

“GIT along there!”

Down Spring street one day in the ‘70’s came a twenty-mule team in a cloud of dust, drawing a train of three heavy, loaded wagons. Two little mules with tinkling bells on their collars headed the team – behind them were larger mules, nine pairs of them, graded upward according to size, as smartly as soldiers on parade. Just in front of the wagons were the largest animals of all, two powerful horses.

The driver rode the right “wheeler” horse. In his left hand he held a single jerk rein to guide the team, in his right a long blacksnake whip which he cracked sharply over the heads of the mules.

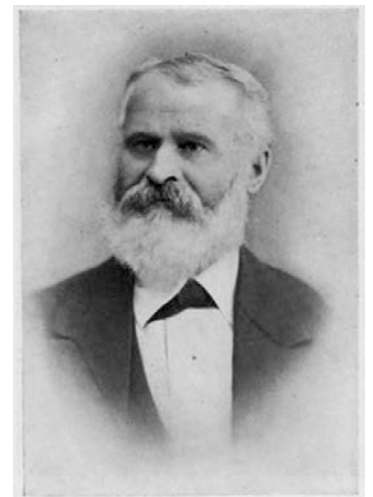
“Haw-w-w!” he yelled, yanking twice on the rein.

The leader mules swung out to the right, the others followed, and then in a wide, sweeping circle, turned left into the mule corral at First and Spring street, where, incidentally, the new Times Building stands now.

The arrival of this twenty-mule team was no novelty, but a familiar sight to Los Angeles residents sixty years ago. It was only one of a total of forty-two twenty-mule teams owned by the Cerro Gordo Freighting Company. Before the railroads were built in Southern California these teams hauled practically all the freight between towns and mines of the Mojave Desert, Death Valley and the Owens River Valley, a business involving millions of dollars.

With the regularity of a train schedule the wagon trains with their twenty mules passed through the streets of Los Angeles, on their way to and from San Pedro, where they picked up freight from the boats and delivered it to the gold mining towns of the interior. They hauled everything: machinery for the mines, lumber, firewood, coal and hay, tools and foodstuffs and even live chickens. They also hauled gold-bearing ore from the mines to the stamping mills.

★ The story of the twenty-mule teams forms a picturesque and now almost forgotten chapter of Southern California’s eventful past. Founder and head of the Cerro Gordo Freighting Company was Remi Nadeau, French pioneer who later built the Nadeau Hotel, also on the site of the new Times Building. His favorite niece, Mrs. Melvina L Pointe Lott, still lives in Los Angeles, and enjoys reminiscing about her uncle’s unique freighting business.





Not only can she tell about the twenty-mule teams, but she actually owned two teams herself. When the railroad finally forced Nadeau out of business he sold his last teams to his niece and her husband, Austin Lott, who had been his station agent for seventeen years. The Lotts used the teams to haul gold ore from the Oro Grande Mining Company, from the company's mines in the Calico Mountains to their mills near Daggett.

“Uncle originated the twenty-mule teams,” she says. “He was in the freighting business up near San Francisco first, hauling merely with six mules and one wagon, when he had the brilliant idea that if he added more animals, he could haul heavier loads. So he kept adding more pairs until he had

twenty mules altogether, or rather, eighteen mules and two horses.

“As his business kept growing, he gradually spread southward towards Los Angeles, establishing new stations where the mules could be watered and fed and the freight stored.

“Sometimes these stations were set up near towns. Sometimes they were plopped right out on the lonely desert, because that location was the most convenient to the near-by mines.

“San Fernando and Newhall were two of these isolated stations; they have since become good-sized towns. Beyond Newhall on the way to Mojave were Coyote Holes and Forks-the-Road, both of them have now entirely vanished. After the station at Mojave came Caliente, at the foot of the Tehachapi Mountains, where there was a big mining camp. Then there were the stations of Tehachapi, Panamint, Bakersfield, Owens River, Lone Pine, Red Rock, Bishop Creek (which later became the town of Bishop), The Ponds, Mill Creek, and many others, including the station at Daggett, which he later sold to my husband and me.

