of explaining something that I think a lot of us would just really be ignorant of. So thank you.

David Todd [01:26:30] And, you know, speaking of sort of teaching people and helping them understand, is there any sort of advocacy efforts, lobbying efforts, that you're working on to improve protection for burros?

Mark Meyers [01:26:46] To be honest, I stay as far away from advocacy and legislation as I can get. That's other people's job. I want to be here for the donkeys. So there's a lot of groups that will badmouth the Bureau of Land Management. They'll badmouth the Department of Interior. And I have to work with these people. I want them to feel comfortable calling me when they need help. And that's just the reality of it.

Mark Meyers [01:27:17] So, I don't get involved in anything other than helping the animals. So I'm on speed dial with the people that make the decisions in Washington, D.C., with the Bureau of Land Management, with U.S. Fish and Wildlife. And that's the way I want it. I don't want them to look at me and my organization being those people that are, that are causing us grief. If they need help with donkeys, I want them to say, "Call Mark, he'll take care of it".

Mark Meyers [01:27:46] But, let everybody else handle the, the mess, the legislative part, all that kind of stuff.

Mark Meyers [01:27:57] My board of trustees has asked me and Amy never sign a petition on anything. And that's because if Amy and I were to sign a petition, and I don't care what it's about, it's still going to look like the Peaceful Valley Donkey Rescue was signing that petition, because Amy and I are Peaceful Valley Donkey Rescue, and there's really no separating us from the rescue. So, we don't get involved with anything.

Mark Meyers [01:28:23] It's, it's, literally, it's all about the donkeys.

Mark Meyers [01:28:27] People will send a donation and want to know my opinion on something that's totally unrelated to donkeys. And I write a very nice letter back and say, "Sorry, you don't get my opinion on that, because my opinion on anything other than donkeys will cost me half my donors". And donkeys are my, my mission. That's what I'm all about. So I'm not going to risk anything that's going to hurt the donkey's cause.

Mark Meyers [01:28:56] So, I, no, I don't, I don't get into any kind of advocacy, except for rescuing donkeys.

David Todd [01:29:03] Okay.

David Todd [01:29:05] Well, in sort of looking into the future, what sort of role do you see for donkeys going forward and, you know, its status in the years to come, especially the ones that are on these public lands where, you know, it's not clear that there's anybody looking after them?

Mark Meyers [01:29:26] Well, the long game, as I see it, is, we are getting control over, say, Death Valley. I was out there a month and a half ago, and I think we counted ten in one area and six in another. And when we started out there, there was over 200 in between those two areas. So we're managing the numbers now. And so as long as we keep at it, we can keep the numbers in a controlled amount.

Mark Meyers [01:30:10] Now, what used to happen before our involvement is they would go in and they would remove them all and then they would ignore the problem for 20 years, and they would remove them all. And this has been going on since 1938. So with our involvement, we're going to keep the numbers down.

Mark Meyers [01:30:27] So, then you have our involvement with the Bureau of Land Management. So, we're going to help them manage their numbers.

Mark Meyers [01:30:34] So, my long game is we're going to continue with our research and we're going to prove to the Park Service that they need a healthy burro population or they're going to see their bighorn sheep population dwindle. Okay? So, we're going to be able to show them, "OK, your research is wrong. Our research is right." So let's increase that burro population just a little bit because we've proven to you that we can manage the numbers. So let's just agree on what that number is and then we're going to manage it.

Mark Meyers [01:31:06] So, now I've earned a seat at the table. Okay? That's, that's the long view is earn our seat at the table, earn our voice.

Mark Meyers [01:31:16] So, the policy that they've had in place all these years, we can prove is wrong. Now we've got a seat at the table. Now the donkeys have a place.

Mark Meyers [01:31:27] So, that's sort of the long game, is we go from the government having all the say, into let's have the research and the non-government organizations having a say. Let's have the university researchers have a say, because right now it's just the government saying, "Our way or the highway". Well, maybe we can have a different approach now that Peaceful Valley is involved, because now Peaceful Valley is what the government's having to lean on. So, maybe, going forward, we can have a different approach.

Mark Meyers [01:32:06] You know, in reality, in 1972, there was no Peaceful Valley Donkey Rescue when they wrote the legislation. And now there is. And now the federal government is leaning on us. So we are going to work our way into having a better say on what's going on.

