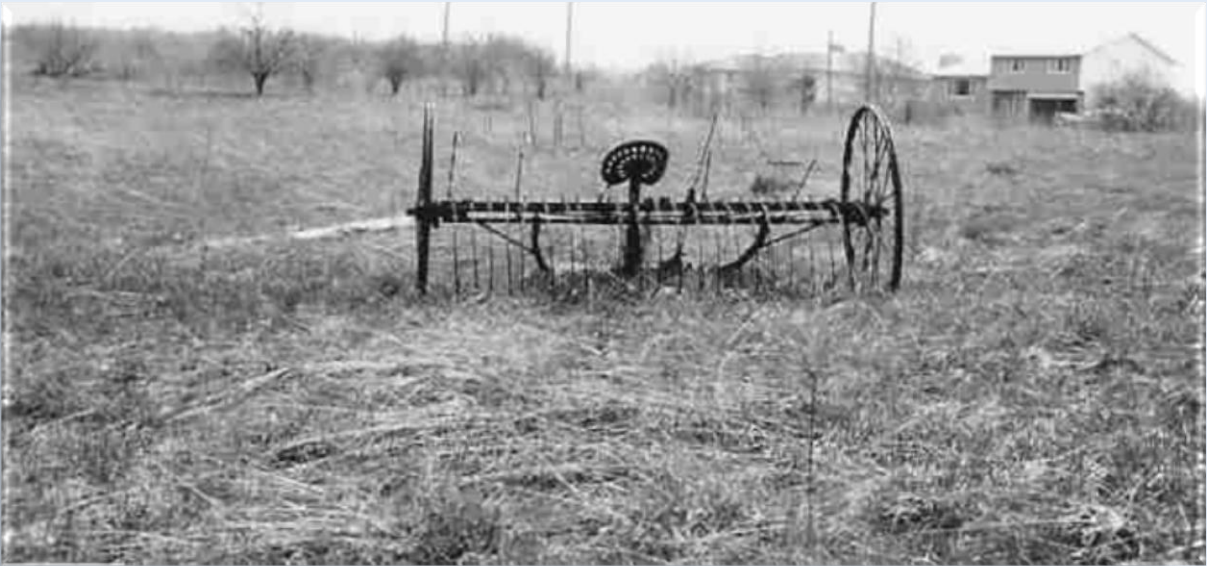


Mule Intelligence

by Frederick Wickert



Dump rake, pulled by Julius and Caesar



Wagons similar to the one in the story, loaded in the same fashion. These are horses in the photo, and not mules.

As a boy, I lived on a small farm near Syracuse, New York. It was around the time WWII began. We farmed the hard way in those days, mostly doing everything by hand with the help of a team of mules named Julius and Caesar. I learned to drive that team of mules at the age of eight.

One day Dad and I were building an electric fence for a temporary pasture on a gentle slope in the rear portion of the farm. It was a hot day. The team of mules were hitched to a box type wagon, in which we carried wire, fence posts and tools. As we worked, Julius began pawing at the ground. Dad tried to get him to stop, as he was afraid some harness would get damaged and have to be mended.

Dad got him to stop, and then returned to fence building. In a few moments Julius began pawing at the ground again. Dad went to him and spoke to him. He stopped pawing until Dad resumed working and he resumed pawing. Dad was puzzled at this behavior. He could see nothing wrong to cause Julius to do this. Soon the reason became clear. Julius had dug a hole almost a foot deep. Water from a small spring we had not known existed, began flowing into the hole. The water was cool and clean, being filtered by a small deposit of gravel we also did not know was there. Julius and Caesar took turns drinking their fill. We never knew how Julius knew there was water there, but he did.

The farm adjoined property owned by a country club named DRUMLINS. Drumlins provided fine dining, a ball room, a golf course, bowling on the green, an ice skating rink in the winter, and a ski slope with a ski jump for the winter months. The ski slope overlooked the golf course.

In the summer months, hay grew on the ski slope. The Drumlins golf course crew had a tractor with mowing machine and would mow the hay on the ski slope in late summer, preventing it from interfering with skiing by protruding through the snow.

My father made arrangements with Drumlins management, to be allowed to take the hay from the hill where they had already mowed it.

The process of haying was to use a machine drawn by the mules, called a dump rake. The cut hay was raked into windrows. The windrows were then rolled up by hand with a pitch fork into a pile called a hay cock. I then drove the team of mules with the hay wagon between rows of hay cocks, and my father pitched those hay cocks onto the wagon with a pitch fork, until the load became so high that no more could be piled on.

One day, we were at the top of the ski slope with a full load of hay. There was a double track on one end of the slope that descended to the golf course below, and the hill was steep. It was too steep to go down with a full load of hay. It was our practice to stop at the top of the hill to chain the wheels on the wagon. A chain was wrapped through the spokes of the wheels and around the axel. In that way the wheels could not turn. They would slide on the ground with a length of chain in front of them. This acted as a brake for the heavy load going down the hill behind the team.

On this particular trip, the wheels had not yet been chained, when the team of mules suddenly stopped, and Julius, the mule on the left side, sat down. Dad investigated to determine why he had done this, and discovered that the whippetree had broken at the point where the long pin went through to hold it fast to the tongue of the wagon. Had the team continued forward, causing the pole to come free from the neck yoke bar, the wagon then in free wheeling down the mountain, ending in disaster, the mules and myself could all have been killed.

How these mules ever knew the whippetree had broken, and how they had understood what it took to stop the wagon and hold it until disaster was averted, we never knew.

Action was swiftly taken to chain and block the wheels of the wagon while the mules patiently held it from rolling down the hill. They had more than likely just saved my life and theirs.

After the wagon was secured so that it could not roll down the hill, the mules were unhitched and driven to some shade under a pair of apple trees amidst some tall sweet clover for a well deserved rest, while a trip was made to the barn to obtain another whippetree.

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