

CONVERSATIONS

Stubborn Mules?

By L.E. Buchholz

The jack, jennet, and mule industry is 200 years old in America. I will here venture a few facts relative to these remarkable animals. Foremost, they were of great help in the building of this nation.

At one time, only presidents, kings, and world explorers could indulge in the honor of owning a mule. It was the king of Spain who gave George Washington a jack and two jennets. That trio was made up of the Andalusian breed, and were greys. The jack was named the Royal Gift. He stood 15½ hands high, and weighed 1,250 lbs. He was advertised as designed to get powerful mules, and suitable to get heavy draft work done. But he was also described as being dull-witted and exceedingly inactive.

Washington's Mount Vernon (and its adjoining plantations) was a stock empire, and was well managed. The first president had good coach-horse mares, which then produced the best and the highest priced mules in the new nation. Washington was one of our all-time great stock men.

It was a short time after the arrival of the above-mentioned trio of stock that the adventurer, Lafayette, presented Washington with a jack and two jennets. They were of the Maltese breed, coming from the isle of Malta. The second jack was named the Knight of Malta. He and the jennets were black with white points, and that color became the American standard. The jack was advertised as being suitable to get road mules and mules suitable as light haulers. The Knight of Malta was a high spirited, active, and very stylish animal. He is still spoken of to this day.

Mules, however, were quite well known and widely used, before the above Royal even. But it is possible that no jack or jennet stock of the high quality now in the nation had been seen before, and the same would be true of the mules that resulted—and so a great step forward was taken. It must be true that much attention was paid to the raising of superior stock of valuable animals.

It was only a few years after that that the farm papers and livestock journals all carried a great item of news because now it was told that a new American jack was

born. He had been trained and developed at Mount Vernon. The jack's name was Compound. He was sired by the Knight of Malta, and was out of one of the Andalusian jennets. Compound became more famous than either of the two originals. It was with him that the mammoth jack and jennet registry was formed. Later, hand-selected stock began to be imported.

From then on down in time, great and famous importing firms became established. Some built up their holdings to where they offered 400 jacks to farmers



This rare, old photo of quality work mules was taken at the Swan J. Carlson ranch near Lehr, North Dakota. Mules were more valuable than horses, in as much as they out-sold horses. Note how well-harnessed these mules are.

and ranchers during the spring breeding season. And so mule raising became quite general. The importers kept some of the best seed stock, and soon shows and expositions sprang up. And now the ball was rolling. America became one of the world's foremost pro-

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ducers of mules. America used and employed more mules than any other nation.

As time went on, the importing of jack stock all but ceased. It was home-bred jack and jennet stock that now took the lead. The stock, because of the the feeding practices here and because of the training and ego of the American stock men, was superior to imported stock. Most of the truly great jack farms were also stallion dealers. Some kept up to 325 mares in mule production, and 100 jennets was an average number. Some advertised as standing 75 jacks at public service. It was common for the jack owners to collect good sums of money in stud fees from both jennet and mare owners. The demand appeared to be endless.

The standard jack and jennet registry was a busy and volume organization. Black with white points was the only color admitted. Fifteen hands was the height, and 1,200 lbs. per animal the weight. But all of this was a severe problem since some of the best animals had the rejected colors. Few of even those with the preferred red color ever got that big or heavy. Jennets, as a rule, can be ill-shaped in comparison with a jack. As a race, they are shy breeders, and are often too small and too light weight to meet the above standards. But those that did comply were then held at a figure higher in dollar value than I would care

to print.

Mules, as beasts of burden, in many ways out-rated the horse. Still, some of our people hated them. They wanted nothing to do with mules. But credit must be given where it is due. The mule is a natural follower, and is stronger for his size than a horse. Consequently, mules were front-line pack animals. They lived longer than horses, and went to war on the battle fronts. The mule is sure-footed, and often served as a surface- and pit-mining animal. Mules can stand the heat better than horses. As such, they were the draft animals of the south. Mules helped build most of the railroad and highway road beds. They were also more often used on the big bonanza farms and crop fields than were horses.

Both jacks and jennets cannot stand cold weather. Where cold winters prevail, they need better care, shelter, and feed than most other farm animals. The mule is a desert animal. It can thrive where it is hot and the ground dusty.

Most breeders lived in southern states. Kentucky and Tennessee had great show farms, but Missouri eventually took the lead, and kept it. Mules soon numbered in the millions; the greatest mares had mule colts, sired by famous jacks. Yes, mules can be deserving of much praise and respect. □