

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 5.8 million in 1925, but there were still 1.9 million mules in 1940, and that included 209,000 in Missouri. 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*.

40 Acres and a Mule

I had the utmost pleasure of interviewing Opal Bondurant (now deceased) in 2008 at age 88. She had started working at the David Barton Plantation in 1943 in New Madrid County when they still farmed with mules.

Bondurant speaking: "It was row to row cotton in the 1940s. There were 200 sharecroppers and over 200 three-room houses. They called them shotgun houses because they were all lined up in a row. There was no running water. All of them had wells. Most of them didn't have electricity.

"All of the sharecroppers, who were mainly black, had their own mules, and the mules were kept in a large lot on the farm. The mules were cared for by a hostler. There was a blacksmith there, too.

"Sharecroppers came in each morning to pick up their mules. There were about 300 mules. Those who sharecropped 40 acres had one mule; those who sharecropped 80 acres had two mules.

"Each family had about half an acre they could grow a garden in. Some of them kept chickens. The men worked the mules, and the women and children chopped cotton. All of them picked cotton.

"We had one overseer, Charlie Jacks. He rode a Saddlebred horse. He made sure they were working the cotton and keeping it clean. The sharecroppers were not mistreated. He would be out before daylight, and he would work after dark. He was a real good one.

"Some of the sharecroppers stayed 10 or 20 years. They would stay through the winter. We rarely had a turnover. They had a school for blacks on the plantation.

"Sharecroppers received half of the crop money. In good years, a sharecropper might make a bale and a half an acre, and some years cotton sold for \$200 a bale.

"Sharecroppers would pick cotton all day. They would weigh it in the field. They



would eat and then haul it to the gin. We could hear the wagons coming. We would weigh all evening, from 20 to 40 wagons. The gin would bale four to five bales an hour. Most of the fall, we ginned 24 hours a day. It was a busy place around here. Cotton picking would run from mid-August to February, depending on the weather.

"In 1947, we had a flood. A lot of the sharecroppers didn't make anything. They didn't leave. They didn't have anywhere to go."

I am selling the new book at an introductory offer of \$16 (which includes postage). The price will later move up to \$18. Mail check to: Thiele at PO Box 884, Poplar Bluff, MO 63902. Phone 573-300-3085.

"THAT SON OF A GUN HAD SENSE"

There were 245,000 + mules in Missouri in 1935.

Where there was a mule, there was a story.

This book contains more than 80 of these stories.

Jim McCarty, editor of Rural Missouri, states, "Told in narrative form in the words of those who lived them, these stories will delight anyone who loves Missouri's Long-Eared State Animal."

The 297 page book can be purchased by mailing \$24 (free shipping)

"MY LIFE WITH HARRY - THE MULE"

The 145 page book can be purchased by mailing \$20 (free shipping)

If you want to go back to the past for a time with mules, here are two books that will take you there. Times were tough and hard; as hard as they were, these were good times! - Edn Tomison - editor in chief / Western Mule Magazine

"FARM TO WAR" & WW1 MULE STORY

"One month they are farm mules in Missouri and Arkansas, the next month they are headed in the east coast to board a ship for France to assist the American Expeditionary Force during World War I.

The cost of the new book is \$18 (includes shipping).

ALL THREE BOOKS CAN BE PURCHASED FOR \$50

Send to: Lon Thiele - P.O. Box 884 - Poplar Bluff, MO 63902.

Phone 573-300-3085 / email: lonthiele@hotmail.com.



