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# The Lowly Mule Making Comeback

MULES are becoming a status symbol. Reports from Missouri indicate that this dependable work animal is now in demand by sports and leisure enthusiasts and mule breeding is on the rise.

The Wall Street Journal says riding and driving mules are becoming leisure-time activities competing with dune buggies and four-wheel drive vehicles. They will compete in more than 200 mule events scheduled for this year by some 37 mule clubs.

This is good news. Having grown up in the era when cars were displacing horses and tractors were driving mules off the farms, I acquired considerable respect for both kinds of animals.

Mules deserve all the respect they can get, even if they are sterile creatures with no hope of posterity. They have a reputation for being stubborn but mules I have met did not seem to be any more obstinate than some cantankerous people I have met.

When I was 8 years old I began driving a bob-tailed horse hitched to

a two-wheel cart, later advancing to a hack. When I became a teen-ager my father decided I could handle a team of mules.

"Handling" may have been an exaggeration. While I harnessed and drove the mules, it often seemed they were handling me.

Mules can be playful or mean. Sometimes they would accept bridling readily and other times they would make me chase them 15 minutes before meekly surrendering. When they decided they had done a day's work they would head for the barn, leaving the driver to walk too. Although sometimes miles away, they never got lost or had an accident when traveling driverless.

It is futile to try to hurry a mule, and they sometimes seemed to be regarding human beings with considerable disdain.

The WSJ said that when the U.S. Army, whose mascot still is the mule, eliminated its last mule-packing unit in 1956 some soldiers said the United States wouldn't win another war without the mule. "So far they're right," the writer observed.

Even so, the mechanical age made the lowly mule an obsolete critter for a long time. The Horse & Mule Association of America went out of existence and the U.S. Census of Agriculture stopped counting horses and mules as farm animals.

Mule breeding went into a slump, with only dedicated mule lovers stubbornly holding on. Now mule magazines say better looking mules are selling for \$4,000 each or more.

Don't look for mules to resume their former agricultural chores, however, even if a few farmers still plow with mules. Economists have calculated that if we "de-mechanized" farming it would take 61 million horses and mules to do what tractors do.

It would require 180 million acres of farmland just to grow feed for this many work animals. They wouldn't be pulling implements with air-conditioned cabs, swivel chairs and tape decks.

Mules might take on the task, if they existed, but where would we get farm hands to accept such grueling working conditions?