



Medicine Hat Cowboy Life

September 2022

Official Newsletter for Medicine Hat Cowboy Poetry Foundation

PIT PONIES

Horses have been used in mining operations for generations. In this issue we learn about “Pit Ponies”, horses of all sizes, used as labour in the extraction of coal from the bowels of the earth.



Photo courtesy of Provincial Archives

www.MHCowboyLife.com



Medicine Hat Cowboy Life

From My Perch on the Corral: President's Message



Jen Zollner, President, Medicine Hat
Cowboy Poetry Foundation



When you become a member of Medicine Hat Cowboy Poetry Foundation, you receive this handsome coaster. Memberships are only \$20/year. Contact MHCPPresident@gmail.com

Growing up, my chore was to go to the coal bin and replace the empty coal pail beside the stove with a full one. The big chunk on top would be burned overnight.

Little did I know from the mid 1800's until 1986, there were "underground cowboys" in coal mines and pit ponies. I was shocked that before that it was the muscle of women that hauled the loaded coal cars to the surface and that young children worked long hours in the mines. Legislation did give them some protection but it wasn't monitored; it was only then that small horses, pit ponies were brought into use and replaced some children.

Children still worked in coal mines in Nova Scotia and in Alberta & Saskatchewan (when they became a provinces), as did pit ponies until coal cars were electric or motorized.

It's hard to believe how enslaved miners were to the coal companies, yes in southern Alberta too, and that the harsh working conditions of man and beast were unbelievably dangerous and unhealthy.

Perhaps a glimpse in this newsletter will bring some awareness of this segment of 'black' history.

The Medicine Hat Cowboy Poetry Foundation is busy preparing for our third annual Cowboy Poetry and Western Music Show, which will be held on October 1, 2022 at the Medicine Hat High School Theatre.

We have an excellent line-up of performers, local and from away. We will be featuring the Meliora dogs, (see article on page 7). Food trucks are scheduled to be there. Our show will start at 4:45 with local poets and junior poets.

We are thrilled to feature local musicians, Reese and Morgan Klaiber, and the band, New Mixed Company. Our main stage poet is Morley Thorpe from Spy Hill, SK, on the far east side of that province. Shelley Goldbeck, (Vice-President of Medicine Hat Cowboy Poetry Foundation), will emcee the event once again, and share her original songs and poems. Showtime is 7PM.

Tickets are available by calling me at (403)529-6384 or by going to Hale Hearing in 13 Ave Coop Mall or Medicine Hat Auction Supply Store. See our poster on Page 12. Please share.



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Last of the Pit Pony Drivers

At age 86, Bob Moffatt is a well-known promoter and tour guide at the Drumheller Atlas Mine Museum. His coal mine career in the Red Deer Valley started when he quit school at 16. "My mother cried for a month because it was a rather dangerous job and she knew of the deaths and injuries".

Bob's Irish dad didn't start coal mining until he was 14; "you were supposed to be 16 but nobody checked your age". Before 1842 it was children and women that lugged the coal out of the pit.



Bob Moffatt
Photo by Duster Video

That's the year British law forbade that practice for children under ten (and women). This was about the same time Bob's great-great-grandfather was born. It's apparent the law didn't work because when Bob's grandfather was six or eight years old, he was so tired after 12, 14 or 16 hour days that Bob's great-grandfather had to carry his son home from work. In about 1842 horses and ponies were used to do underground haulage.

Bob worked in the tippie which is where most careers started. "It was not uncommon to drop to 40 and 45 below and stay there for weeks. You'd freeze quite thoroughly while you stood by your shakers as the coal went by." During a break he'd run to get hot bricks from the blacksmith shop and stand on them to keep from having frozen feet.

"The air here was particularly thick with coal dust that easily ignites. You could get fired for smoking." But the boys would lean out the window to smoke. One windy night Bob's match kept going out so he quickly lit it inside. There was a terrific 'thirumph' and three long 'whooshes'. "I spent the rest of the evening looking for spot fires. Fortunately there were none." Maybe that's how the tippie in Atlas Mine burned down in the 1930's.

"The first day underground I was scared spitless. The claustrophobia set in and I thought for heaven's sakes, I'll never find my way around in here. I'll be lost forever. And the sounds were scary. You'd hear the roof shift and some of the old ties crack a bit." That is where Bob drove various pit ponies. His favorite pony Johnny, loved oranges. Turk was the one that could count.

