

Manny Kicks Long Ear Lore

By Chris Stuckenschneider

CHAPTER 6: Francis Had Star Power

You're in the know about mule teams and rollin' wagons, so let's turn our sites to tinsel town and a talented mule that heard "Roll em!" from a big time Hollywood director.

"Francis the Talking Mule" was a standout, stand-up comic, a four-legged hit on the silver screen, a household word back in the 1950s when Francis appeared in movies with funny man Donald O'Connor. All agree she upstaged him, capturing the heart of the nation's moviegoers with her toothy laugh, distinctive bray and smart alecky ways.

Each flick featured a cookie-cutter theme. Francis, an Army mule, issued orders like a drill sergeant. The brassy long ears had the gift of gab, but she'd only talk to Peter Stirling, a young soldier played by baby-faced O'Connor.

Sad sack Stirling was a whipping boy for Francis, a mule that would hurl stinging remarks at the actor in rapid-fire succession when no one else was around. The movies were set in a variety of make-believe locales. From the jungles of Burma to the bustling streets of New York City, the pair cracked up audiences, many of whom were children at afternoon matinees.

Francis played a male role, but she was actually a girl—a miss named "Molly," from Drexel, Mo. Her owner, Edward D.

Frazier, blazed a trail in mule breeding. He even supplied the mules involved in Harry S. Truman's inauguration in Washington D.C.—a proud foursome that pulled a rig down Pennsylvania Avenue in 1948, the day the Missouri-born President was sworn into office.

When Universal Studios decided to make movies that included a mule, the call went out far and wide. Jack Hackethorn, an award-winning photographer, heard about the opportunity and contacted Frazier. He paid Frazier Farms \$200 for

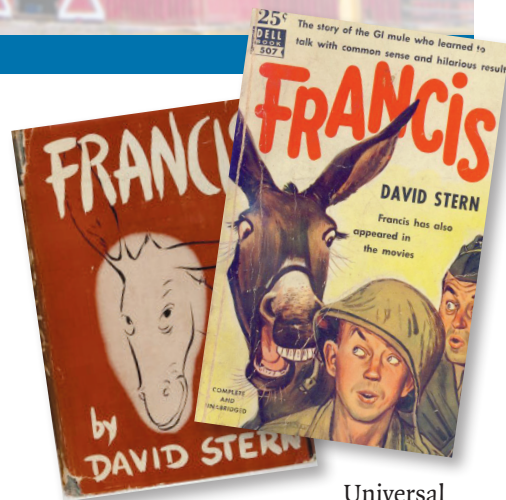
Molly, and made a deal with the studio to fly her to Hollywood. A seat in first class wasn't an option, but it should have been because Molly was star material.

Magnetic Molly blew the competition out of the water. She was the studio's golden girl, hired for her appeal, winning personality, long eyelashes and photogenic face.

All starlets have to watch their figures, the camera can really put weight on you, and Molly struggled with

her widening girth. The glamour-gal couldn't be held entirely responsible—the cast fed her carrots and other treats that made her put on 200 pounds. By golly, the good life caught up with Molly.

But success never went to the matinee idol's head. She didn't buck her work schedule and cooperated with her trainer Les Hilton, a famous equine handler. Molly had another claim to fame. In 1950 she won the prestigious American Humane Association Patsy Award for portraying Francis—not bad for a country mule from Missouri.



Universal

Studios may have made Molly a star, but David "Tom" Stern's book gave the long ears her storyline. A longtime newspaperman, Stern served in the army during World War II and his book of short stories titled "Francis the Talking Mule" was the basis for the movies.

In our next chapter, I'm going to introduce you to some real-life mules that served our country, earning their stripes in the process and a feedbag full of honor.

Just a little mule humor!

Mule Links to More Learnin'



- 1 Meet Francis the Talking Mule—and her sidekick <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wV8DBOng3jo>
- 2 In 2003, David "Tom" Stern, the author of the book "Francis the Talking Mule," died. The San Francisco Chronicle wrote about this newspaper man <http://www.sfgate.com/bayarea/article/David-Stern-III-created-films-Talking-Mule-2511181.php>
- 3 Photographer Jack Hackethorn put Francis in the spotlight—Hackethorn loved mules as much as photography. <http://www.mopress.com/p.php>

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