

Plow Hand Blues

[Greetings]

Thank you for attending our little barnside chat, “Plow Hand Blues: Revisiting the Mules of Mississippi.”

Now, we have a lot to cover and not a lot of time to cover it, so let’s jump right in! [CLICK]

Church Goin Mule is an outsider artist who recently completed a residency at Cleveland, Mississippi's own Jax Farms in addition to being profiled in Country Roads Magazine, Our Mississippi Home, Acadiana Profile, and more. They have an upcoming show at the Greenhouse in Biloxi, and you can find Mule's work online at megamegamega.net or @churchgoinmule on instagram. Mule's life was changed by hearing Howlin Wolf's “Smokestack Lightning” for the first time, and Mississippi never let old Mule down since. Marshall’s work will be on display here and I will include some more of her work throughout the presentation! [CLICK]

For those of you who don’t know me, or have only seen me day-drinking at this festival, my name is Charlotte Jones. I am a history practitioner and will begin my PhD studies in Anthropology this August at LSU. I’ve had articles published in Mules & More Magazine, Country Roads and *Louisiana History*. Currently, I am the site manager of the 1811 Kid Ory Historic House and recently curated an exhibit about work mules called Stomping Grounds, which this is an extension of. [CLICK] The 1811 Kid Ory Historic House is a sponsor of this event and is located in LaPlace, LA. Never heard of LaPlace? Yeah, me neither until a few months ago -- however, you can find yourself in LaPlace at the end of I-55 when you're heading to New Orleans. Clarksdale and LaPlace are also connected by Highway 61, and the area shares another cultural connection via the Mississippi River. This event is also sponsored by Chateau Debris and Meraki Coffee Roasting Co.

I welcome questions and criticisms, but please wait until the talk is over when we are checking out Marshall’s wonderful, wonderful art work to speak with me - no one likes being stuck in a captive audience! And a quick disclaimer, I am a blues fan -- not a blues historian. Numbers are not my specialty, so if I get birthdays or years wrong or someone else wrote that song that I sampled, etc. etc. etc., please wait til after to point it out. Also, while this is mostly a lighthearted discussion on mules, I will mention some historical topics that can be quite racially and politically “loaded.” These are facts that I will be covering for the sake of historical context, such as Reconstruction, sharecropping, and race relations as told directly by men long deceased. This is not meant to politicize but if anyone tries to interject *and* politicize, I will kindly ask you to leave. [CLICK]

First thing first, what is a mule? A mule is the hybrid animal between a female horse and a male donkey, known as a Jack. Literally, a jackass. [CLICK]

[Mule facts and figures here] Jacks & Jennys, Hands as measurement, etc. etc. [CLICK]

Mules have been around for nearly as long as human civilization, and used to be a very prominent animal for folks of all backgrounds, from farmers to the nobility.

During the colonial era, the Spanish used mules throughout present day Texas, Central and South America. By the mid-1700s, they could be found scattered throughout the Mississippi River Valley, and on plantations by the cusp of the 19th century. George Washington is credited with making mules popular on the American landscape, and by 1817 the quadrupeds helped build the Erie Canal and later pull boats and barges along its banks. Smaller mules were also used out west and in the Appalachian Mountains for coal mining. Stagecoach drivers and pioneers often preferred mules for travelling.

Speaking of travelling, I would have brought my mule Chica with me, [CLICK] but then we would have had to start walking 17 days ago. But, she can walk about 20 miles a day, and easily carry 300 pounds on her back if needed -- and though the journey would have been hot and humid with very little shade, she would have handled it much better than a horse due to her strength and hybrid vigor. If she felt overworked, she simply would've refused to continue on until she had a thorough break. These attributes are the same reasons why farmers, planters, and all those other guys I just mentioned preferred mules. [CLICK]

Despite these attributes, mules were often shunned and written off as being lazy, stubborn, mean, or just plain stupid. In many ways, mules were basically equal to your modern day work trucks, tractors, etc. Horses, both socially and culturally, were the "better" animals, and of course, by the early 20th century, this hierarchy also included automobiles -- as one wealthy Coahoma County planter learned the hard way. In the summer of 1912, J.E. Humber, at 65 years old, met and married a woman named Lottie Edson while vacationing in Kentucky. When their train arrived at the station, Humber's finest teams of mules were waiting, but "the bride took one look at the team of spirited mules, and declared emphatically she preferred an automobile. The aged husband pleaded it would take time to get a motor car, and suggested they try out the two Mauds," who "could go about as fast as an electric coupe." That was the beginning of their problems and soon after she divorced him and won an alimony of \$6,500.

