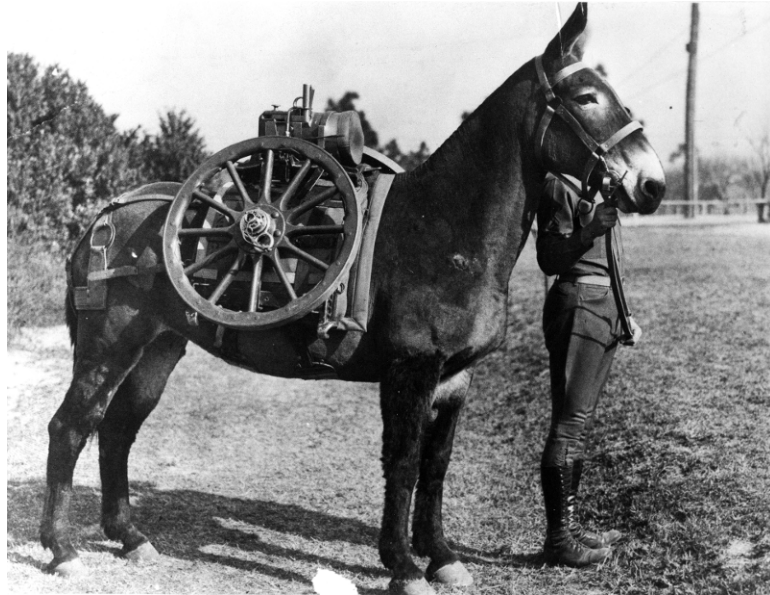


MULE CROSSING: *Contemporary Mules*

By Meredith Hodges

Mules played an important role in our country during the Reconstruction Period: they patiently worked the fields, packed necessary artillery for the army, and served as a durable riding and driving animal in the westward movement. With the coming of the industrial age, their uses were minimized and they were faced with the possibility of extinction in the march of progress. Today, through the persistent determination of



mule enthusiasts, mules are once again emerging as a conceivable asset to our economy and a unique form of athletic achievement and entertainment.

With new and improved and training techniques, the mules of today are known for their beauty and outstanding athletic ability, their durability and their intelligence. Their uses are limited only to the imaginations of their owners. It is now commonly known that a mule can perform better than the horse he came out of with proper training; subsequently, mules are not only competing in mule shows, but horse shows as well—in events from cutting to dressage. Cattle ranchers have discovered the mule to be an important asset in their business: he can go all day without tiring and can cover terrain that might discourage a horse, not to mention that the ride is much more comfortable. Hunters caught in the heavy snows of the Rocky Mountains praise their mules for carrying out heavy game and blazing trails through treacherous snowy ground, leading them and their horses to safety. Sales persons are grateful to both mules and donkeys for their humorous contributions in advertising and children appreciate the companionship and affection that mules can offer. Even the army has conceded that mules could make their contribution to the economy through their use in mountain light infantry divisions. The only problem that arises is educating people on mule psychology so that they can train them properly.

Through mules look and often act a lot like horses, there is a vast difference between the two psychologically. If a horse is given green pastures, plenty of clear water, and friends of his own kind, he is generally contented; the mule needs more. He possesses a curiosity about the world around him that requires him to participate and interact. For instance, if you were to walk out into a field where horses were grazing, chances are they would give you a glance and continue their grazing with a certain amount of indifference. Mules, on the other hand, would be compelled to approach you and check you out. They will

generally follow you around until you leave the field, begging for attention or simply observing you closely from a safe distance. Mules have a genuine desire to make friends with those other than their own species. Also, they are a very sensitive animal and can read your intentions through the tone of your voice and your body language.

