

History of Columbia Mule Day

By Dave Skillington

Columbia, Tennessee and Mule Day are “synonymous” to many people in the Southeast and with the growth of our “current festival” (in excess of 100,000 people during our Parade downtown), plus a mailing list that covers 35 states, plus Canada, it has become known as.....

MULE TOWN USA.

It all started more than 150 years ago, when Columbia became known as a Mule Trading Center, where farmers knew that they could find “quality well broke” mules to plow the fields. As the “saying goes”, their team of mules could make or break them. These mule sales were held in downtown Columbia, around the Courthouse. In later years, the mule’s owners would lead their mules in “parade form” down west 7th Street, and a large crowd would form just to watch the “beautiful animals”, as there was not enough space where the sale was being conducted.

The next “step” was to add floats, etc., along with the mules, so the first parade was held, usually the first Monday in April, which was the date of the mule sales. The spring time was the time these sales were held each year in order to meet the farmers’ planting schedule.

The first “official” Mule Day was held in 1934, which consisted of the parade, and a mule show in downtown Columbia after the parade. The crowd was estimated at 12,000 to 15,000, and was sponsored by the City of Columbia. The following years included a “log pulling”, held in the park along the river, and a “square dance” held in the Tobacco Warehouse. Mule Day grew during the late 1930s, and the 1941 event



Mules in Parade down West 7th Street, Columbia, Tennessee, on the way to the Mule Sale at the Courthouse, during the 1930s.

crowd was estimated to be 50,000. World War II was the reason the event was not held in 1942; as 1943 “rolled around”, local people felt like they needed something to get their mind off the war, for at least one day, so the 1943 parade was held with bands from CMA, and Central High School, playing to 10,000 people. 1944 and 1946 parades were small with only 100 to 175 riders and a few mules and wagons, with no attempt to schedule any activities for 1945.

The War had come to an end, and local people wanted something to celebrate, so starting with 1947, continuing until 1950 the “event’s” attendance grew to between 40,000 to 50,000, and was sponsored by the local Chamber of Commerce. In the planning stages for 1950, and with the farmers becoming interested in “those green tractors, that ran like a deer”, the Chamber was looking for something to generate more interest. They talked my father Charlie Skillington (who was Mule Day Chairman at the time) into riding a mule to Nashville (a 60 mile trip, from our home in Santa Fe) to invite Governor Gordon Browning to be Grand Marshall of the 1950 Parade. He took the trip on one of the family mules named “Headlight Nell”, a black mule with white around the eyes; the trip took place

in early March 1950 with the route from Santa Fe, through Bethel, into Leiper’s Fork, and on into Williamson County. At the end of the first day, he spent the night with a friend, on Old Hickory Boulevard, across from Percy Warner Park. The family joined him in Nashville the next morning, and we followed him on Nell, with a Police escort into Nashville, down Eighth Avenue at 9:00 a.m. in the morning, and made the trip up to the “door” of the State Capital. This was carried “live”, on WLAC Radio, and Headlight Nell “brayed” during the broadcast; everyone in Columbia asked my father who he had to bray like a mule. I remember this day, like it was yesterday; it was a “big deal” for an eleven year old farm boy from Santa Fe.

The 1950 First Monday in April parade (included a twenty mule “hitch”, driven by my late brother, Joe Frank Skillington) was a huge success, it was the last one sponsored by the Chamber of Commerce. There was some concern about the twenty mule team, making the trip around the Court House Square, so the Sunday before the parade, downtown Columbia was shut down for a practice round, everything went as planned. In order for the wagon to have some weight, a log was placed under the wagon that dragged on the street; when the

parade was over, about one-third of the log had been used. My father presented the ten farmers that had provided the mules for the “twenty mule team”, with a hand painted tie of Headlight Nell.

In closing, there was an absence of twenty-four years without Mule Day. The Maury County Bridle and Saddle Club, which received their non-profit charter on December 15th, 1973, was looking for a “fund raiser”, and held their first Mule Day in 1974. It consisted of a mule show and Queen’s contest on Friday night, with the parade, mule pulling, and square dancing on Saturday. Little did our Club Members in 1973 realize the Mule Day that they started back in 1974 would become the “huge event” that it has become today. Many people have stated, our Mule Day is “RURAL AMERICA AT ITS BEST”, it is like taking a “step back in time”!



Charlie Skillington on “Headlight Nell” and Governor Gordon Browning at the State Capital, 1950.



The Farm Bureau float in the 1936, Mule Day Parade.