Sister Maud Mule by Alec Johnson (and Bo Carter and Lonnie Chatmon)

The population of mules peaked in 1930. A whopping 369,000 mules roamed the great state of Mississippi. Let's visualize that for a moment. That is nearly 5x the seating capacity of the Mercedes-Benz Superdome. If you can't visualize a floppy-eared animal braying at the field then you have clearly never been to a Saints game.

Another way to visualize just how many mules that is is to think about their byproducts -- yes, I'm talking about manure. An average 1,000 lbs. horse will produce around 405 cubic feet of manure per year. Use that same figure with mules, and all of the mules of Mississippi in 1930 produced around 149,445,000 cubic feet of manure. [CLICK]

That's 24 million more cubic feet than the interior volume of the Superdome.

Long story short -- these animals were everywhere throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

40 ACRES AND A MULE

So, the question is, HOW and WHY did mules become synonymous with the Deep South? [CLICK] It's not because of the Siege of Vicksburg, even though that incident highlights just how common mules were in Mississippi by the mid-19th century. During the siege, both confederates and residents of Vicksburg resorted to eating mules and rats. There are conflicting stories about the origin of this menu, but either way the press ran this mock menu that included mule tongue a la bray and a bottle of 1492 sparkling Mississippi River water. [CLICK]

Despite their omnipresence since the 1700s, the beasts of burden truly became ingrained in the culture of the south after the Civil War because of the familiar saying, "40 acres and a mule." The phrase was coined in 1865 by General Sherman's Field Order No. 15, which allowed confiscated lands to be redistributed to Black refugees along the Georgia Coast. The order was rescinded the same year, but the term spread like wildfire throughout the country. "40 acres and a mule" was essentially a politically-motivated **sound bite** to stir up more political chaos. Confederates, especially massive land holders, obviously hated the idea, especially since it meant that their land could be confiscated and redistributed. But for those formerly enslaved, "40 acres" became a dream and later an unfulfilled promise. Either way, the slogan became another source of discord and really pitted Blacks and mules into a sort of symbiotic relationship even though, as we've already discussed, these equines could be found all over the country. And there was money to be made in mules! [CLICK]

Branding itself, "The Golden Buckle of the Cotton Belt." Clarksdale went through a boom town phase at the end of the 19th century. [CLICK] As you can see here. [CLICK]

A good stockman could make good money in the mule business. In 1920, the average cost of a mule was about \$150 (nearly \$2,000 today). In addition to breeding mules, moving them from states like Tennessee, Missouri, or Kentucky, or selling them -- auxiliary occupations could also find good money in the mule business. When Clarksdale was a boomtown there were several stables in town in addition to feed stores, blacksmiths, wagon dealers, harness makers and so on.

[CLICK]

Perhaps the most recognizable mule space you didn't know existed is the old Gates Mule Barn just down Sunflower here. The barn, now a veterinary office, is next to Red's. [CLICK] Apparently, O'Hayes was quite the stockman before he moved somewhere north of here (likely Missouri) for better business. [CLICK]

Around 1903, the Guyton and Harrington Mule Company built a massive mule barn on the corner of 3rd and Yazoo that extended the width of the block. They ran a massive mule trading organization that extended from Lathrop, Missouri to Columbia and Nashville, TN, and down the Mississippi River Valley to New Orleans. While the Yazoo & Mississippi Valley railroad moved African American families north during the Great Migration it simultaneously moved beasts of burden down south, however the poor animals shipped down south more often than not awaited tragic fates. [CLICK]

