

We'll Miss Those Little Jacks, Jerking That Iron Wheeled Cart

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MERTZON — The following report has been withheld for six or seven weeks in the hope that further information might develop to make the story more complete. But considering how close-mouthed the subject is, and how unsuccessful I've been in extracting a comment out of him, it appears that the best thing to do is relate the story and be done with it.

What happened was that, in late April during lamb marking, my goat-whiskered uncle just up and abandoned his traditional lamb marking conveyance — a mule powered wagon — in favor of the new pickup he uses in the remainder of his operations.

He didn't call us in for an open discussion of the matter. He prepared no press releases announcing his jack cart was going into moth balls. All he did was suddenly start moving his panels and paraphernalia from the cart into his truck, as if mule jockeying had become officially out of style on the morning of April 18, 1966.

The mules were turned out to pasture, their harness hung in the barn, and the wagon parked near a dilapidated old buggy shed. The end of an era was closed without any more justification than a housewife needs to shift all the furniture in the house.

The whole outfit was stricken with doubt. My Boss' crew, who were helping the uncle at the time, were so badly shaken that their entire behavior pattern was affected in every phase except at the dinner table. The two hombres who work immediately under the whiskered gent was as thunderstruck as if their patron had told them to sow 400 pounds of pumpkin seed in the horse trap. If any of us had had the prescience of a goose, we would have quit the work before the news spread and bet every nickel we could raise that the last outfit in the county to use iron instead of rubber was catching up with the glorious times of the Great society.

We all knew it was useless to ask what had prompted the change from the teeth-rattling wagon to the fancy shock-absorbed vehicle, because it is well accepted in these parts that the Tio's habit of passing out information pertaining to his decisions would make old Silent Cal Coolidge look like the biggest blabbermouth that ever lived in the White House.

So the work went on as if nothing was wrong. The only thing missing was this last example of untaxed, unlicensed form of transportation and the set of Mexican mules that had pulled it for so many years.

One question about the transition rests in the possible effect the absence of an active muleteer will have on our idiom. As is universally known, the language basic to wheeling a team of mules across the roughs is the primary source of all the most potent, blue-tinged expletives that are heard in the range country.

Though horseshoeing, ranch plumbing experiences, and early morning sessions with recalcitrant broncs have contributed to the vocabulary of the ranchers and their drovers, it was the mule skinner who furnished the bulk of the colorful expressions common to the cow country.

Anyway, it appears that my grey-snouted old uncle has quit the mule game. Evidently he doesn't care if future generations never hear the iron rims striking the rocks, and the drive popping the lines off the jacks' backsides. He doesn't seem to give a hang whether the only runaways we ever see are re-runs of chariot races on TV.

But I guess we'll make it somehow. There must be something in this magnificent age to take the place of the predawn sight of my grey-snouted uncle chousing his mules across the drylands of the shortgrass country.