

**M**ules are hitched to Missouri as permanently as biscuits to gravy. Before tractors, mule teams were the power source on most of about half of this state's farms. They were a good cash crop, too. At the peak of mule production in Missouri, "40 percent of the family farm income came from selling weaned foals," says Dr. Melvin Bradley, professor of animal science and a horse and mule extension specialist. "No other state has benefited from a draft animal like Missouri has from the mule. They farmed our land, hauled our lumber, drained our swamps and took us to church."

The mule, a sterile offspring of a

male donkey [jack] and a female horse [mare], exemplifies hybrid vigor.

"The cross-breeding yields an agricultural work animal with the intelligence, endurance and surefootedness of the sire, plus much of the size, weight and general temperament of the dam. Except that its head is bigger, its ears longer and its feet smaller, the mule looks very much like the horse," says Dr. Gil Porter, professor of English and research associate with the Missouri Cultural Heritage Center.

Since July 1982, Bradley and Duane Dailey, professor of extension education and agricultural photojournalist, have traveled thousands of miles throughout the Show-Me state corraling facts

and photos for a research project, "Missouri Mules, Then and Now."

**MORE THAN 2,000 PAGES** of transcripts and 8,760 35mm negatives document interviews with about 100 folks who know and love mules. "We wish we had done this 10 years ago, but its better now than never," Bradley says.

"And in another 10 years it would be too late," adds Dailey.

The completed research will be used in publications, displays and slide-tape shows.

"We worried about financing. We thought of going to the state, but figured in these times people might look twice at money coming out of

## MISSOURI MULES: No Harness Strong Enough

Text by Larry Boehm. Photos by Duane Dailey

Until his death last December, Russell Potter, 73, preferred to work his 400-acre farm near Palmyra, Mo., with a four-mule hitch.



Jefferson City for a mule project," says Bradley.

Instead, the duo harnessed the support of people proud enough of Missouri's mule heritage to join the Mule Skinners Society.

"There are now 304 members who have contributed more than \$8,000," says Dailey.

**CHARTER MEMBER** Elmer J. Weber, BS '29, of St. Louis thinks the project is worth the investment. "I helped raise, drive and sell those beloved critters for a good part of my early life. I well remember in 1917, at the age of 12, my dad trusted me to drive six-mules—four abreast and two in the lead—hitched to

a new McCormick wheat binder. Why, I felt I had more power under my control than a present day 747 pilot," says the retired Bell system executive. "I always felt mules enjoyed people and this helped make for mutual admiration."

That shared fondness dates back some 3,000 years. It's said that King Solomon's son was married while seated on a royal mule. Nero had his favorite mules fitted with gold-trimmed riggings. And mule-chariot races were a main event at the first Olympic Games.

Closer to home, George Washington's commitment to "an excellent race of mules" for American farmers persuaded the king of Spain to export two jennies and a jack in 1785. The next year, Mount Vernon overseer John Fairfax promulgated the jack's attributes and offered his services for 10 pounds a mare and 15 pounds a jenny. Mount Vernon mules commanded prices as high as \$400 a pair.

"We're talking about a time when table beef was 2½ cents a pound," says Bradley.

The first ad for a jack in Missouri appeared in the Dec. 18, 1830, issue of the *Missouri Intelligencer*. It announced the public auction of the well-known Tontalego "on the first day of January next, in the town of Columbia."

Callaway, Boone and Audrain counties were reputed Missouri's leaders in jack stock and mule breeding. However, Howard, Cooper, Monroe, Pike, Pettis, Saline, Carroll, Randolph, Chariton and Lafayette weren't far behind. The breeders in these counties "developed an intelligent, vigorous, durable, large and handsome draft animal," says Porter.

**MULEPOWER** was saluted by Civil War soldiers in the song "There Ain't No Harness Strong Enough to Hold Jo Selby's Mule." Porter, who has been collecting mule lore for more than a year, still is searching for the ballad's lyrics.

By 1870 Missouri was the major mule-producing state in the nation, both in quantity and quality. During the next three decades, mule production peaked. Records show that in 1889, about 34,000 mules were foaled here and Missouri traders sold more than 68,000 head.

At the 1904 World's Fair in St. Louis, a Platte County man drove his

six mule team right over all the competition and permanently placed the phrase "Missouri mule" in the global vocabulary.

A few years later, Missouri's finest proved themselves worthy of their international status. Some 350,000 of them were sent into the British military during World War I by the Lathrop, Mo., firm of Guyton and Harrington. Another 160,000 served in the U.S. Army.

Even in the more mechanized World War II, mules earned their stripes hauling ammunition, gun barrels, food and medical supplies over terrain too rugged for jeeps.

**DESPITE** such distinguished service, mules still are burdened with a bad reputation.

Aficionados are quick to defend. They profess mules don't panic, never overeat, tend to be skeptical, are open to compromise, maintain a strong sense of self-preservation and sometimes approach intellectual brilliance.

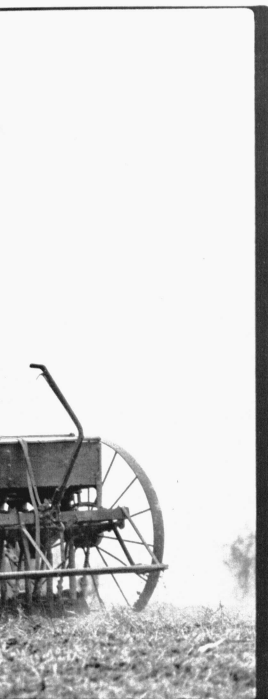
"A mule can cope with everything better than a horse," says Bradley. "It's the mule's nature to stop, think and make decisions for itself. And if it's different from ours, we call it stubborn. There's always this mental tug-of-war between the owner and the animal. A number of humans haven't been able to outsmart the mule, and you've got to be smarter to work it. The horse is easier to get along with. It's just too dumb to know when to quit."

