

Mules and Men

By Willis Linn Jepson*

Across the sun-bitten plain of the valley of the San Joaquin, heavy with heat and aromatic with tarweed,, two lads might have been seen toiling slowly eastward on an August day in the year 1890. The second day on that plain a sharp change of wind tore away the veil of dust and blue haze and revealed in the sky eastward high and snowy slopes. In unison the two lads cried: "The Mountains! The Mountains!" It was the sort of spirit implicit in that cry which brought ten men together in the year 1892 to form a society of mountaineers. They met in Warren Olney's law office in the old Montgomery Block here in this city. There was no oratory; but there was as discussion of organization, of ways and means, of incorporation, and the responsibilities of the seven of those present who signed the articles. There was debate on the objects of the proposed society and the language in which those objects should be expressed: in what way members should be had. Ventured one man present: "We must in some way get people to know the wonders of the High Sierra." Said Warren Olney: "We must first ourselves by exploration get knowledge of the glaciers, the snow-fields, and peaks of the Sierra Nevada." Remembering the almost untrodden wilderness of vast areas fifty years ago, he went on: "We must use mules." And then, after a pause, another said thoughtfully: "We shall learn much from mules." The words were of good omen. When we as an organization took up with mules we enrolled in that company of great intellectuals who for twenty centuries have associated with mules.

Horace, sick of the clamor of Rome in the Via Sacra and unspeakably tired of the bores who waylaid him at Vesta's Temple, gets on his bob-tailed mule and trots with a light heart and a free mind to Tarentum where he pens those images of delight in praise of the open air and the countryside that are immortal. Apuleius, astride his mule, wandering through the vales of Greece, bussing rustic maidens in flowery bypaths and adventuring happily at wayside inns. Le Sage with his retinue and train of mules engages in high emprise in the mountains and passes of Spain, fighting bandits and rescuing hapless maidens. John C. Fremont and Paul Fountain, American explorers a century since on the Great Plains of North America, are saved from surprise attack because the extraordinary powers of scent of mules and their absolute terror of Indians causes their mules to give alarm. James Davis, member of a native tribe of California and nurtured in the wilderness, defender of the law against civil disorders and gentleman unafraid, discovers that the mules of his packtrain instantly seek the protection of an incense cedar tree and no other when, in the mountains, the lightning bolts play thickly all around. *He also* learns from mules!

The hard-headed common sense that prevailed on that day the Sierra Club was founded was of fair and hearty omen. Of wisdom and intelligence, of patience and fortitude, of caution and self-reliance this club has learned more from His Honor, The Mule, than from any other one element in the Sierra Nevada.

Mules and Men! Men and Mules! A man, hot and thirsty, arrives at Simpson Meadow on the Middle Fork of the Kings from Tunemah Pass and of that ice-cold water drinks his fill at once. A mule waits or drinks sparingly. A man puts at once all the food possible into his tired body. It is an hour before the mule bells begin to tinkle in the meadow. A man falls off a mountainside or cliff. A mule, endowed with a colossal appreciation of the value of his own skin, never falls off a mountainside or a cliff unless engineered thereto by man. The relative intelligence of mules and men is easily demonstrated: men voluntarily jump off the Golden

Gate Bridge into the dark tidal waters far below. No mule jumps off the Golden Gate Bridge; you cannot by any possibility even push a mule off that long span across the Golden Gate.

The word mule comes from a Greek root meaning labor. The word may be taken as a symbol of the prodigious achievements of the leaders of our organization over a period of fifty years, in protecting and helping to protect those things in the California mountains we love best. No other society of the mountains has a record so proud, so prolonged, so successful. That which the leaders of the Club, during the last fifty years, have done has been done despite public inertia, often despite opposition, sometimes despite what has been called "private greed." To keep that which we now have and to add to it during the next fifty years will test far more the strength of this Club than its battles in the past. Public greed, vastly more powerful, will succeed private greed and specious pretexts will be made for the invasion and depreciation of primitive areas under the false pretense of the welfare of the mass man. We discover and place a sign on the tallest tree in the world and shortly we must place a steel barrier about its trunk to prevent its destruction by the mass man. We discover and make known a canyon of scenic beauty with Creation's dew fresh upon it, and all our arts and persuasion and power are employed to prevent spoliation by the mass man. We must believe that the superior knowledge and trained intelligence of this Club will always or at least ultimately prevail. Our fair and high purpose ever, each year, grows stronger and more secure with the passage of time. Each year we renew our strength in the high fountains of our Sierra; each year we return to those high altars where we worship in the light of the Red Gods of the Camp Fires, where in the pass we feel free air astir to windward, where on gaining a crest the heart leaps at the crags of a hidden range, where the alpine maple bursts into leaf along its rocky stream in the July spring and the steer's-head flowers on its icy bank, where the boulders and the snow lie—where the boulders and the snow lie—drifted snow and naked boulders, drifted snow and naked boulders—there yearly we renew our vows, you and I, you and I.



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