

Manny Kicks Long Ear Lore

By Chris Stuckenschneider

CHAPTER 3: Tote That Barge On the Erie Canal

Drummin' my hooves to the beat this week, feeling right royal about my roots. As you'll recall from the last chapter, mules' lineage is aristocratic, and respected, thanks to the King of Spain, who saw fit to give George Washington a special gift that made us what we are today. Magnifico!

Because of our brains and brawn, folks put us right to work. An area where we clearly left our hoof prints was on the towpaths of the Erie Canal. We earned respect there pulling barges along the 363-mile canal that formed a passageway from the Great Lakes to the Atlantic Ocean.

We helped build that canal too, an engineering feat that took nearly eight years to complete. Corks were popping when the canal opened in 1825. For the next 55 years, long ears were the primary pullers, toting goods like lumber, hay, and coal along the waterways. Four feet deep and 40 feet wide, the canal filled the nation with pride, and swelled many a mule's heart too. The canal made it easier to move people and goods around New York State.

Barge drivers were called “Hoggees,” a Scottish word pronounced Hog-ee, a phrase farmers use to call the piggies in for corn and slop. Most often mule handlers are called muleskinners—a term that makes me shake in my hooves. The canal muleskinners were mere kids, boys of 9 or 10 years of age. They had a ton of responsibility being raised on the water and often stuck with their job for years to come, turning into salty old dogs.

The young'uns would have to harness a team of mules for a six-hour shift, water and feed them oats and hay, then unhook that team and load them into a little barn on the barge to rest while the fresh team took its turn. Round the clock this went, the boys working from May to November, only stopping for the winter when the canal was likely to freeze over.

Hoggees preferred mules to horses because we are smaller and could fit into the barges. And of course we're hard workers, and smart, as I've stated before and will continue to drive home. Once a Hoggee got a team trained, the mules would be like a jet on autopilot. They'd maintain their gait if the driver wanted to hop into the barge for some shuteye of his own.

Another quirky feature about mules is that we're picky about the water we

drink. The long ears were leery about the Erie. The canal was as dirty as a duck pond in a draught, and mules turned up their noses at having a drink, whereas horses would go nuzzle down and turn up sick as a dog.

There are plenty of legends about the Erie Canal and a famous song too that most of your parents and grandparents sang in school. Ask them about “Low Bridge Down,” also called “The Erie Canal Song,” a ditty about an “... old mule named Sal, 15 years on the Erie Canal. She's a good ol' worker and a good ol' pal, 15 years on the Erie Canal ... we hauled some barges in her day, filled with lumber, coal and hay ...”

Oh bother, I got carried away. That song was written in 1905, at the end of an era when mules excelled on the Erie, and too soon were replaced by crude engines incapable of forming friendships.

But farther west, relationships were developing between farmers and their favorite hitches. Next chapter, there'll be MORE on mules. And that's a hint you'll have to try to figure out!

Just a little mule humor!

Mule Links to More Learnin'

- 1 Hear a first-hand account in the YouTube video “I was a Hoggee on the Erie Canal” at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=V7oNKKYFZm8.
- 2 Sing along with the lyrics to “The Erie Canal Song,” written by Thomas S. Allen, <http://www.eriecanalsong.com>.

Common Core Standards:
R.CCR.1, R.CCR.2, R.CCR.3, R.CCR.4, R.CCR.5, R.CCR.7,
W.CCR.4, SL.CCR.3, L.CCR.4