As for the kick, one mule skinner advised Porter, "Just let 'em kick where you was, not where you is." Bradley adds that respect minimizes the danger. "Basically, if you get kicked by a mule, it's your own fault."

The typical farmer, plowing two to four acres a day behind his team, treated them well.

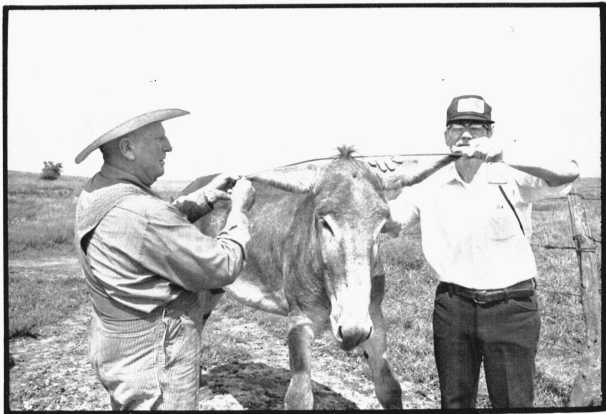
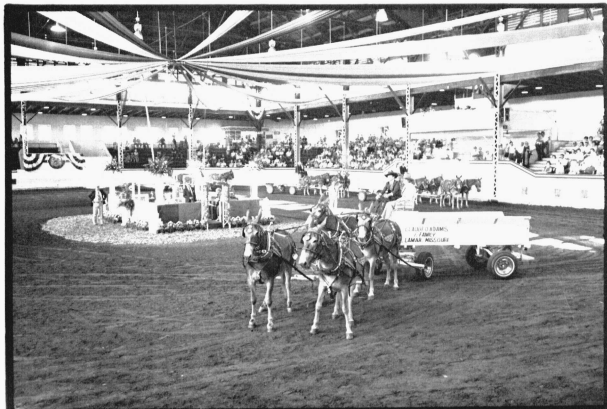
"Because the livelihood of the farmer and the welfare of his family depended so heavily on the health and productivity of his mules, he cared for them conscientiously," says Porter. "Mutual respect and affection developed from shared labor, long association, interdependence and common tribulations."

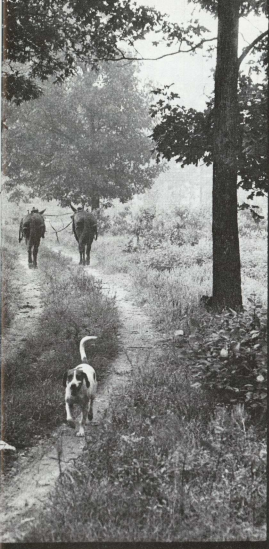
**MULES STILL PLOW** fields and sometimes work cattle, but they're more likely to be found at the center of



Once a common scene, this team of mules, belonging to Roy Pendergrass, Bakersfield, Mo., heads for the barn after a day of hauling logs. There's corn and water waiting for them there.

The Adamses of Lamar, Mo., may be this state's first family of mule breeding. At last year's State Fair, son and daughter Mike and Cherlyn competed in the four-mule hitch for the first time. Even after driving figure eights, backing up and moving the team from side to side, they couldn't beat the champions, their parents, Claude and Kay Adams.





Belgian mares, like this one owned by Gene Chipman of Perry, Mo., consistently produce popular blond sorrel mule foals.

A good mule has long ears, so a wide ear span on the jack is imperative. Melvin Bradley, right, and Leo Baumli of Barnard, Mo., measured these ears 33 inches tip to tip.

leisure activities like show rings, trail rides and drives, rodeos, weight pulls, hunts, races, and fence jumps.

Today's fashionable draft mules are blond sorrels, a soft tannish color.

"In the early days of mule breeding, the black mule with white points was most common," Porter says. "But the color was unpredictable, including white, brown, red, gray and spotted. Breeders soon discovered Belgian mares consistently produced sorrel foals of a uniform practical conformation that were easier to match up both physically

and aesthetically."

Mules were a feature at the first Missouri State Fair in 1853 and were still there in 1984. This year a display produced by Bradley and Dailey was an added attraction.

**DESPITE THE LEGACY**, the mule has never been recognized by the Missouri legislature as the official state animal that Bradley thinks it is. "I've spent my entire life around mules and Missouri people. I can definitely see a parallel in disposition." □

## MULES AT MIZZOU

The College of Veterinary Medicine has acquired the University's first mule team in more than 30 years, thanks to a corporate gift from Hill's Pet Food. Other contributions have provided a restored antique wagon and partial purchase of harnesses and accessories.

Hilda and Louise (Louise has the bigger white spot on her forehead) were bought from Howard Sartain of Fayette, Mo., an 87-year-old farmer who broke them four years ago.

"Their disposition is so good. They're just like overgrown kittens," says Dr. Robert Kahrs, dean of the college. Kahrs is holding the mules in the picture below.

The 6-year-old sorrels will be groomed, trained and exercised by volunteer veterinary students, faculty and staff. This group will drive the team on Campus tours, parades, competitions and other events.

"Fine draft mules are a sight unequalled, and their appearance conjures up images from the past and linkages to proud Missouri traditions," says Kahrs.

