

Manny Kicks Long Ear Lore

By Chris Stuckenschneider

CHAPTER 4: Long On Ears

Did you get the “MOre on mules” hint from the last chapter? If you did you’re as sharp as a Midwest long ear—specifically a Missouri mule. The abbreviation for that state is MO. We are the state animal there, an honor gratefully bestowed on us in 1995.

Mules are firmly rooted in Missouri, but respect for us isn’t front and center in the “Show-Me State.” You can’t tell folks from Missouri much—instead you’ve got to show ’em. And they call us stubborn? Take my lead, and let’s proceed.

A few years before the Erie Canal opened, a passageway of other sorts was being explored, the Santa Fe Trail. In 1821, William Becknell, a Missourian who’d fallen on hard times, left Franklin, Mo., determined to reach Santa Fe, New Mexico, with items to trade. It wasn’t exactly a walk in the park, but he was the first person to make the journey, returning with a great-great grandpap of mine, a mule loaded down with awesome stuff. Around that time, the first mention of mules appeared in early Missouri newspapers.

There were mules aplenty in the southwest because New Mexico had belonged to Old Mexico where donkeys were a dime a dozen. Donkey, plus mare

equals mule, so the rule goes, and those Mexican mules were scrawny and tough as nails.

Folks hightailed it west, seeking their fortune, exploring and settling the frontier. The trail became a mega mule motorway. Our breed was surefooted and could be counted on to heft heavy loads, go the distance in the heat without a lot of water and settle for grub a palomino wouldn’t touch with a 10-foot pitchfork.

Mules from Mexico mixed with breeds that evolved from Washington’s Jack stock, other donkeys and big-boned draft mares from Europe. With its fields of thoroughbreds, Tennessee and Kentucky were top states for quality mares and mules too. These animals hoofed it to Missouri and the state perfected mule breeding.

It was no hee-haw that the country was developing, and mule breeders heeded the call. Missourians supplied cotton mules to the plantations in the south,

which ticked off the sheep cause they were pushing wool. Cotton mules turned a deaf ear and got the job done. Their hooves were smaller than a horse’s, and they’d step daintily along the rows, never trudging on the cotton bolls.

Jacks were bred with different size mares according to the jobs required of them. Prospectors heading west to pan for gold didn’t need a mighty mule with withers wide, neither did workers in lead and coal mines. Small mules and horses were required there that could squeeze through the mineshafts—though bitty they were still able to pull cars loaded with ore.

Stories about the jobs mules did, tales passed down from one generation to the next, how steady they were hitched



to the plow and the disk, how intelligent and patient. Have a mule caught in a twisted knot of barbed wire? He’d stay still until help came, but a horse would thrash around to get free, furthering injuring itself.

One ol’ guy related this yarn about his dad. His father owned six horses and a mule. In the morning he’d work the fields with three horses and the mule, and in the afternoon he’d hitch up the other three horses and the mule. His long ears didn’t need a break.

In our next chapter you’ll learn about a clean team with plenty of steam. Twenty muscled mule teams that made history in Death Valley. Their likeness still appears on grocery store shelves.

Just a little mule humor!

Mule Links to More Learnin'

- 1 Learn about the Santa Fe Trail—a slide presentation by kids: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g8AnAy2DdK4&feature=related>
- 2 Mules filled many roles in MO., <http://web.missouri.edu/~ajbr3d/4802/equine/mules.html>
- 3 Story of longtime mule at Silver Dollar City—he was potty trained, <http://thelibrary.org/lochist/periodicals/wrv/v34/n3/w95d.html>
- 4 Melvin Bradley, 83, a mule’s best friend, passes—read about his contributions, <http://articles.latimes.com/2003/mar/22/local/me-bradley22>

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