“Each station was a completely equipped little community of its own. There was always a blacksmith shop, for shoeing the mules and welding the iron tires for the wheels, and a mule corral, houses for the men, a cook house, a storehouse for freight, a commissary with several months' supply of food staples and canned goods. Prospectors and other travelers on the desert found it convenient to be able to buy their canned goods from a Nadeau station, instead of having to go clear into town.

“There were plenty of difficulties involved in establishing these stations out on the desert, but the greatest problem was water. Uncle either had to develop his own water from a well, spring or creek, or haul it in huge barrels strapped to the sides of the wagons, or pipe it from a water source miles away.

★ “The water supply for the Daggett station was piped in this way, and from sad experience I can state that the system certainly had its disadvantages. In the summer time the sun on the iron pipe made the water so hot that when I turned the faucet, I had to protect my hand with a cloth, to keep from being burned by the

hot metal. Imagine drinking that hot water! We did – human beings and mules, too. It was all we had, and there was no way to cool it.

“but on the whole, life at Uncle’s freighting stations was pretty comfortable. He made it his business to see that his men were well fed and content. He had to keep them happy, otherwise they would clear out and go to the gold mines to try their luck.

“At each station he usually had a man and wife, the woman to cook, and the man to be a general roustabout, to take care of the mules and handle the freight.

“Wages were high. A head teamster might get \$100 a month beside ‘keep,’ which included board and room and everything else he needed, even tobacco. Assistant teamsters, who rode on the wagon in back to watch the freight, would get \$85 and ‘keep.’ Even the roustabout got \$75 and ‘keep.’



One of the Nadeau, 20-Mule Teams, halted before a desert loading station.
Two of its three wagons are visible in the picture.

“Uncle was very punctilious about seeing that the men were paid promptly each month. He and my husband traveled from station to station in a light buggy, to pay off the men. For fear of bandits, they would place the paper money in flat packs and pads in their clothes and shoes. The gold would be carefully hidden in among the groceries they carried in their buggy.

“Uncle was never robbed, even though the notorious bandit Vasquez often lurked in the vicinity. Others could not understand why he should be immune from robbery, but he had his own explanation. One day, he told me, in traveling across the desert he had come upon a wounded man by the roadside, stranded without food or water. He had carried the man on to his nearest station, and left word he should be well cared for until he had

recovered. This wounded man, it turned out, was Vasquez himself, and he was so grateful for Uncle's kindness that he promised he would never molest any of the Nadeau property.

"Vasquez kept his promise, and Uncle reciprocated by never turning informer on the bandit. If by chance they happened to meet, there would be no sign of recognition that they had ever met before. And when my aunt reproached her husband for not turning Vasquez over to the authorities he would say, 'Freighting is my business, and as long as my freighters are not bothered by Vasquez, Vasquez is not bothered by Nadeau.'

"Uncle was quite as shrewd in dealing with other problems of his business. His wagons were made in his own shops to his own specifications. They were tremendous, heavy affairs capable of carrying many tons of machinery or gold ore, and made with high beds, so the freight would be protected from the water when fording streams. The wagons for our own twenty-mule teams also had beds so deep that when I stood in the bottom of the wagon, I could barely touch the top of the sides, by reaching upward as far as I could. The wheels had iron tires a foot wide and one inch thick. They had to be that broad, so they would support the great weight of our wagons and their loads, without sinking into the soft sand. They acted rather like snowshoes, you see.



One of Remi Nadeau's 20-Mule Teams at a desert way station

"When one of those iron tires worked off of the wheel, as it often did, it had to be welded and replaced. Each tire was so heavy that three men and an iron chain pulley were needed to handle it but it was worth all the trouble. With just those two teams we hauled enough ore to clear \$100 a day.

"Naturally, the wagons needed very strong brakes, coming down the mountainside with such a heavy load. The brakes were great iron strips the width of the tires, which slid under the front wheels of the first wagon, and locked on the wheels with chains so that those wheels couldn't revolve. The strip under the wheels acted like the runner of a sled, giving enough resistance so that the wagon was kept from running too fast, down the hillside.

"But even with all this care, the wagons and their twenty mules sometimes met disaster. Once the teamster didn't set the brakes properly, and wagons and mules fell over the cliff. He managed to jump clear, but many of the mules were killed.