G&H became *the* stock provider for the British Remount Commission during the Second Boer War, between 1899 and 1902. [CLICK] I'm not going to get into the details here but the Second Boer War was essentially a form of equine genocide. [CLICK] Army mules were also still used heavily in the First World War despite the availability of vehicles, because the pack animals can haul equipment through treacherous environments, even though many soldiers believed that the mule, "is grossly misunderstood; this is because in spite of a long and close association with mankind--mankind yet fails to become on intimate and cordial relations with the mule. His disposition and character do not invite affection or confidence.... Back behind those innocent eyes and drooping ears there lurks mischief--mischief in large and violent doses."

As Texas mandolin blues player Coley Jones states in *Army Mule in No Man's Land*

*"When I get out in No Man's Land
They'll soon find out I ain't no fool.
I don't mind fightin' for my Uncle Sam
But not in partnership with nobody's mule.*

When an Army mule ousted an auto truck in training exercises, a journalist commented that, "Whatever his faults are, the mule can and will pull. He has never shown great fondness for work, but he can perform and does so effectively when there is no way to get around it."

[CLICK] Which is one more reason why mules became so popular in the south and in the Mississippi Delta. Though Guyton and Harrington were more arms dealers than agricultural suppliers, they recognized the economic opportunity for mules in the Delta as they passed through the region during wartime, and began selling cotton, sugar, and draft mules here just after the Boer War ended in 1902. [CLICK] The company designated Clarksdale as their Delta headquarters, plus additional sales stables in Greenwood, Greenville, Rolling Fork, Natchez, Vicksburg and Yazoo City. So, despite the hardships the mules and men endured in the Mississippi Delta, the beasts that were sent to market *here* were considered lucky.

Now, it's pretty obvious that the mules sold in Clarksdale would primarily work in agriculture -- specifically, cotton. In 1925, 77% of the land in the Mississippi River Valley was dedicated to crops and more than 90% of farmers (both white and black) were tenant farmers. Of those crops, cotton composed 70% and corn made 15%. The sharecropping system was typically broke down into three tiers: sharecroppers, tenants, and renters.

Sharecroppers worked a certain acreage of the plantation with everything provided by the landlord (including tools, which included mules). Since the plantation owner furnished everything, they reap the vast majority of the reward, and often sharecroppers found themselves more in debt season after season. But, if a sharecropper could procure their own mule, it elevated them to tenant farmer, who only had to pay their owner about one-third of the crop they yield. [CLICK]

By 1900, 22% of tenant farmers were white, and that number steadily increased to 32% by 1930. However, the allusion of "40 acres and a mule" persisted, and the idea remained that only African Americans and mules could grow cotton. Even though white tenant farmers and sharecroppers dealt with the same issues as their Black counterparts: floods, boll weevil, poverty, commissary debts. [CLICK] When it wasn't time to grow cotton, it was time to grow corn! Which also, in turn, kept the workstock fed throughout the year. [CLICK]

In the 40s, Marion Post Wolcott began working for the Farm Security Administration. She traveled all over Mississippi and her work in Coahoma County really visualizes the daily life of sharecroppers and farm workers in the Delta. These mule photos are from the King and Anderson Plantation, just north of here. Around 1830/1840, scores of mules and laborers worked on the 17,000 acres plantation. [CLICK]

Working with mules began before dawn. A stable hand, often a young boy, would have to feed the mules. After they ate, it was time to put on their tack, then walk out to the section of the plantation to work. Like I just said, the King and Anderson Plantation was 17,000 acres so that's quite the haul. [CLICK]

Work throughout the morning, then come back to feed the mules at noon. See the massive bell on top of the mule barn there? Then pretty much repeat the process in the afternoon. The days were long, hot, and monotonous. It's here we see basic components of the blues -- field hollers and call and response -- really come into play. [CLICK]

As Son House said, "They'd sing about their girl friend or about almost anything--mule--anything. They'd make a song of it just to be hollering." Field hollers became a fixation for folklorists and musicologists who visited the Delta in the 30s and 40s.

