

Mules are a rarity in most parts

By IRWIN ROSS
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Toll the funeral bell, chant the dirge, shed the furtive tear; for the mule, with ears flapping and hard tail swinging, is walking into limbo; He'll be a mule to the last; he won't walk fast and he'll balk a time or two but he'll get there, nevertheless.

This honest, homely workman is a victim of progress. Our grandchildren will probably know him only as the strange looking inhabitant of a pen at the zoo. History will probably not do him justice, for his reputation among those who know him only by hearsay is not pretty. No animal has inspired so much profanity, so much concentrated criticism, as this purely utilitarian beast, created by man when he diverted one of

nature's laws to cross two noble creatures, the horse and the ass, to make a hybrid.

Rural folklore swells at the seams with homely wisdom about the mule. "Never bet on what a man can do, or what a mule will do," and "The best way to put a mule in his stall is to hire someone else to do it."

A Missouri outlaw mule could knock a hole in a two-foot wall, stand on his head and kick at the sky, and chill the spine of the roughest mule skinner with his display of temperament.

The large barns, which mule barons built to house the animals until they were sold, had windows the size of a ray of sunlight. Stockmen felt that the mule was less lethal in a dimly lit enclosure.

And mule buyers, out of

respect, quickly learned to take the shoes off the hind feet of those which they purchased.

The first mule to set foot on the soil of America came into Missouri from Mexico. However, the Mexican mule, originally from Spain, proved inadequate for the hard, endless labor of the American frontier, and the now famous Missouri mule was invented.

Kentuckians sent blooded jacks and jennets into the state, and Ohio farmers sent large, strong mares. After the mule colt was foaled, high grass, limestone springs, and the expert handling of Missouri farmers did the rest.

The result was a large-boned, shambling animal, weighing between 1,100 and 1,200 pounds, an animal which did not have a peer anywhere.

By 1880 Missouri stood first among the states in mule population. The state's reputation justified an oft-appearing illustration of two mules being led by their

halters, with the caption, "In mules Missouri stands at the head—the only safe place."

The growth and expansion of America during the latter part of the nineteenth century can be told, in part, in terms of mule statistics. They built the railroads, logged the forests, plowed the fields and harvested the wheat. Teams of 8, 12, and 16, powered the reapers and the combines. They turned the grist mills, built the roadways, forced the sugar out of the sugar cane. They groaned and sweated and kicked—but they did not stop. The coal mines employed them, the army utilized them, and foreign countries purchased them.

After enjoying a boom during World War I, the mule industry had a few good years immediately following the peace. In addition to the home market, there was a big demand for Missouri mules in Europe. The Germans, having seen what the Missouri mule could do on the Western

Front, were the largest importers.

As the economic situation in Europe deteriorated, mule trading declined. By 1929, the high rate of exchange and the general condition of international trade all but wiped out the trade.

The mule population of the United States increased up until 1925, and then the years of decline set in. In 1925, there were 5,918,000 mules on the nation's farms. From that time to the present, there has been a steady decrease.

Old mules are dying faster than the young ones are growing up. Since the life of a mule ranges between 17 and 19 years, this indicates the mule is rapidly passing into the ranks of those other animals symbolic of early America—the Texas Longhorn, the American Bald Eagle, and the American Buffalo.

The decline of the mule was reflected in the number purchased by the United States Army during World

War I—123,660 and World War II—29,336.


The mule had a brief day after World War II. With one foot in heaven, he still packed a tremendous wallop in the other. The United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration purchased 20,500 mules in the United States to be used for general farm work abroad.

Since then the market has deteriorated. One farmer, who has worked around mule auctions for 41 years, claims that more mules formerly went past the auctioneer in Kansas City in an hour than now go by in a month.

It is said that a mule has no pride of ancestry and no hope of posterity. He is a hybrid, a cross between a horse and an ass, and is almost always sterile.

Male donkeys are called jacks and female donkeys are called jennets. The cross between the jack and horse mare produces the mule,

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