“Windstorms were another hazard the teams had to face on the desert. The wind would blow a regular gale, filling the air with flying tumbleweeds and bringing sand and gravel with such grinding, stinging force that in a few hours every bit of paint would be scratched off the wagons.

“The men themselves would be scratched and blinded, and generally miserable. Sometimes they would be so anxious to get to the next station, out of the storm, that they would whip up the mules and try to hurry them, even though sand had covered the road so that it was quite obliterated.

“More than once those wise little mules saved the men’s lives in such a situation. For when they strayed off the road, they would realize it along before the men did. They would stop and absolutely refuse to go any farther. The leaders would circle around the other mules until they were all in a tight, compact little bunch. And there they would stay until the weather cleared and the teamsters could get their bearings again.

“Those mules were wonderfully well trained. Many a time I have watched them starting up to pull their load, when the driver gave the signal. The two leaders would start first, the next pair wouldn’t budge until the chain between them and the leaders was taut. After this second pair had taken a few steps the third pair would start, then the fourth, and the fifth, until every animal in the team was pulling the load evenly. It was a beautiful sight to watch.

★ “I also liked to see them fording a stream after a heavy rain, when the water was so high they would have to swim. Pair by pair they would plunge in and strike out boldly for the opposite shore, their little legs paddling hard as they pulled the heavy wagons behind them.

“Those little mule led a strenuous life. Sometimes after a rain they would get bogged down in the soft ground, and tug heroically in their efforts to pull out again. Continually they had to struggle over terrible roads.

“Uncle often had to build his own roads in the mountains and desert. He spent thousands of dollars making roads and grading them. and even in Los Angeles itself, his drivers would find the streets pitted with squirrel holes, and gopher and coyote holes. The men would have to stop the wagons and fill in the holes before they could go on! Frequently after a cloudburst they would have to stop to build a whole new piece of road that had been washed out. Mud-holes had to be filled with hay and branches of trees.

“I tell you, it took tough, hardy men to drive twenty-mule teams, and it took a hardy man like my uncle to organize and boss the whole business.

“Founding a freighting company of twenty-mule teams required imagination and enterprise as well as hardihood – but Remi Nadeau had plenty of these qualities. His whole career show it.

“He was born in Quebec, Canada and emigrated to the United States. In 1859 he left his wife and children in the care of French settlers in Minnesota, and set out by ox team across the western plains, to seek his fortune.

“In California he was much too canny to be swept into the feverish prospecting for gold. He decided he could make money just as quickly – and much more surely – by getting the gold from the miners after they’d dug it up. So he started a freighting and staging business in Northern California. As the railroads commenced building south from San Francisco, he was gradually driven down toward Los Angeles.

“In 1868 he built a little house on Olive street, where the Biltmore Hotel stands now, sent for his family, and settled down to become one of the riches and most substantial citizens of the town. No one knew how much he was worth, because he himself kept track of all his enterprises. He didn’t trust bookkeepers, and he didn’t trust banks. He never deposited his money in banks, but usually invested it in new projects as fast as he earned it.

“I have no idea where he hid most of his cash. Accidentally, though, I did discover one of his caches. One day when my aunt was ill, I was trying to help her by dusting the suite of rooms she and her husband occupied, rooms which no servant was ever allowed to enter. I noticed a jardinière on one of the bureaus was dusty so I wiped it off, and then pulled out the dirty old newspapers that were stuffed inside. When I looked under the newspapers I had the shock of my life – the jar was full of \$20 gold pieces! There must have been more than fifty of them. I never told Uncle I’d found them. I didn’t dare.

“In the early ’80’s the railroads reached Los Angeles, so he was forced to give up his freighting business. His twenty-mule teams were sold to mines and ranchers, and several were taken over by the borax works at Death Valley. The borax company adopted the twenty-mules as their trade mark, although they never used as large a team as that to haul their product. They didn’t need to – their loads weren’t heavy enough.

★ “After the freighting business, Uncle went in for farming. At Inglewood, which was then the Centinela ranch, he planted 3300 acres in wheat, barley and oats. But the year was very dry, and the crops were a complete failure.

“He next planted hundreds of acres of sugar beets, where Santa Monica is now. The beets flourished, but a mistake in a machinery delivery ran up costs so he had to give up his sugar beet venture.