

The 20-Mule-Team & its Famous Driver Borax Bill

By the Pacific Coast Borax Co.

One of the most novel and interesting attractions to be seen at the St. Louis Exposition was the 20-Mule-Borax Team, which the Pacific Coast Borax Company sent to St. Louis from Death Valley, that famous region of desolation in which so many human beings have perished. As the interested spectators watched this team in its picturesque attire, hauling the gaily-painted "prairie schooners," it was difficult for them to appreciate the fact that these were the very same animals and the identical huge wagons which regularly make the long, tedious, hot and dusty trip from Furnace Creek in Death Valley, over 162 miles of parched and shifting sands of the desert, and dry and rocky ravines of the Funeral Mountains, to the nearest railroad point-Mojave-there being not a single house or habitation on the entire route.

One stretch of 60 miles is without water -- water and food for man and beast have to be carried by the teams. From 16 to 18 miles is the distance that can be made in a day, the sun, in a clear and pitiless sky, beating down its rays on the driver and team at a temperature of 136° to 150°, the wagons and driver all enveloped in a cloud of stifling white alkali dust. The successful transportation of borax out of Death Valley by the 20-Mule Team is the highest development of this method of transportation, and speaks volumes for the ingenuity and ability of the officials of the Pacific Coast Borax Company.



Provisions for the round trip, for man and beast, are loaded on the wagons at the railroad, and supplies for the return trip are left at each camping place. To furnish water, a steel tank, containing 1200 gallons, is placed on a running gear, and attached to each train of wagons. The teams work steadily, and their arrival at a given point can be figured even more closely than many of our so-called "limited" trains.

If you were on the lookout for a Borax train to come in, you would first see, far off in the desert, a small cloud of dust, white as steam, slowly growing larger until finally the outlines of huge wagons could be discerned; later, the tinkling of the chime of bells on each mule can be heard, mingled with the words of encouragement or command from the driver, until at last the team comes up to you, the driver putting on the brake, making the tires of the huge wheels screech and shriek as the brakes bind against them.

The driver rides on the 11 nigh-wheel horse." A large strap is attached to the end of the brake bar, and with a snap hook fastened to a ring in the back of the driver's saddle, the brake bar can be thrown in a ratchet on the side of the wagon, thus keeping the brake on until it is thrown out. The driver swings himself into the saddle, reaches back and pulls taut the brake strap, at the same time signalling with the "jerk-line" to his leaders, giving a peculiar call to the team. Immediately the

animals "wake-up," and "get into their collars," and tighten up the long chain that reaches from the leaders to the wagon; the driver gives another peculiar shout to the team, at the same time giving the brake strap a huge pull, releasing the brake bar from the ratchet; the animals all pull in unison, the brake is off, and the great desert caravan is under way. When we use the various borax preparations in our toilet, bath or laundry, little do we think of the terrible journey they have made from Death Valley.

The important features of this 20-Mule-Borax Team are the mules, the wagons, the jerk-line, and, last but not least, the driver.

The Mules

Mules, like people, vary greatly in intelligence. For service in a 20-Mule-Borax Team only animals of extraordinary intelligence can be used. Each animal must know his name and promptly obey commands addressed to him. He must be strong and willing to do his share of the work.



The most important and valuable animal in the team is the "nigh leader." The swinging of the team in rounding curves, etc., depends greatly upon his doing his work intelligently. Each span of mules is attached to a set of single-trees and double-trees, that are hooked into the chain which extends from the leaders to the wagon. In going around a sharp curve, naturally this chain would be on a tangent from the leaders to the wagon, therefore, in order to keep the chain in this periphery of the curve, as well as the wagon in the road, it is necessary to have some of the spans of mules between the leaders and the wagon leap over the chain, and pull almost at right angles to the direction of the team, compelling them to step along "sideways." This they will do upon the driver shouting the command to them by name.

At the end of the day's journey the mules are unhooked from the single-trees, and the chain, with the double- and single-trees attached, is left at full-length in front of the wagons. In the morning the driver and "swamper" put on the harnesses, hanging the bridles on the hames, and each mule after drinking takes his own place at the chain, although there is no special mark to indicate it, and they are not camped two consecutive nights at the same place.

The Wagons

These wagons, undoubtedly the largest and strongest ever used in any country, were built at Mojave, California, after a careful study of all the requirements they would be called upon to fill. Each wagon was built to haul twelve tons, or a carload, of borax out of Death Valley, and the trains were to consist of two wagons, in addition to the water wagon, besides carrying the hay, grain and provisions. When we take into consideration the fact that the modern railway car hauls but twenty tons over a smooth road of steel, with gentle grades and light curves, we can appreciate how well these wagons are built; for they have been in use for years, each carrying its carload, or more, of freight up and down the rocky canyons and steep grades of the Funeral and Panamint Mountains, and over the burning sands of Death Valley, with a record of never having had a single break-down. And they are good for many years to come.