Bob's first job was working on the track for CPR for \$5.60 a day. The coal mine was paying \$9.25. Eventually he went from picking bone in the tippie to being an underground cowboy, a pit pony driver. He was the first in five generations of Moffatts that didn't make a career of it. Starting in his mid 20's he worked his way up to being deputy Alberta fire commissioner in charge of fire training for the province. In retirement he came back to Drumheller as a senior advisor at what is now a National Historic Site. He fires himself at the end of each tourist season!



Mine Ponies and Horses I Have Known

by Bob Moffatt

My earliest memories of Pit Ponies goes back to when I was 12 years old. These ponies belonged to the Minute Mine. This was a small mine that was cut into a drift in the side of a hill. These mines were commonly called "gopher holes" to differentiate them from the deep and large mines that sunk a shaft into the valley floor and then branched out into the coal seam.

Gopher hole mines stabled their ponies outside of the mine. The ponies were kept in their stalls except when they were working. Their only freedom came in July when the mine was shut down for holidays. The Minute Mine ponies then enjoyed a romp in the large adjacent pasture. (Pit ponies in the larger mines spent months in stables underground.)

A few of my friends and I also enjoyed the ponies' freedom by utilizing them as rodeo stock. These draught beasts didn't take kindly to someone clambering onto their back and would get rid of us with a few bucks or by scraping us off on a tree. I sometimes think the ponies enjoyed this as much or more than we did, as they would stand quietly time after time while we grabbed a handful of mane and scrambled onto their backs, only to be dumped quickly to the ground.

Since the Moffatts had been miners for many generations, I suppose it was inevitable that I would also find my way to the pits. At age 16 I went to work at a surface mining job where I was required to drive a full-sized team of horses as part of the job. Jim and Molly were their names, and they had driven many before me to distraction. They would seesaw back and forth when hitched to a heavy load (or even a light load) when the mood struck. Fortunately I had acquired some experience with horses while spending a couple of summers on a ranch. With this experience and some tips from my grandfather, George Scown who had been



Bob Moffatt

Photo by Cheryl Dust at Duster Video

a real cowboy, I started the first dray business in Drumheller. I was able to bring the team into line and keep them working to their full potential.

With my experience with horses and the fact that my father and his brother Bernard had been hot-shot drivers, it ensured me a job as I reached the mandatory age of 18. Working underground meant higher pay and you were warm in the winter and cool in the summer. It was not the job for the claustrophobic, however.

Having heard some horror stories about how the pit ponies were treated in some of the mines in earlier days, I discovered that the ponies in high-grade mines were treated quite well. They were stabled underground in a dry area that had electric lights. They were fed the best hay available and received a daily ration of oats. *Continued...*



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...Continued The importance and value placed on a pony was never more obvious than when there was an accident involving one. The first words from the pit boss were "how is the pony?" The drivers were expendable, the ponies were not. If a pony was injured or killed in an accident and it was determined that it was the driver's negligence, everyone in the mine scorned that driver. His chances of getting hired as a driver again were somewhere between zero and none.

Abuse of ponies was not tolerated either. As an example, I've seen a mine shut down for three days by the union when they fired a miner for missing work because of drunkenness. However if you were fired for abusing a pony, the union would not back you at all.

During my two years as a driver, I drove four different ponies. Luckily the majority of this time I drove a pony named Johnny, whose disposition was very amicable. However, the experience with the others was valuable, interesting and as I'll relate below, sometimes laughable.

QUEENIE – a small mare, obviously of mostly Welsh pony lineage. Easy to drive but sadly windbroken. She could pull on the level but couldn't handle the hills on the entry I worked in.

PANCHO – an ugly dispositional little stud who was prone to run away with you and your string of mine cars at the most inconvenient and dangerous parts of the trackage. He was the only pony that required reins. Most drivers agreed that beheading would be preferable to gelding for this beast. He put quite a number of drivers in the hospital.

TURK – this pony could count. I have to assume that this pony was only expected to pull six or fewer cars of coal when he was broken-in. However, he was well known for refusing to pull more than six cars and also for kicking any driver who attempted to pass his rear end with the intention of encouraging greater effort by hauling on his halter. Since my haul was regularly eight to fourteen cars each trip, this put me in a quandary. Quite by accident I discovered that Turk was not counting cars but rather, the number of chains connecting the cars as they clanked. Thereafter I would stretch every chain taut from the fifth car back. Turk would waltz away with 14 cars easily and both of us were very happy.