[CLICK]

I'm not a musicologist, but it's really no surprise that field hollers and call-and-response laid the foundation of the blues. If a team of mules begins bellowing at lunch at 10am day-after-day, you're gonna eventually bray back -- if not to sass then at least to break up the monotony. One historian quotes a "Coahoma County plowman," singing to his mule, "O-O-O this donkey won't drink water. I'll knock him in the collar till he go stone blind." [CLICK]

Sometimes you're yelling at the mule, sometimes you're yelling about the mule, sometimes you're yelling like a mule. I know I seem biased but listen to these three different clips for just a minute. [CLICK]

They are, by no means perfect examples of humans sampling mule brays in music, but you get the idea. I almost played Dolly Parton's version of Muleskinner Blues, since Chica has a higher pitch, but if word got back to Miss Parton that I compared her to a half-ass I would be absolutely mortified!

One of the most famous musicians to come out of the Delta, Big Bill Broonzy, really captures the sentiment of cotton picking and sharecropping, which this lecture is named after. [CLICK]

*I ain't gonna raise no more cotton, I declare, I ain't gonna raise no corn
I ain't gonna raise no more cotton, I declare, I ain't gonna raise no corn
Now if a mule started runnin' away with the world
Oh, Lord, I'm gonna let him go ahead on*

[CLICK] Now, speaking of plowin -- one newspaper ad strived for that in 1922. Big Bill Broonzy claimed Scott, MS as his home. In 1922, a full page ad ran in the Jackson Daily News boasting about Scott as the "largest cotton plantation in the world." It had a counterpoint to everything that contributed to the daily problems of sharecroppers. [CLICK]

[CLICK] Five years after this advertisement ran through Mississippi, a crevasse opened the Mississippi River levee just 3 miles west of this land of milk and honey on April 21st. Millions of acres of farmland in the Delta became inundated, about a foot of water per day.

[CLICK] Refugee camps dotted the levees, and over 185,000 were flooded out. Stock, such as mules and cattle, were rounded up next to, primarily Black, refugees. These conditions were absolutely horrible and inspired many blues songs including, Charley Patton's "High Water Everywhere – Part I" and Barbecue Bob's "Mississippi Heavy Water Blues" described the Great Flood of 1927, while Broonzy recorded "Terrible Flood Blues" and "Southern Flood Blues" in

the wake of the 1937 flooding of the Ohio and Mississippi rivers and later also recorded versions of Bessie Smith's 1927 classic, "Back Water Blues." [CLICK]

While the Great Flood of 1927 is by far the most memorable incident of Delta flooding, another incident in 1890 spurred a flurry of levee building initiatives, conducted by private, rather than Federal, contractors. And levee building, in some capacity, began as soon as people of European or African descent began settling in the Mississippi Delta. [CLICK]

The levee building frontier is also one of the most inspirational landscapes in Mississippi, and one that I didn't thoroughly appreciate until I started outlining this lecture. The archetypal white overseer, often nicknamed Mr. Charley, is quite a villainous looming over the history and folklore levee-building. He is often reflected in songs and tall tales. Supposedly a Mr. Charley killed an agent from the Memphis SPCA but I haven't found proof of that. Either way levee camps were lawless places.

Labor was much more tedious on the levees for the poor beasts of burden, both the quadrupeds and the biped counterparts. An 1867 report described levee building in Mississippi-- it required mule "scrapers" to move clay from ditches to the levee top, where they would repeatedly pound the thick clay with their hooves by running back and forth over it.

