

Tales of Twenty Mule Days

By Harold O. Weight

Twenty mule borax freighters had given way to the narrowgauge at Borate, in the Calicos, when Fred Sickler worked for Pacific Coast Borax Company there in 1900-1902. But one of the big outfits was hauling supplies from Daggett to the company's properties around Death Valley, and transporting men doing prospecting and development work there. John Tipton was the driver.

"I went out one trip," Sickler recalls. "On the way we camped at Saratoga Springs, at the south end of Death Valley. I found a spot where the ground was kind of high and covered with a pretty good growth of grass, spread my blankets, and went to sleep.

"In the morning the others were laughing at me.

"How did you sleep?" one wanted to know.

"Why, I slept fine!"

"See any ghosts?"

"No ghosts."

"Well, you were sleeping on the grave of the teamster young Wassum killed!"

That killing was famous in borax freighting history. The teamster, hauling borax from Amargosa to Daggett, camped at Saratoga Springs. That night he and his swamper quarreled, and the young swamper killed him with a shovel. In the morning the swamper buried the teamster, harnessed up and started back. Unable to manage the team, he somehow overturned the wagons, breaking his own leg. But he was able to crawl onto one of the animals and reach the works.

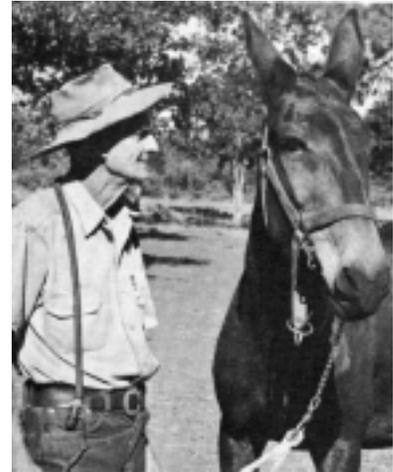
Sickler was particularly interested in this killing because the swamper came from his home country, Pala, and he had heard the story. as a child.

"The swamper reported the driver killed when the wagons overturned, going down grade," says Sickler. "They took his word for it, went out and got the team. But the story got out. We heard the boy confessed to his father. So the teamster was dug up and his skull had been nicely cut through with a shovel. They arrested the boy. I think after a long trial he was freed."

Spears varies slightly: "When workmen came to dig up the body, that it might be removed to a more healthful distance from the spring, they found he had been foully struck from behind, and wanted to lynch the murderer. But they did not, and because of the discomforts and dangers of the trip, neither coroner nor district attorney of the county would investigate the matter."

Perhaps the swamper's twenty mule smashup led to the many stories of terrible borax team accidents and runaways. While Spears mentions such tragedies he gives no other details or dates, and does say the five teams ran the five years, Death Valley to Mojave, without breakdown.

The frontier humor of the old freighters can be credited for starting some. John Delameter told John Edwin Hogg a runaway borax wagon story to top them all. Delameter, bound from Borate with 24 mule team and "80,000 pounds of colemanite," about 1890, suffered brake failure on the steepest grade. The wagon rode down on the terrified mules. The wheel animals fell "and the wagon squashed them." The pointers and the sixes "squashed" successively. Then with its 40 ton load, the wagon "fetched up in a heap on top of the team of eights. Eight mules killed, wagon damaged, an' harness torn to pieces-that little wreck put \$3000 in red figgers in the book."



One can picture Delameter peering sharply sidewise under shaggy brows each time he pulled the long bow a little farther. Twenty-four mules. Forty tons of ore in one wagon. Eight mules squashed!

Another teamster-swamper killing took place in Daggett in 1884, this one after they completed the haul. The swamper was drinking and complaining about his mistreatment when another freighter advised him to kill his enemy. "Early the next morning," Spears wrote, "someone passing the blacksmith shop heard groans behind it and there found the offending teamster, alive but with his skull crushed. Beside him lay one of the huge spokes used in building wheels for desert wagons. One end was covered with blood and hair of the dying teamster.

