

Mules on the Farm

By Lonny Thiele

Mules were used for farming in this country roughly 1785 to 1950 or 165 years. Mule numbers peaked in the US at 2.7 million in 1920, but there were still 1.9 million mules in 1940, that included 209,000 in Missouri. The three leading Missouri counties in 1940 in mule numbers were the Bootheel counties of New Madrid (9621), Pemiscot (9650) and Dunklin (7646). Mules were more popular in the South where cotton and tobacco were farmed because they withstood heat better than horses, were easier to care for, and cost less to feed. Quotes used in this column and most of the material used comes from stories in the book, "That Son of a Gun Had Sense: Mule Stories From the Bootheel During the 1930's-1940's Era." Some of the people quoted in these stories have since passed on.

At the river, we would hook Jake to a log and turn him loose — Mules without lines in the logwoods.

I don't know the percentage of mules that worked without lines in the logwoods, but from the dozens or so men I talked to about mules pulling logs, many of them said they would hang the lines on the hames. And it wouldn't take mules long to learn this.

The late John Hammon, of Wayne County, recalled, "My dad could take any mule, put it in the logwoods, and it wasn't long until he could just hang the lines on their hames. He could load logs without them (lines)."

The late Mitch Threlkeld who was raised in Ripley County recalled, "My brother and I worked timber in the summers after we got the crops laid by. We'd hook Henry up (to a tie) and say 'get up' and he'd take off for the wagon and I'd follow. I just tied his lines on the hames. I would follow him back to the woods."

Wallace Howe of Greene County, Arkansas talks about Jake. "The smaller logs, 2-foot and under diameter, we would only use Jake... One of us would stay at the river and hitch him to a log; the other would be at the sawmill. At the river, we would hook Jake to a log and turn him loose, and he would go to the mill. The other would turn him loose after the log was dropped off, and he would go back to the river. If he



was pulling a heavy log, he would stop and rest a minute, then he'd get back down and go again."

The late Lloyd Massey, of Pemiscot County, told how his dad used the larger mules for logging. "Now going to the big mules, ole Rock and Sam, my dad kept them to haul logs. Anytime he wasn't having to farm, he'd take those mules back in the woods where people were cutting trees for lumber. They were perfect. When loading logs, he didn't have to use the lines or anything. He'd just holler at them, 'get up, whoa, haw.'"

Thiele has written a 2nd mule book, titled "My Life With Harry—The Mule." Which recounts the life of a young girl as she worked mules in Scott County in the 1930s. This book is based on a true story. Both books are available through Amazon.com or phone Thiele at 573-300-3085 or email: lonthiele@hotmail.com. (See ad below)



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