20-MULE TEAM DAYS

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20-MULE TEAM HAULING DOUBLE BORAX WAGONS OUT OF CALICO HILLS. C. C. PIERCE PHOTO.

IF YOU GO to Boron celebration, during its 20-Mule Team Days celebration, September 23 - 0ctober 1, you will see a synthesis of the old and the new in borax mining. The spirit of early desert days will visit this Mojave Desert town in the form of a colorful parade, in bright whirling of square dancers invited by the Boron Twenty Mule Team Twirlers, at the whiskerino, gymkhana, contests, exhibits, and the Western costume.

And in the background will be refineries turning out products for today's jet-space age. The modern city of Boron, with 4000 population, may look far removed from 20-Mule Team Days, but it is closely allied. While almost insurmountable problems were ironed out to haul borax from Death Valley to the railroad at Mojave 165 miles away, Boron's repository of borax was lying almost on the route, and only about three miles from a railroad. But it wasn't until 1926 that Clarence Rasor discovered a new borate form here.

So before Boron was dreamed of, 20-mule teams hauled past the site to Mojave on the Southern Pacific. Mojave was both terminus of the famous route and the town where the wagons were built. A state historical monument, dedicated during Mojave's October 1958 Gold Rush Days, marks the site of the corral where the teams rested overnight, just east of the rails.

Why is borax so important? It was prized long before the Christian era, and in the years since its household and agriculture uses have become so common we are un-aware of most of them. In very recent times, borax, in its various forms, has become strategic in "miracle" products, and its use has multiplied so that it is even less known to the general public than it once was. Glass fiber is one of its more than100 products. Its importance as a key ingredient for super-fuels of the space age can hardly be assessed yet. Research programs involving its use in medicine, atomic energy development, and food processing indicate that the industry may still be in its infancy.

While men were stumbling across the valley seeking gold, and others later were taking silver from the Panamints, this white gold lay by the tons in the trough floor. Even when first found, about 1875, it was not recognized. It was the discovery by Aaron Winters that was to catapult the Death Valley borax story to such heights that today, 80 years later, the dramatic episode of Aaron and his wife Rosie watching the white stuff flame green, is known to millions of radio and TV fans.

As exciting as are the stories of the men who erected this giant desert business, none caught the imagination as did the 20-muleteams, their long-line skinners, and the huge wagons that hauled the borax from Death Valley to Mojave. This was a stretch that produced a saga never fully told. At one end were toilers—many of them Chinese—gathering the borax and crystallizing it. Far to the west was the supply and rail station.

In between were long miles without a seep of water, without a tuft of grass. Once out of Death Valley, via Wingate Pass, freighters went past Lone Willow Spring, on the east slope of the Slate Range; then to Granite Well past Pilot Knob—volcanic beacon for a hundred miles. Then came the long low grade to Mojave, the old road now cut by Highway 395 a few miles south of Atolia; and continuing north of present Boron and Castle Butte. More than half of the 10 stops were dry camps, where water tanks were kept.

Borax had been hauled out of Death Valley country earlier — to Daggett and Mojave—but the small loads were not paying. Searles, hauling from Searles Lake, had a shorter easier route. What Wm. T. Coleman wanted were payloads. He needed wagons that would haul 10 tons each, that wouldn't break down in these desert miles. Such wagons weren't being made. Coleman chose 35-year-old J. W. S. Perry to solve the problem and take over as Death Valley superintendent at Harmony Borax works, the ruins of which are seen just northwest of Death Valley National Monument Visitor Center.

The wagons, 10 of them, were built by Perry in Mojave. The hind wheels were seven feet high, the front, five feet. The bed was 16 feet long, four wide, six deep. They made a six-foot track. Cost was $900 each. Hitched two together, they hauled as much as 45,000 pounds in a load. In their five years on that road, there was never a breakdown. As to hauling such loads, skinner Ed Stiles experimented with various combinations and by the time the wagons were built, had proved that he could handle 20 mules stretched out in pairs reaching over 125 feet from the wagon. The skill acquired by both mules and skinners in following winding canyons and looping grades is a fascinating and technical story in itself.

The 20-mule team period was brief, but its mark is enduring. If the nation had never heard of Death Valley or its mining before, it became "20-mule team borax" conscious beginning in 1904 when an outfit was at St. Louis World's Fair, then paraded through New York, Philadelphia and Chicago. In 1916, a cross-country tour, interrupted by World War I, continued in 1919,with people in hamlets and cities receiving borax samples. Again the wagons and teams were called out in 1937 for San Francisco's bridge completion and opening of the

Death Valley - Lone Pine Highway; in 1940 to publicize the Wallace Beery "Twenty Mule Team" picture; and in 1949 as part of the Centennial Pageant staged by the Death Valley ‘49ers.

Latest trek was in November, 1957, when a replica of the famous teams, with one of the original wagons, rolled into Boron as a prelude to opening ceremonies for the $20 million open pit and refinery.

All but the memory of the rumble of the giant wagon wheels, the creak and clank of harness, the pounding of 20-mule teams, is drowned out now by roar and scream of jets and missiles at nearby Air Force bases.

And that memory will be revived by Boron's 20-Mule Team celebration the end of this month. Main events will be the final weekend, with a parade and square dancing on the morning of September 30. Hobbies and crafts are among displays. Food booths will be open. All visitors are invited to "dress Western."