JOHNNY – perhaps he was the best pony that ever worked in the pits. He was easy-going, strong and as affectionate as a dog. This pony would pull his heart out for you and this counted a lot when you were pulling coal for contract miners who were paid by the tonnage they produced.

SPIDER – Spider was not a pony. He was a full-sized horse that pulled loads from a Duckbill loader in the high section of the mine. He had a nasty habit of squeezing his driver against the wall of the entry when you walked past him. I only drove him a couple of times and since my uncle had advised me of Spider's habit, I had a machine bit in my hand to give him a jab in the ribs which moved him in a hurry. This may sound cruel, but if you've ever had a horse leaning you against a solid wall, you would know you cannot breathe, let alone move. *Continued...*





... Continued. My miners, pleased with my efforts to supply them with cars and timbers, were always bringing me an extra piece of pie or a plug of tobacco as a tip. Since some of the pie left a lot to be desired and you could only chew so much tobacco, I let them know how much I loved oranges. I don't know if they would have continued packing extra oranges had they known that Johnnie was eating them. Merely smelling an orange would start him salivating. Actually, I had a hard time avoiding him if I chose to eat an orange myself.

My days as a miner ended with an accident that saw Johnnie escape unscathed and fortunately I did not lose my leg. While recuperating, I decided the number of days we were getting in the mine were insufficient to make a decent living. So regrettably I left the mines and the valley.

Eventually all the remaining mines became mechanized and the ponies were sold. Hopefully they all got good homes; some I know were retrained as riding ponies for children. The fate of the mules and the large horses (those that had to wear leather helmets to soften the blow when they hit their heads on a low slung timber) were sent to the glue factory.

The value of the pit ponies is incalculable during the transition period between manpower and mechanization. Most of the miners and drivers I worked with are gone, as are all the ponies. I miss swapping tales about the antics, accomplishments and eating habits of the ponies, like the one who would stomp open any lunchbox containing dill pickles or the one that loved chewing tobacco. Good drivers were well known and lauded throughout the valley, but each of them owed their fame to their pony. See video: <https://mhcowboylife.com/cowboy-stories/>

Life as a Pit Pony:

Are all pit ponies black?

Willie was excited about his new job. The news was like a seventh birthday present. For two years he'd been a breaker boy, his hands as tough as any man's from picking bone (pieces of rock) from the sharp coal pieces. He saw the black pit ponies as they lugged the heavy coal carts out of the mine. How he longed to play with them! Now he'd be washing them down on their days off.

Then came the surprise. The first pony he scrubbed wasn't black at all; he was white. When the coal dust was washed off, he discovered the ponies were every colour, and hardly ever black.

Why did pit ponies go blind?

Some people think pit ponies go blind from being underground for long periods of time. Not the case. Unfortunately before the introduction of effective head gear with eye protectors some went blind due to eye injuries.

<http://www.saddlebox.net/you-wont-believe-what-these-horses-had-to-endure/>

When did They Start Using Pit Ponies?

Men dug the coal. Women and children lugged or dragged the coal out of the mines. Many children got hurt and died, but the government of England only took notice when 26 children drowned in a mine accident in 1838.

In 1842 British law prohibited women and children under age ten from working in the mines. (Disgracefully there was minimum inspection to enforce it.) Hence in 1842 they started using pit ponies in the mines.

Link to You-Tube song, "I Am a Pit Pony"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=undcMKLT3fE>



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Pit Ponies

I was four when I started my life underground,
Stabled below, choking coal dust did abound,
Brave miners, my friends, they treated me well,
For one, oh so young, the job was like hell.

The dust and the gas, air putrefied,
Miners would crawl on their bellies and sides,
After pulling the journeys for eight hours a day,
I lay in my stable, no soft or warm hay.

Fifty weeks of the year we'd work together,
Oh what I'd give for fresh air and fine weather,
Then it would come, two weeks on top,
Roaming the fields, a nice gentle trot.

The air I took in, so fresh and so clean,
The weeks would fly by, then back to the seam.
Ten years I would work with brave men below,
But my time did come, stay on top I would go.

A pit pony's life was hard and so tough,
I made many friends, took the smooth with the rough.
Life in the field is the way it should be,
For ponies who started out young, just like me.

By Arthur Cole, 2016



Shetland Pony

Note: Straw would be too flammable to use as bedding. Fortunately pit ponies aren't used in mines anymore.



