

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, that included 209,000 in Missouri. 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."

PAT AND MIKE

As told by Rodney Eddleman

I was 12 in 1941. That was the worst year I had on the farm. That spring my brother, Harley, got drafted and my dad got a job in Jefferson City, a political job. Jobs weren't plentiful around here. He moved up to Jefferson City and would come home every couple of weeks. He worked as a guard at the main gate at the penitentiary.

My dad had the whole place plowed by a guy with a little Ford tractor, and dad disked it up and planted it in corn with our mules, Pat and Mike. He figured 38 acres. It was just up good when dad left and that left me to take care of it.

I wasn't that big of a kid, maybe weighed 80 pounds. I couldn't even get the harness over the top of the mules. Mom would help me. So, I plowed corn. I think I plowed that whole bunch three times. Back then they believed in a lot of cultivation. In late summer it turned off dry.

My dad had the belief of taking a wheel off the sickle bar mower, hook a mule to one side of it and put a rope to the other side. You held on to that rope and drug that between the rows. That kept the crust broken up and held the moisture in.

We always used Pat. Pat was what they called a blue mule. He was much gentler and slower than Mike, a brown bay mule. It was okay working that wheel except for a couple of places where there was a slope to the ground. The wheel would want to go downhill and knock over cornstalks. You had to hold on to that rope to pull it off the corn. That was sheer frustration struggling to keep it pulled off. I wasn't old enough to cuss yet, so I stopped the mule, laid down in the corn row and cried. I had to get up and finish it of course. I got the corn raised that summer.

Pat was the nicest, gentlest thing. Mike was just a mule. You had to watch getting around the south end of Mike. He'd kick you with both feet. I think he got all of us at least once. He was maybe a hand and a half taller than



Pat and might have weighed 900 pounds and Pat 800 pounds. They were 9 or 10 years old.

Pat, he was a very smart mule to my notion. If you hollered "whoa" he would stop and look around to see why you were stopping. He was the easiest riding mule. Don't think that anyone ever rode Mike, because they were afraid he would throw them off. If the cultivator was in the back end of the field at noon. I'd just unhook it, crawl up on Pat and lead Mike, and go to the house for dinner.

For more information, phone Thiele at 573-300-3085 or email: lonthiele@hotmail.com To purchase a copy of the book, *That Son of a Gun Had Sense: Mule Stories from the Bootheel Area During the 1930's -1940's Era*, mail \$24 to PO Box 884, Poplar Bluff, MO 63902. The book is also available through Amazon.com. Anyone who has a farm mule story they would like to share in this column. Contact Thiele at above info.

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