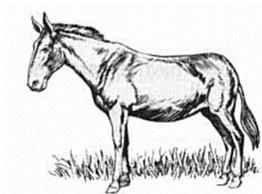


from Gary McCarthy's

OUR AMERICAN WEST



Mules ~

Don't Tick Them Off!

The mule was the most maligned animal on the frontier despite the fact that he worked hardest to win our American West. He was described in many ways, all of them colorful and uncomplimentary. A few of the more notable descriptions were: *“An outrage upon nature, a monstrosity, a combination of the donkey and the horse with all the good qualities of neither. It is half horse, half jackass, kicks with uncanny skill, and gives evidence of malice aforethought. A mule is unapproachable in devilment, fathomless in cunning, born old in crime, of disreputable paternity, and incapable of posterity, stolid, imperturbable, with no love for anything but the perpetration of tricks and its daily rations.”*

Even today, the term, “stubborn as a mule” is still commonly used to describe some of the people we all think we know and who exasperate us.

Mules are the offspring of a jackass (male donkey) and a mare and they are sterile. Early in the history of man it was discovered that this hybrid cross had the size and conformation of a horse and the feet, head and tail of the jack. The Spaniards who colonized American noted with pride that their mules were able to pull or carry greater weights over rougher ground than either horses or donkeys and used considerably less grain.

As our westward migration began, Missourians discovered that they could sell mules to the wagon trains at a hefty profit. By

breeding big Mexican jacks to large draft mares, they developed superior animals, often mules weighing almost fifteen hundred pounds and selling for over a hundred dollars a head when good saddle horses were lucky to bring thirty dollars.

By the 1850's mule trains were a common sight across the American West. Mules, unlike horses or oxen, did not have to be shod, could keep their weight and strength up in rough country where forage was scarce, were less susceptible to disease and sunburn, traveled faster over a long distance and generally seemed to make it a point to take good care of themselves even when a stock tender was lax, indifferent or even unkind. Owners of mules have always claimed that their animals outlive horses and are much cheaper and easier to keep. Thousands of mules were used on the Santa Fe Trail and Wells Fargo and Company used mules almost exclusively in the Southwest. They were also popular down in the hard-rock mines in Bodie, California and other strikes such as the Comstock Lode in Nevada where they pulled ore carts on rails. Some of these mules went down into the mines when young and never came back out again but toiled their lives away in the dangerous semi-darkness.

Another source of great demand for mules was the United States Army where soldiers found that the only real drawback to using mules was that Apache considered them delicious to eat. But this was offset by the stamina of the mule and its ability to carry supplies wherever they were needed in a hurry. For example, in 1881, a company of Indian scouts and a pack train marched eighty-five miles in the scorching heat of New Mexico to deliver badly needed supplies to civilians in less than twelve hours. This same pack train, only a few days later, marched sixty miles under even worse conditions carrying heavy packs. In 1812, another pack train loaded with an average of two hundred pounds per mule was forced to travel 280 miles in less than three days in an errand of mercy to the San Carlos Indian agency.

On farms, mules were the preferred draft animal from the Great Plains all the way down into Mexico and remained so until after the tractor generally became affordable. In fact, the peak

Government pack mules near the Mexican border



population year for the American mule was in 1925 when over six million of them were still the dominant source of power in industry and agriculture. There is also little doubt about the contribution made by thousands of mules who worked and died in building the Panama Canal and in transporting Allied supplies during World War I and even in WWII. And even though they were obsolete, across America's farmland, a good team of mules was worth plenty because machinery, parts and gasoline were in very short supply and the mule once again was called upon to plow and harvest our nation's croplands.

In my estimation the reason that mules can be stubborn is that they are considerably smarter than horses, and when they have been worked too hard or long, they just...well, they just come to a halt, toss in the towel and quit. Once a mule quits, or goes stubborn, it is almost impossible to make them continue to work no matter what the punishment. But their intelligence also means that the mule is extremely sure-footed and careful when negotiating dangerous roads or mountain trails made slippery by rain or wash-outs. Mules also demonstrate their intelligence and good sense when they get into serious trouble, such as stepping into a bog, or quicksand or a tangle of barbed wire. Unlike a horse which will nearly always panic when something goes wrong

underfoot, a mule will freeze and wait for the danger to pass or be eliminated by its owner.



Unlike the smaller burro which was the sentimental favorite of the lonesome prospector, the mule is more likely to retain a little aloofness, not at all an easy trick when, for example it was just one of the twenty mules that pulled a borax wagon across the harsh Mohave Desert. The problem was not in discovering the borax deposits, but getting it out of that awful desert. Horses could not endure the heat and the punishment while oxen were too slow and required so much food, rest and water that they rendered the operation uneconomical. So it was our valiant mule that pulled the great, high-sided borax and other precious water wagons that kept both men and beast alive in the terrible heat. Fortunately the 165-mile run from Death Valley to Barstow, California was on a slightly downhill grade because the twenty-mule teams each had to pull an astounding forty tons.

Today, there is definitely a resurgence in the popularity of the mule. During Mule Days in Bishop, California, thousands of spectators watch extremely valuable mules built like thoroughbreds race for top prize money. Most racing mules will leave the average backyard horse in the dust and after crossing the finish line will likely bray their victory with an almost human-like arrogance. Mules are also the preferred animal to carry you over the Sierras or down into the Grand Canyon and back because there isn't a mule alive stupid enough to spook like a horse and take itself and its rider over the edge.

After defending and praising mules, I think it only fair to say that although I have enjoyed riding a few mules, I've never had any great urge to buy one. Why? I suspect that trying to constantly out-guess and out-smart those stubborn, jack-rabbit-eared beasts would get pretty tiresome. And really, don't you think that horses are a whole lot easier on the eye?

Gary McCarthy is a national award-winning western and historical novelist who welcomes comments about this column and can be reached through his website:

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