Meliora
Service
Dogs

Paws and Poems

Meliora is a Latin term for “ever better”. Meliora Service Dogs’ purpose is to relieve conditions associated with disability by giving ongoing support and making specially trained service dogs a reality for veterans and first responders suffering from mental and physical disabilities, with a view to improving their independence as well as their physical and emotional well-being.

Medicine Hat Cowboy Poetry Foundation is pleased to partner with Meliora Service Dogs in Medicine Hat to tell the stories of some of their veterans and first responders. We have been meeting with the members, conducting interviews and writing poetry. We will be video recording the interviews and poetry for posting on our web site. We will also be publishing a book of biographies and poetry. It will be called Paws and Poems.

Dogs are an integral part of farm and ranch life so we thought the connection with Meliora would be interesting to our cowboy poetry audience. Few among us have not loved or been loved by a dog at some point in our lives!

The Meliora Dogs will be conducting a demonstration at our Cowboy Poetry and Western Music Show on October 1. See our poster on Page 12 for details.



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Spot, the Pit Pony

Don went to work at the Midland Coal Mine when he was 17. Spot was the pony he worked with: one-eyed, only 3 1/2 feet tall but strong enough to pull a car loaded with a ton of coal. He could pull more than one car, but he preferred not to. Spot was used to living underground where it was always the black of night. Don liked the graveyard shift when no boss was looking over his shoulder. Don and Spot looked out for each other. Spoiling her with a special treat in his lunch every day was his way of showing how much he loved that pony.

Don remembers the time when Spot refused to go any further into the tunnel. "Come on girl, We've been down here a million times today. What is going on?" Don pleaded as he pulled on her bridle. But Spot would not budge. "Great, I'm going to be in so much trouble. Come on girl, you can do it," he urged.

Don tried everything he could think of to get Spot to move. He tried pulling her. Nothing. He tried pushing her. Still nothing. Spot would not go into the tunnel.

Don was about to kick Spot when another miner happened along, "We're waiting for those cars to get here. What are you doing?" the miner asked.

Frustrated Don said, "Well I'm trying but Spot just won't budge."

"Spot won't go in the tunnel?" the miner asked.

"Nope, I've tried every...." began Don.

"Everybody out of the tunnel NOW!" the miner yelled.

No sooner had the last miner left the tunnel when the ceiling suddenly collapsed. Spot was a hero. The pit ponies were like little safety alarms; they seemed to know when something was going to happen.

-compiled from stories told by miners who worked at Atlas Coal Mines, Drumheller, AB



Pit ponies were often given chewing tobacco as a treat. They reportedly love it!



Link to a comprehensive 35-page teacher's guide for student learning about coal and coal mining. It also contains excellent pictures. http://www.afle.ca/uploads/6/4/5/8/64588929/ba_part3.pdf

Medicine Hat Cowboy Life is the official newsletter of the Medicine Hat Cowboy Poetry Foundation, (a registered Society in the Province of Alberta), published four times per year by Shelley Goldbeck, DTM, Vice President and Webmaster of MHCP. Our mandate is to preserve, promote and celebrate cowboy traditions and country living in the Medicine Hat area. If you wish to submit articles or information of interest to our readers, please email MHCPPresident@gmail.com subject: Newsletter.



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Life as a Coal Miner: What is Scrip?

Company scrip was the currency used to pay miners. It could only be used in company's stores. In the coal town where they lived there was no other store and none in the vicinity. Miners could charge their store purchases, their food, clothing and even the tools they used in the mine. The house was often rented from their employer as well. Company store goods tended to be expensive, as was the rent, though the house might merely be a shelter with no running water or plumbing. At pay day the employer would subtract the rent and store purchases from the miner's monthly pay cheque. If the miners got a raise in pay, the company would simply raise the prices. Therefore miners tended to be in perpetual debt to their employer. Thus the words to the song "Sixteen Tons", "I owe my soul to the company's store."

Why Fear the Siren?

The wives of miners at home lived in fear of hearing the emergency siren. It was the signal men were hurt or worse, had lost their lives. If one of them was her husband and she had no children to work in the mine, where would she go? What would she do? She'd be homeless.