[CLICK]

Mules were better cared for than levee workers, but the poor brutes were still subject to harsh living conditions. The intensity of the labor often gave mules sores, and of course, if one broke a leg it was over for them. Even the Army Corp of Engineers acknowledges that there are likely mules buried in the levee. [CLICK] Alan Lomax recorded one muleskinner's "perennial complaint" that he couldn't find a "good partner with his shoulder well." Muddy Waters's "My Captain" agrees with the sentiment -- a poor work mule affected the men's work (and pay):

Yey, my wheel mule is crippled, hum, you know, my lead mule is blind

Yey, my wheel mule is crippled, hum, yes boys, my lead mule is blind

Now I ain't gonna buy my baby no more stockings

Oh yeah boys, with the seam behind, hmm

[CLICK] This dynamic between mules and laborers inspired quite a bit in literature as well as the blues. Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* exemplifies how mules were often valued over men when the town performs a mock eulogy for the residential half-ass. [CLICK]

We decided to leave "insert Faulkner quote here" because you turn to any random page of his and find a mule in it. But his famous quote is "A **mule** will labor ten years willingly and patiently for you, for the privilege of kicking you once" and I can vouch for that.

Of course, by the 1930s the Great Depression was ravaging the country, and with sharecropping still in effect, mule ownership still carried a heady symbolism in the South. [CLICK]

Memphis Minnie's [Sylvester and His Mule is based on](#) Sylvester Harris, a farmer in Columbus, Mississippi. This is copied directly from Wikipedia, don't judge me. Sylvester, was at risk of "losing his farm to foreclosure and, since he was used to secure his loan, his mule Jessie. In desperation Sylvester made several calls to the White House insisting on speaking with the President. On one of the chance calls FDR answered the phone, spoke to Sylvester and said he would get back to him. Shortly thereafter he was contacted by the Homeowners Loan Corporation and his mortgage renegotiated thus saving his farm (and his mule). The Reverend J.M. Gates, a hugely popular preacher from Atlanta, heard the story and popularized it in recorded sermons," that inspired Memphis Minnie's song.

In conclusion, we should not forget the mule and its quiet but powerful blues legacy in Mississippi. As Bukka White said, "That's where the blues start from, back across them fields... It started right behind one of them mules or one of them log houses, one of them log camps or the levee camp. That's where the blues sprung from."

[CLICK] So, try to visualize the 40s in the New World District. Things are slowly getting better despite the omnipresence of Jim Crow [CLICK] -- the country is getting out of the Depression, the levees are no longer piece-mealed together by individual contractors (though the federal levees also have its own problems), technology and the internal combustion engine is making farm work a tad easier. [CLICK]

But there's still the daily dredges of sharecropping, the Mississippi heat, floods, plowing, pestilence, Jim Crow, boll weevil, charbon, dust, love problems, balky mules, mule manure, and so on. [CLICK]

It's the end of the week. It's payday. The first thing you want to do is the opposite of what you did all week long. You want to clean up nice, dress to the nines, hit the town, and sweat on your own accord. [CLICK]

And if you're a blues musician, such as Muddy Waters, singing about all the drudgery, you want to embrace the opposite -- such as a nice car, a brick house in the city, and an electric guitar. As automobiles became more available and affordable, the Great Migration also upticked; more and more impoverished Southern Blacks left for better opportunities up north, and away from Jim Crow. [CLICK]

Nate Shaw, a Black stockman from Alabama, who rose the tiers of sharecropping, summarized it best. "He don't want to plow no mule -- That was his bondage and he is turning away from it."

These same improvements in technology also led to the decline of mules in the mid-20th century. The availability of tractors and other mechanized agricultural tools slowly replaced the mule in Mississippi and the need for human hand labor. But somehow, the association of 40 acres and a mule never quite left the South.

[CLICK] By the 1960s, Civil Rights leader reclaimed this imagery, most notably in Atlanta in April, 1968, when two mules, Belle and Ada, carried Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s through from the Ebenezer Baptist Church during his silent funeral procession. [CLICK]

Exactly one month after this assassination, the Poor People's Campaign **Mule Train** left **Marks, MS**. The 1,000 mile journey took a month to complete but 28 wagons pulled by 56 **mules** paraded down Pennsylvania Avenue on Juneteenth (June 19)1968. [CLICK]

Now, we know folktales *and* blues musicians tend to stretch the truth when necessary, but Muddy wasn't lying when he said, "The blues was born behind a mule."

[CLICK]

<https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLx2xkgZ3mSzttoxJw6UfcMzgQHLH4HjwUR>