Being the sensitive animal that they are, they have a low tolerance to pain. This contributes to their careful and deliberate way of going—a mule will do everything possible to keep himself safe. He is careful about his footing in treacherous terrain as well as careful about the feed he eats. Knowing this about mules can be a valuable aid in training. If a mule is not doing what you ask and you lose your temper, he will try anything and everything to escape the pain. This is where the old wives' tales had their beginnings. Those who understand the mule's low threshold for pain and understand his desire to please will either move on to something different if he is not giving the desired response, or introduce the lesson differently to clarify what is expected. In any case, beating a mule into submission will only cause fear and resentment, and being as intelligent as they are, they will only distrust you. Once they distrust you it is very difficult to make amends since they also possess an excellent memory!

In the early days, mules and horses had to be “broken” and trained quickly due to limited time for such matters. Trainers did not have the patience it takes to bring a mule along “right;” consequently the results were sayings such as: “Stubborn as a mule,” “Kick like a mule,” and “Get a mule's attention with a two-by-four.” The old trainers may have succeeded in getting the mules to work, but they could never trust them... conversely, with broken spirits, the mules never trusted.

Today good mule trainers apply the basic techniques of Behavior Modification in their programs. That is, getting the desired response through positive reinforcement and ignoring, as much as possible, the undesired behavior. Negative reinforcement, or punishment, is used sparingly and is never severe. Voice is an effective form of negative reinforcement; a firm “No” when he is misbehaving is generally sufficient, followed by a few minutes of ignoring him. If you have a mule that bites, a firm pinch on the nose, a “No,” then ignoring him for a bit should do the trick. If you have one who kicks, try your voice first--if he persists, quietly restrain a hind leg in a scotch tie while working on him. If he begins to kick in the scotch tie, stand back and ignore him until he has settled down. When he is settled, reward him by scratching his rear, and then resume your work. He will soon learn that he is responsible for causing his own pain and, preferring the reward, he should eventually cooperate.

Restraints are helpful in dealing with mules but must not be applied so they cause pain. Hobbles, leg straps, and scotch ties are generally all that is needed in dealing with difficult mules. If you find these are not sufficient, you may be dealing with an outlaw, in which case it is best to put him out of his misery before he injures someone. Even if the mule has led a life of abuse, their ability to determine just who is responsible for their pain means that with love and kindness, they can be taught to trust again--it just takes a lot of time and patience.

Still, the most important thing to remember is to praise the mule with caressing and scratching when he does what you desire. Mules love this kind of attention and will do their best to get it. If they are rewarded immediately when they are behaving as desired, the desired behavior will eventually become the norm. If bad behavior is ignored or gently reprimanded, it will fade to a minimum. The result is a pleasant, affectionate, and dependable animal.

Though we are still a busy society, with the help of technology we are more able to give the mule the time and appreciation he deserves. Consequently, we are continually discovering new uses for the much maligned mule, enjoying him more, and in the process, we're putting the old wives' tales to rest.

Yesterday's mules sturdy and strong
The days in the fields were often quite long
The man with the whips sometimes evened the score
With a jolt to the head by a stout two-by-four.
"Understanding" a word not common for slaves
Caused many good mules to go to their graves
"Stubborn and cranky are mules," said most men
Who used and abused them then were kicked or bitten.

When industry triumphed, the mules quickly faded
But the tales remained and were often quite jaded
Twas never the man with the stout two-by-four
Who was wrong from the start to push mules way too far
But the folks who were ignorant knew only what's said
And since mules cannot talk, their reputation was dead
They're known to be pushy, vengeful, and cross
So man abandoned the mule for his exquisite horse.

With more time to our leisure the mules of today
Are treated much better and perform just that way
The love and affection the mules can now give
Makes raising and training them a warm way to live.
To meet them and greet them, to own one or not
The mules of today exhibit just what they got!
We've banned the "Old Wives' Tales" and made a new rule
If you aren't too stubborn, why not ride a mule!

For more information about Meredith Hodges and her comprehensive correspondence training program, *Training Mules and Donkeys*, please visit **www.LuckyThreeRanch.com** or call **1-800-816-7566**. Also, find Meredith Hodges and Lucky Three Ranch on Facebook and Twitter. And don't forget to check out her children's website at **JasperTheMule.com**.

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