<https://www.stalberttoday.ca/local-news/the-buried-past-1298272>The link to this video tells about coal mining in Carndiff, SK

Learn More: Links to Pit Pony and Mining History

http://www.afle.ca/uploads/6/4/5/8/64588929/ba_part3.pdf

<https://www.canadashistory.ca/explore/business-industry/canada-s-boy-miners>

<https://wend.ca/?p=28883>

<https://ehive.com/collections/7079/objects/1111365/two-handmade-horse-shoes>

<https://hoofcare.blogspot.com/2010/04/coal-mines-and-pit-ponies-farriers-made.html>

<https://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/wales-news/darkness-years-dangerous-harsh-life-2182018>

<https://www.saddlebox.net/you-wont-believe-what-these-horses-had-to-endure/>

<https://www.horsejournals.com/popular/history-heritage/ghosts-coal-mines>

[https://www.tripadvisor.ca/Attraction_Review-g181805-d1587589-Reviews-Atlas Coal Mine National Historic Site-Drumheller Alberta.html](https://www.tripadvisor.ca/Attraction_Review-g181805-d1587589-Reviews-Atlas_Coal_Mine_National_Historic_Site-Drumheller_Alberta.html)

http://www.afle.ca/uploads/6/4/5/8/64588929/ba_part3.pdf



Coal Mine Lingo (Pit Talk)

Miners (underground cowboys) have a vocabulary of their own, words they use in their daily life. Some indicate how dangerous work was for pit ponies and for miners.

Equine Miners – pit ponies harnessed to work in coal mines

Chee/Haw – command for pit pony to go left or right

Snap – a piece of food, some of which miners might share with pit ponies

Bellman – rings a bell when it's safe to haul men or ponies up or down

Damp – word to describe various noxious gasses

Black Lung – over time, a lung disease from breathing in coal dust.

More Coal Mine Lingo

Stint – a length of coal

Ringer – a crowbar

Colliery – coal mine

Trap – door that opens by pulling a rope on a pulley, they shuts by itself

Scrip – substitute for money coal company pays, often a form of credit

Bobtail Sheet – in the pay envelope showing how much money the company has taken from the miner's pay for rent, coal or articles bought at the company's store on credit.

Coal Mine Jobs

Sinkers – men in charge of sinking new shafts

Sparkers – electricians

Fitters – mechanics

Borers – drill holes

Powder Monkeys – carry the explosives

Shot Firers – do controlled explosives

Bell Man – rings a bell when it's safe to work

Onsetter/Offsetter – loaded and unloaded the lifts

Trapper – kid that opens the trap to let miners and ponies through

Poisonous Gases (damp)

White-damp – noxious gases like carbon monoxide

Fire-damp – a flammable gas especially methane that sometimes seeps from coal

After-damp – the choking gas after an explosion of fire-damp

Stink-damp – the rotten egg smell of hydrogen sulphide

Black-damp – “unbreatheable” gases left after oxygen is removed

Metal Tags

-it has your number on it

-coming to work you exchange your metal tag for a lamp (your only light underground)

-when you return from work, you give your lantern and take your tag

-when your tag is one the hook, the manager knows you're in the cave (in case of an explosion, fire, cave-in or flood)

<https://www.stalberttoday.ca/local-news/the-buried-past-1298272>

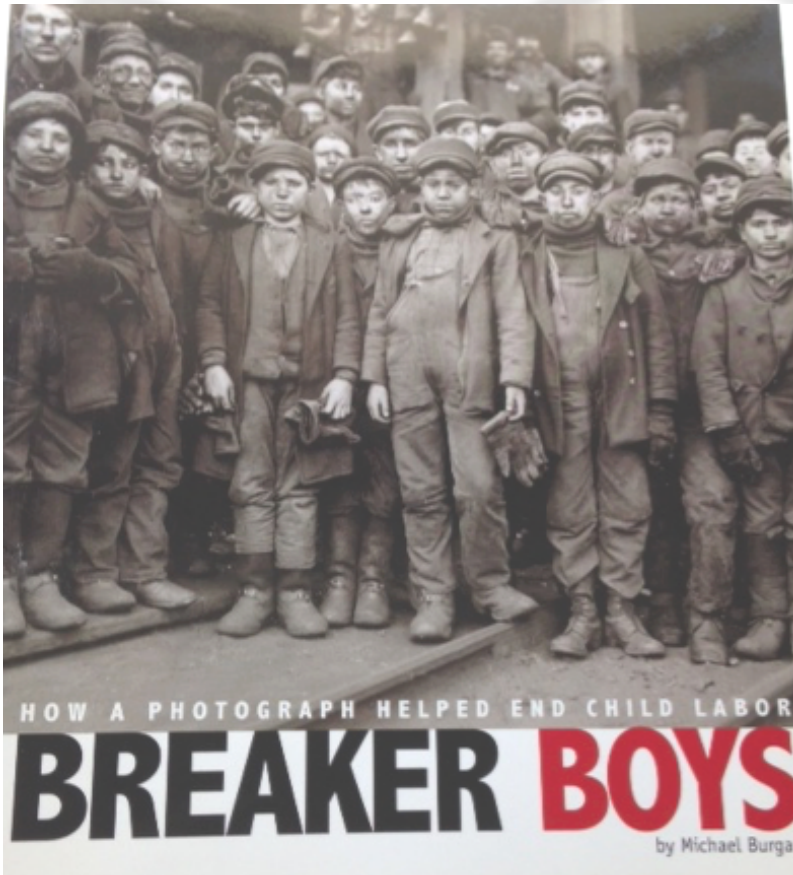
The link to this video tells about coal mining in Carndiff, SK