David Todd [01:32:23] Gotcha. You know, I thought it was interesting, you know, you talked about your experience with all these donkeys. And it seems like, you know, they, they benefit from you, from all the the care and support you give them, but I'm getting the sense that you get something back. And I was wondering if there were things that they, the donkeys and burros do for you, that they teach you, that you might be able to tell us about.

Mark Meyers [01:33:01] Oh, man. You know, the first thing I learned from donkeys was patience, absolute patience. They, okay, I'll give you a prime example. I have a donkey named

Jed, and Jed is probably, I don't know, late thirties. And I was, I took one of my dogs to the vet, and the vet happens to be our main vet for the yard. But he's also a very dear friend of mine. And he was looking at my dog and he looks and says, "Oh, you know, I've got one of your donkeys back there". And I say, "Oh, that's great". And you know, we've got 12, 1300 donkeys on the yard. So I just assumed it was one of the donkeys - didn't give it any thought.

Mark Meyers [01:33:44] And so, the next day, I'm in the office and my chief operations officer comes in and says, "Oh, we're going to get Jed". I'm like, "Where's Jed?". "Oh, he's up at the vet's office". I'm like, "Why didn't you tell me?" So that, the donkey that the vet was talking about was Jed, my, my donkey.

Mark Meyers [01:34:01] So, I'm like, "Well, I'm going with you". And she said, "Good, because we barely got him in the trailer". So we go to the vet and I go and I get Jed, put a halter on him and lead him out. And we get to the corner of the stall and he stops. So I stop. We look around, we start walking. He sees the trailer, he stops. I stop. We walk up to the trailer. He stops. I stop. I step into the trailer. He looks around, and he jumps in the trailer. And they're all looking at me like, "Well, that was easy." I'm like, "Of course it's easy. You just, you've just got to let Jed do Jed".

Mark Meyers [01:34:37] They're like, "It took, it took ten of us lifting him up to put him in there". It's like because you didn't show him respect. You, you tried to do it on your time instead of Jed's time. And that's the one thing donkeys have taught me is just show them respect and patience. And that's all it took.

Mark Meyers [01:35:01] I didn't have to, I didn't have to try to outmuscle them. I didn't have to try to out-think him. I just had to have patience, and donkeys have taught me, if nothing else, patience.

Mark Meyers [01:35:11] The same with the wild guys. You want to put them in a trailer? Put them in a trailer. Just give them the time to do it themselves. Oh, sure, I could get a cattle prod, a stick and all sorts of stuff. Or I could just wait. Nine times out of ten, they're just going to walk in that trailer. So, yeah.

Mark Meyers [01:35:32] But, I tell you one thing. I made a lot of money contracting. But I never enjoyed a single day. Been doing this for 20-some odd years and I have still not worked a day in my life.

Mark Meyers [01:35:50] This has, this has just been an amazing, amazing experience, ever since we started rescuing donkeys. Every day is an adventure.

David Todd [01:36:01] Sounds like it. Well, I see we've been talking for a while and using up your day. And the donkeys are probably waiting for you?

David Todd [01:36:13] Is there anything you'd like to add before we wrap up?

Mark Meyers [01:36:19] No. You know, if anybody listens to this, if they want to learn more, they can go to donkeyrescue.org and learn more about the rescue and learn more about donkeys, get involved. The, you know, donkeys are amazing creatures that definitely don't get their due. And it's sad. If more people would, would just learn a little bit more about them and learn to appreciate them and learn about their many contributions, I think they'd be blown away by what donkeys have to offer. I really do.

David Todd [01:36:58] Well, hey, thanks very much for the introduction to the world of donkeys and your work with them. It's been really interesting. I truly appreciate your time.

Mark Meyers [01:37:10] I appreciate your having me.

David Todd [01:37:14] Well, I hope our paths cross, but until then, take care of yourself and all those donkeys and your friend down the road. Thank you for especially on a day like today when you need to go see him for, you know, taking some time to explain your work.

Mark Meyers [01:37:33] My pleasure.

David Todd [01:37:34] All right, You take care.

Mark Meyers [01:37:36] All right. Thank you.

David Todd [01:37:38] Bye now.

Mark Meyers [01:37:39] Bye.