Each wagon weighs seven thousand eight hundred pounds, and cost a thousand dollars. The combined weight carried by the two wagons, exclusive of water and feed for men and team, often is sixty thousand pounds, while the combined weight of the wagons is fifteen thousand six hundred pounds, or about one-third of their load.

The Jerk-Line

The jerk-line is one of the most important pieces of the 20-Mule Team equipment. It reaches from the driver to the leaders, and is one hundred and twenty feet long, made of the best leather, soft, pliable and strong.

It is the driver's telegraph line, by means of which he communicates his wishes to the leaders of the team. It is by this single line the entire team of 20 animals is managed. From the driver it is carried to the nigh leader, through a ring on the rump of each nigh mule, and through the hame rings, or other rings fastened on the housing.

The jockey stick, which connects the leaders, is a light iron rod, with a snap hook on either end; one end is fastened on the chin strap of the off mule, the other to the hame ring on the off side of the nigh mule. When the driver wishes the leaders to go to the right he gives a strong, steady pull; when he wishes the team to go to the left he jerks the line-the latter operation giving this line its name.

The Driver

A man to be a successful driver of a 20-mule jerk-line team must have patience, force and ability; patience to properly train the animals, and force to insist upon his orders with his assistant as well as with the mules; and, also, he must be a practical veterinary, a blacksmith and a pretty good wheelwright. He goes out hundreds of miles in the desert, away from all human assistance, except one, a "swamper." If any of the animals get sick, he must cure them; if they cast a shoe, he must be capable of shoeing them; if the wagons break down, he has a valuable cargo and must evolve some way of getting through to his destination.

Borax Bill



The man who is acknowledged to be the best handler of the jerk-line and driver of 20-mule teams, is Bill Parkinson, better known as "Borax Bill." From his youth he has been driving these mammoth teams, and has a copyright on a large number of peculiar expressions that he has found necessary in awakening the required amount of energy in balky mules.

Mules have some very marked peculiarities, and at times an entire team will seem to be in a conspiracy to do everything contrary. "Borax Bill" soon discovers that fact; the team is brought to a stop, Bill deliberately dismounts, takes his black snake, which has in all probability been coiled like a necklace around his neck, and makes a few emphatic, eloquent statements to mule No. 1, accompanying his remarks with a round lot of blows from the whip, by way of being convincing. This he will repeat with each mule on both sides of the team. All animals having been impartially attended to, "Borax Bill" again mounts and, with a few pulls on the jerk-line, notifies the leader that he is ready to move. All the animals are at once in readiness for the starting signal, which is promptly given. They settle forward in their collars, the chain is pulled taut, off goes the brake, and, with another command from Bill, they are pulling in unison and with a will, and the mighty load of sixty thousand pounds or more is moving, the crankiness of the mules has disappeared, and their conspiracy for the time is at an end.

"Bill" has earned his reputation as the peer of any 20-mule-team driver, not alone on account of his dexterity for handling a team of 20 animals, with their attendant train, but on account of his resourcefulness in extricating his team or wagons from discouraging predicaments; his ability in keeping his mules in the best of health and thoroughly understanding how to treat their ailments when, at any time, they may be "off their feed," and his firmness and justness in the treatment of his "swampers," for it often requires a man of firmness and courage to handle them properly out on the desert. He is a splendid type and specimen of the frontiersman; fair and honest in his dealings; of undaunted courage and fully prepared to maintain his rights, depending entirely on his personal ability to defend them; a warm-hearted, kind and generous friend.

In freighting with a 20-animal team every driver has an assistant, called a "swamper." The swamper's duties are numerous. He has to cook the food where they make their camp, wash the dishes and look out for fuel for the fire to cook the meals (this fuel usually consisting of sage brush or grease wood); in going up grade he has to get out and walk alongside of the team; on the down grade he operates the brake of the rear wagon ; in camp he assists in unhooking and unharnessing the mules, and in feeding them.



The building of railroads to all portions of the great West is rapidly narrowing the sphere of these mighty teams. Ere long the 20-Mule-Borax Team and Borax Bill will be relics of the past. They have, however, performed an interesting and useful part in the service of man and the development of our country.

From *The 20-Mule Team and a Sketch of its Famous Driver: Borax Bill*

© 1981 by United States Borax & Chemical Corp.