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The Library Corral: The Medicine Hat Public Library

The Medicine Hat Public Library serves as a community hub, providing equitable and convenient access to books, media, information, and programs that help to educate, enrich, entertain, and inform. Anyone can use the library and its resources. <https://mhpl.shortgrass.ca>



Pit Pony by Joyce Barkhouse

It's a picture book, it's a juvenile book and it's a television movie. It's the award winning story of 11-year-old Willie who must quit school and work in the coal mines of Cape Breton, hardly ever seeing the light of day. As a child pit pony driver, he and Gem, the pony end up being heroes. Through story Barkhouse has us living the hardships and dangers of coal miners, and their children in the early 1900's.

Breaker Boys by Michael Burgan How a Photograph Helped End Child Labor

The young boys pictured on the cover worked long hours in the breakers sorting jagged chunks of coal by hand, a dusty and dangerous job. Since 1908 Lewis Hine was taking photographs and with the "Progressives" tried to convince people that child labor is wrong and that it needs to end.

The pictures shocked Americans. Hine's lifelong goal was finally achieved in 1941 with a lasting law that limited child labour. He died in 1940.

The author follows the long and frustrating journey of the "Progressives" in achieving that end. Your heart breaks for the children in Hine's photographs and the author's narrative about kids as young as five working ten hours a day, six days a week in mines, factories and mills. Hine's photographs live on to document that dark side of history.

<https://www.history.com/news/child-labor-lewis-hine-photos>

Coal in the Valley by Lawrence Christmas

It's coal mining in Drumheller through historical images. It also consists of about 60 photographs of and stories in the words of old-time miners and their families. Atlas Mine Museum's infamous Bob Moffatt is quick to tell you he's on pages 48 and 49 in the book! See more:

<https://www.canadashistory.ca/explore/business-industry/canada-s-boy-miners>



Medicine Hat Cowboy Life

Medicine Hat Cowboy Poetry and Western Music Show

Saturday, October 1, 2022

Medicine Hat High School Theatre

**Door Prizes
Silent Auction**

**Tickets
Only \$20**



**Meliora
Service
Dogs**

**Tickets: MH Auction Mart Supply Store
and Hale Hearing**

For more information, contact

Jen Zollner, 403.529.6384

Partner: Drowning Ford Grazing Association



MC: Shelley Goldbeck

Schedule:

4:45 Local Poets perform

5:30 Meliora Dog Demonstration
and Photos with Service Dogs

6:00 Supper from local food trucks

7:00 – 9:30 Cowboy Poetry and
Western Music Show

www.MHCowboyLife.com



Morley Thorpe



Reese and Morgan Klaiber



Holly Padfield



New Mixed Company

Country Stories

A collection of stories and poetry by and for seniors
who have lived and worked in rural areas around Medicine Hat



Three Heads are Better Than One
by Gena LaCoste



Medicine Hat Cowboy Poetry Foundation

**Hale
Hearing**

Read stories and poems
from and about local rural
seniors. Many are accompanied
by videos on our web site www.MHCowboyLife.com.

Secure your copy of
Country Stories and Stories
from Seniors for only \$15 each
by contacting President, Jen
Zollner at
MHCPPresident@gmail.com.

They will also be
available for sale at our show on
October 1.

Stories from Seniors

A collection of stories and poetry by and for seniors
who've lived and worked in rural areas around Medicine Hat



Cover Art: Preacher and Parson
by Gena LaCoste



Medicine Hat Cowboy Poetry Foundation

**Hale
Hearing**

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