"Two nights later when it appeared the Justice was about to turn the swamper loose for want of direct evidence, a masked mob took both swamper and the teamster who had advised the crime from the lockup. Telegraph poles in Daggett have a single crossarm. Two ropes were thrown over one of these arms and nooses in the ends were put about the necks of the two prisoners. It was really but a bluff on the teamster. He was soon lowered and advised to leave town. The swamper now 'holds down a six-foot claim' just beyond the village limits."



Herman F. Mellen was a boy in Calico at this time. "The victim, a teamster, was found lying on the floor of the stable," he says. "Lying beside him was his supposed murderer, his hand upon the cartstake that was the bloodstained evidence of the killing. These men had been drinking and quarreling during the early part of the night, but at the coroner's inquest, the accused denied all knowledge of the affair. However, the citizens were fed up on lawlessness, so they took the matter into their own hands. Although I heard several men say they did not think the right man had been hanged, most contended that if they did get the wrong man, he deserved what he got. He was a bad egg."

These misadventures of early borax freighters at Saratoga Springs and Daggett point up a perplexing problem: Who drove the first twenty mule team out of Death Valley-and by what route?

Several long line skimmers put in for that role when the big teams gained national popularity. All are gone now. Two-Ed Stiles and Frank Tilton-left their claims in print. Stiles, as recounted earlier, freighted the first borax out of Death Valley. His repeated claim was that late in 1882, the foreman at Amargosa told him he was going to try something new. Four spans of mules were hooked up in front of the six spans Stiles had been driving and two big wagons, with a small water and feed trailer, were made into a train. Stiles hauled the outfit, loaded with borax, down past Saratoga Springs and on into Daggett. He continued to drive this big outfit, from Amargosa and from Harmony Works, by that same route, for more than two years.

If California State Mineralogist Hanks was right, Stiles sets the date of his first trip too early. No borax was being refined at either Harmony or Amargosa in the fall of '82. But set it a year later, and Stiles may well have driven Death Valley's first twenty mule team-but not, as is claimed for him, the first twenty mule team ever hooked up.

Tilton's story, told to Dane Coolidge, was that he quit as a carpenter building sheds at Harmony Works to become swamper and, a month later, teamster. Borax was being hauled from Harmony by ten mule teams to Daggett. At one crossing of the Amargosa bed, down near Saratoga Springs, it was almost always necessary to uncouple and haul the wagons through one at a time. The foreman finally figured a twenty mule team would get them through the bad section and make better time over the rest of the road. Dates given at Tilton's death, however, indicate he didn't start working for the borax company until 1890.

Both these stories fix Daggett as the early shipping point for Death Valley borax—a matter long in conflict among oldtimers. It may be that before Perry built his freight line to Mojave this was the road used.

Perry had reason to be thankful, once, that his freighters did not invariably hold to schedule. He and a workman, searching for a shortcut route through Death Valley country, found themselves afoot 50 miles from the nearest water when their horse died. There was only enough in the water keg to fill a small canteen and half fill a bucket. It was too hot to bike by day, but they set off at nightfall, hoping to reach a small abandoned wagon in Windy Gap, 26 miles away, before sunup. They planned to rest in the wagon shade the next day, and make it on to Hidden Springs the next night.

While traveling slowly through the hot night, Perry heard a rattler buzz at his feet. He jumped and the rattler missed. But Perry landed on jagged rocks, falling and spilling almost all the water. Hurrying on, they reached the wagon just after sunrise and suffered there through the burning day with only enough water to wet their tongues to keep them from swelling. Hidden Springs was still 25 miles away. They dared not start until dark, and might not have strength to do so then.

But just at dusk a team came along, a day ahead of the time expected. "That night," says Spears, who recorded the story, "Perry sat up until one o'clock to drink water."

All travelers among the increasing numbers following the borax road were not so lucky. Teamsters found and buried five men who had perished from thirst along the road through Windy Gap.

Excerpt & pictures taken from *20 Mule Team Days in Death Valley*
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