


Manny Kicks Long Ear Lore

By Chris Stuckenschneider

CHAPTER 5: A Massive Effort



You kids may know about Borax because your mom has used it to concoct slime. Around the barn, the only slime you'll find is in the pigpen. Those squalid squealers could benefit from a bath in Borax. I'm familiar with the laundry booster and cleanser because of mule teams that hauled tons of extreme clean across California's Death Valley.

Let's return to yesteryear, to the frontier of the 1880s, to a desert valley where heat rises in waves and bakes the landscape with temps in the 130s—an arid landscape where teams of 18 mules and two horses transported Borax from open pit mines to railroad spurs where it was shipped to folks anxious for the spanking new, miracle product.

Francis “Borax” Smith and William T. Coleman were early Borax pioneers. If it weren't for them Borax wouldn't have become a household word and a whole bunch of mules wouldn't have made a name for themselves.

They all had names, by the way. That's how the driver got his team to do what he wanted. Some say if the words didn't

sink in, he'd toss a rock or two between their ears, but that might be hearsay. I hope so. Talk about cheeky!

No one really knows why the teams were called 20-mule teams when actually two draft horses were included in the hitch; maybe “Eighteen Mule and Two Horse Team Borax” sounded clunky, and didn't look as spiffy on the front of the Borax box. Who knows?

What I do know is that man and beast had their work cut out for them. They had to contend with rough terrain that went from flat to mountain-high, snakes, scorpions, and a 60-mile stretch where there wasn't a drop of water. The team did carry water with them to wet their whistles—thank goodness for that.

From 1883-1889, the teams traversed the desert, more than 160 miles one way, a trip that took 10 days. When loaded with Borax, the wagons and barrels of water weighed 36.6 tons—and I'm not fudging on the numbers to impress you. Not a one of the solid oak wagons ever gave up the ghost, and nary a mule had a hangnail on his hoof, much less lost his life.



The teams were manned by a driver in the lead wagon who'd control the team with a leather



lead, a jerk line. The two animals closest to the first wagon, near the wheels, were “the wheelers,” go figure! Those Herculeum horses could really throw their shoulders into the job. They outsized the mules, but didn't have near the brainpower, no card games of Crazy Eights around the campfire for them.

Accompanying each team, were two other men. The muleskinner, or teamster, rode one of the horses, and the swamper manned the rear brake. He also served as dishwasher and cook, and was a master with beanie-weenies.

I'm usually not full of hot air, but all this talk of deserts is getting to me. It's time to chill out. In the next chapter, we'll head to Hollywood and meet Francis, a mule with a gift of gab.

Just a little mule humor!

Mule
Links to More Learnin'



- 1 Death Valley was a hostile environment—read more about it, <http://www.nps.gov/deva/index.htm>
- 2 All housewives loved 20-Mule Team Borax—take a look at this old television commercial, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BaunKrP-btI>
- 3 Twenty-mule teams captured the hearts of the nation, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BaunKrP-btI>

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