





by Lisa K. Harris

Mule Packing

—a National Park Tradition

It's 3:30 in the morning, and Kate Kahla unlatches the door of a horse trailer, triggering the start of another workday. She's already been awake for hours, preparing for the day's tasks by loading mules, horses and pack-bags, and driving miles down a dirt road to its abrupt end amid scrubby cacti, gnarly trees and bursage.

With clangs, rattles and repeated commands of "whoa there," Kahla unloads and "tacks up" [attaches gear like bridles and saddles to] animals, continuing nearly a century's tradition of mule packing in our national parks and monuments. She and her husband Sid own Elgin's Walking S Ranch, a working cattle ranch, and supply a valued commodity to the National Park Service. They lead packed mule strings into the rugged backcountry of Southern Arizona's Saguaro National Park, Organ Pipe National Monument, Chiricahua National Monument and New Mexico's Bandelier National Monument.

"We've packed for family camping trips and university researchers, but

most of the time we pack equipment for Park trail work," says Kate. "You name it, and our mules have carried it: cables, pulleys, pick-axes, shovels, camping supplies, food, rain barrels and wheelbarrows." The cargo is neatly stuffed into special canvas pouches made especially for mules; the pouches fit snugly over an animal's back and hang along its sides. A wheelbarrow or rain-barrel-toting mule carries two—one on each side—for balance. "Once, we packed in a port-a-potty," she recalls.

Working mules have been part of the National Park Service's development and continued management since the government agency began in 1916. A cross between a horse and a

donkey, a mule is able to carry heavy loads over rugged terrain. It can carry up to 20 percent of its body weight—about 170 pounds on flat ground, less if the trek is steep and rocky. In Parks, they've hauled equipment for constructing roads, trails, bridges, buildings and campgrounds, as well as food and supplies for construction workers and rangers. While trucks and bulldozers undertake much of the heavy work today, mules continue to play a role in meeting backcountry wilderness needs.

With seven mules and three horses, the Kahlas run two strings of pack animals. The mules carry the loads, and the Kahlas ride the horses. "Mules are smart, smarter than I am some-

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Mules carrying propane tanks in Bandelier National Monument



Courtesy: Kate Kahla

Mule packing in Saguaro National Park



Sid Kahla leads a string of mules to Manning Camp in Saguaro National Park.

times, but they have to think first,” explains Kate. “If I signal them to turn suddenly, they have to ponder turning for a bit before they act. A horse turns immediately.” Maneuverability is key in mule packing and that’s why Kate rides a horse. “It’s all about safety—mine and the mules’,” she adds. If one mule spooks and bolts, Kate must quickly escape from the oncoming animal and control the others, so they don’t trample her or run off.

Mules are tied together with twine, not leather, so they can easily break free of one another; otherwise a bolting animal could drag the rest of the mules with it. “It can be the littlest thing [a bee, cactus, hiker] that sets them off,” says Kate. “One breaks, and the others react, running every which way, unless I can control them quickly.” Once, a black backpack left by a hiker caused panic, sending a mule scurrying into the woods. “He probably thought it was a bear,” Kate explains.

String order depends on personality. “I place dominant mules in front so they don’t nip at the others,” Kate says. The last mule is the one that has a long stride and the surest foot. “That way, if it falls behind, it can step up [catch up] quickly.”

Kate watches how mules interact

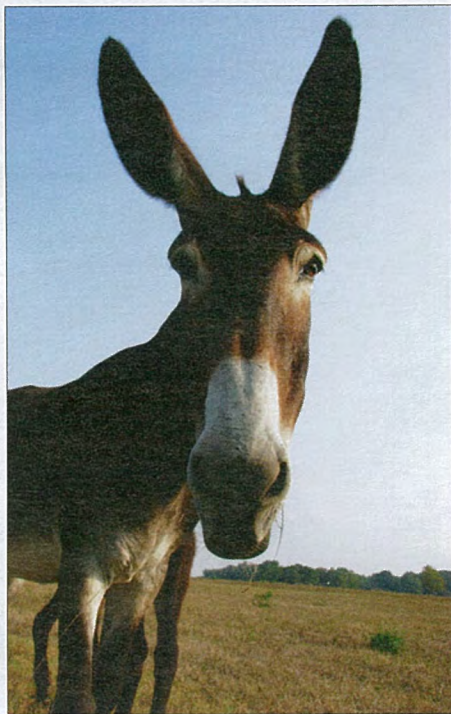
Mules can be like spoiled children who are used to getting their way.

with each other in a corral. “I see who’s hanging out with whom, and who’s nipping at whom, and [I] string accordingly,” she says. Kate said she believes that mules are like people, with distinct feelings about whom they like to be around and those they don’t want to associate with.

Mule packing is steady work. In Arizona and New Mexico the Park Service builds and maintains trails year-round, repairing damage caused by wear, flood-

ing, erosion, overgrown vegetation and fire. “Most of our trips are one day long,” explains Kate. “We drop supplies at spots and leave, returning later to pick up the equipment after the trail crews finish.” Depending on the route, she might pack in 10 miles or more, one way, and return to the Walking S Ranch the same day. If the supplies are going to be brought out again in a day or so, or if it’s a really rugged trail, they might stay over.

One example is a stock corral at



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Saguaro National Park's Manning Camp atop the Rincon Mountains. The steep trail is nine miles long, and "it takes us four to five hours to make it to the top," says Kate. "If we stay overnight, we bring food for the animals, as well." Concerned about the effects of introducing non-native plants into the ecosystem by way of animal feed, Parks requires that stock animals eat only weed-free feed.

"Packing mules is easy," Kate says. "I can teach anybody to pack; it's handling the animal that's the tricky part." Both she and Sid are third-generation ranchers. Kate came from a cattle ranch in southern Oregon and has always worked with mules. Sid is from southern Texas. "Mules can be tough to work with, and you just have to have a way with them in order to train them," admits Kate.

Mules can be like spoiled children who are used to getting their way. Retraining "spoiled" mules requires a lot of time and patience. "Sometimes it takes touching a new mule over and over again on the same spot until they learn to accept what you want them to do," explains Kate, who looks to the past for guidance by reading old military animal husbandry manuals. "The army used mules for hauling ammunition and supplies up through World War II and knew how to handle them," she says.

Kate, who works with mules because she loves a challenge, knows of no other woman mule-handler in Arizona. "If I can bring back everybody unhurt and happy, I've been successful," she says.

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