



Mules

By Donna Campbell Smith

Not long ago, mules were sold from barn lots like used cars are sold today. By 1960, there were too few to count. Now the mule is making a comeback in North Carolina.

The mule, perhaps better than any other animal, symbolizes North Carolina's farming heritage. Known for its intelligence, strength and hardiness the mule was able to stand up to our hot and humid summers easier than the horse. Mule traders set up sale barns in towns across the state for buying and selling mules, making them an important part of the state's economy. A hundred years ago, these businesses were as common as today's used car lot. One of those towns, Benson, in Johnston County, has become famous for its mule trade. It still celebrates the mule's contribution with one of the country's largest Mule Days Festival. This event annually changes the small town into a boomtown for the last week of September, with people from all over the East coming with mules and horses to compete in rodeos, shows and other events.

We can thank George Washington for introducing the mule to America. Washington's breeding program was aimed at producing a larger, stronger mule to be used on the farm. He imported donkeys from Spain, the first being a gift from King Charles III, to breed to his horses.

Washington was right in his belief that mules would be important to American agriculture. In fact, mules from Washington's stock became the forerunners of quality mules that were the backbone of American agriculture for many generations of farmers, especially in the South.

Farming

Mules plowed the fields, harvested the crops and carried the crop to market. On tobacco farms, a mule-drawn transplanter was used to set the plants in the ground. At harvest, mules pulled wooden sleds loaded with primed tobacco from the fields to the barns, where the leaves were cured. Finally, the mules were used to carry wagonloads of cured tobacco to market. Cotton farming was also dependent in the mule, as were corn, bean and peanut farmers.

The average farm in North Carolina at the turn of the 20th century had four mules. In 1935 a national census reported that North Carolina had 217,000 mules. In 1950 there were 250,000 mules here. But by 1960 there were not enough mules to even count. Automation had made them obsolete.

Military

Mules played an important role in military history from the time of the Civil War. They carried heavy artillery and moved supplies and men. The North purchased their mules from dealers, but the Confederate soldiers had to provide their own. That meant mules were taken from the farm and put into military service, leaving the workforce at home shorthanded. This dilemma might have contributed to the South's defeat in that war since their mule shortage was a serious economic problem.

Mules are still used in the military for packing in supplies and ammunition at locations inaccessible to vehicles, including the mountains of the Middle East. In the manual, *Special Forces Use of Pack Animals*, it states, "Animal transport systems can greatly increase mission success when hostile elements and conditions require the movement of combat troops and equipment by foot." The manual describes the characteristics of the mule as having intelligence, agility and stamina, which make them excellent pack animals. Some soldiers are trained in mulemanship in North Carolina. They learn to put on the packs, how to ride across difficult terrain and to care for the mules.

Companion

The mule is making a comeback in North Carolina and across the country. The 1996 Equine Survey reported 1,700 mules in the state with a value of \$1.7 million. Most are companion or pleasure animals, some are used in the tourist trade, and a few are back on the farm.

The mule's intelligence and sense of self-preservation has earned it the unjust reputation of being stubborn. Not so, mule fanciers are quick to tell you. It's just a mule is too smart to do something out of blind obedience if they see that the action is not in their best interest. Trail riders and packers have learned to trust the mule's uncanny ability to sense danger, and they appreciate their surefootedness and sense of balance on the trail.

Are mules better than horses? It all depends on whom you ask. Many mule owners confess that mules are not for everyone. Shannon Hoffman has three mules and is on the board of directors for the Carolina Mule Association (www.carolinamuleassoc.com or 919-269-3561). She showed horses as a child and then Quarter Horses on a national level before getting into mules about eight years ago. She says, "Mules made me question everything I thought I knew about horses for a long time. I am still learning from them and about them." Shannon drives, rides and packs with her mules, Lucky Number Seven, Shiloh, and Sadie Mae. Of mules and their owners Shannon says, "The people who get along with mules are the salt of the earth type with very little ego." She says of the mules, "It seems as soon as you want to show off, and have a crowd watching, the mule will playfully make a fool of you every time!"

James Lamm of Wake Forest has a mule that is fast becoming famous. Rocky was named America's Ultimate Horse Idol at the national contest held in Richmond last October by doing a five-minute routine including some pretty difficult tricks. The contest organizers did not expect a mule to enter, much less win the title, leading them to rename the contest America's Ultimate Equine Partner.

Rocky's repertoire includes making funny faces, fetching, pulling the family dog around in a cart, rolling a barrel around, and standing on a small pedestal. Rocky demonstrates a mule's uncanny surefootedness by walking onto a teeter-totter bridge, then placing his feet carefully until the bridge is perfectly balanced. For a grand finale Rocky jumps into the bed of James's pickup truck.

Mule shows are held throughout the state, with every event common to horse shows. One event unique to mule shows is coon jumping. This is a contest rooted in the old southern tradition of hunting raccoon for its fur. Hunters used their mules to pack the pelts out of the forest. The need to cross fences in the chase behind hounds was no problem, since a mule can easily jump a fence as high as its own back from a standstill. But a wire fence was tricky, because if the mule did not clear it he could get a nasty cut. To protect his mule, the hunter simply threw his jacket over the wire fence, and then gave the cue for the mule to jump. The hunter then retrieved his coat and climbed across, too.

Human nature being what it is, there was soon a contest of whose mule could jump higher. Today, mules that never met a coonhound or a raccoon are competing for championship ribbons by jumping hurdles inside show arenas.

Not to give the impression that mule ownership is only about fun and games in North Carolina, there are some who still put the mule to the plow. Farming with mules in North Carolina is mostly done for the sake of nostalgia. Historic farm parks often keep mules and demonstrate how they were used in the old days. Whatever their purpose, you no longer have to look hard to find mules in the Tar Heel State. 📍

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Shannon Hoffman, of Zebulon, showing "Lucky Number Seven" in a western class at the Annual Roxboro Mule and Draft Horse Show.

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