

BUILT ON THE SHOULDERS OF VETERINARY GIANTS: MISSOURI MULES

BY: DR. STEVE JOSEPH, KCVMA HISTORIAN

“The mule is the embodiment of a living - breathing - kicking - connection with a rich cultural heritage and a bridge that spans centuries.” Let’s explore this statement that can be found on the Missouri Mule Club website.

Seen at events throughout the state, the Missouri Mule Team is cared for by the Mule Club at the CVM. Veterinary students exercise, groom, feed and otherwise proudly care for these special animals. The club is advised by Dr. John Dodam, who is pleased to discuss the mules and the club.

The mules of Missouri date back to 1822 when William Bucknell of Howard County led the first trading party over the Santa Fe Trail and returned with a herd of Mexican mules and donkeys.

Breeders were quick to recognize the need for hardy animals to pull wagons west, and they developed the big and intelligent draft mule. By the mid 1800s mules flourished as pioneers headed toward the great frontier.

The mule played a pivotal role in the development of several industries that grew the state and the national economy. This included the expanding cotton market as well as the lead, coal and logging industries.

By 1870 Missouri emerged as the nation’s leading mule provider for these industries, and remained a leader through the end of the century. More fame came when a mule team belonging to W.A. Elgin of Platte County swept the competition at the St. Louis Exposition.

When World Wars came, the Lathrop firm of Guyton and Harrington received a contract from the British to provide 350,000 mules and horses for service.

At one time, nearly 50 percent of Missouri farms used or bred mules. The average farm income was about \$700. A pair of foals could add as much as \$500.

Harry Truman was quick to remind fellow countrymen about the superior qualities of Missouri Mules. The President was the son of a mule dealer. He invited a four-mule hitch from Lamar to drive in his 1948 inaugural parade up Pennsylvania Avenue.

Although the mule has been replaced by modern farm equipment and technology, they are not gone. Professor Melvin Bradley speaks about their legacy. He says, “They farmed our land, hauled our lumber, drained our swamps and took us to church. Now we’re having fun with them.”

Private donations are essential to the existence and operation of the Missouri Mule Team. Consider supporting the team with a tax deductible donation. Contact Connie Sievert at sievertc@missouri.edu.

