

Recalling our mules on Patrick's anniversary
By J B Leftwich

I've got a mule, her name is Sal,
Fifteen years on the Erie Canal.
She's a good ol' worker and a good ol' pal,
Fifteen years on the Erie Canal.
We've hauled some barges in our day,
Filled with lumber, coal, and hay . . .

I love the ditty above. It suits my mood. I wish I knew the music to it. I would enjoy humming an Ode to Sal.

Mules were a vital part of my early life in the hill country of Buffalo Valley when I was growing up on a farm that had neither tractors nor electric power – nothing with horsepower. Everything was linked to mulepower.

There was Alice, a huge mule with immeasurable power. If we had hitched her to the barn, she could have dislodged it from its foundation. Pair her with a young mule or a lazy mule, and she would pull the whole load, including her recalcitrant partner. But pair her with an honest teammate, and she might just relax and let him do the pulling.

If you hitched her to a bull-tongue plow or a double shovel, she could be obstreperous or cooperative, depending on her mood. She could pull a bull-tongue so smoothly and so rhythmically the single tree would be as level as the bubble in a spirit level. Or she could sashay along swaying the singletree like a seesaw.

My daddy's language was consistently clean. I never heard him swear or use an obscene word. Except once when he was plowing with Alice furnishing the mule power. Alice was in a sashaying mood with the singletree moving from horizontal to almost vertical positions

"You SOB," he yelled at her unaware I was anywhere near.

He was wrong, of course. Alice was no SOB, and Alice knew that. Wrong gender. DOB would have been appropriate.

Then there was Dick, one of the most cunning mules we ever owned. Dick loved us, and we couldn't avoid fondness for Dick albeit we were alert to his beguiling charm. We never knew if Dick was genuinely affectionate or if he just knew how to work the system.

Dick was prone to colic at unexpected times. In one cornfield, there stood a walnut tree which cast an inviting shade on hot summer days. As Dick approached the shade, he would groan and roll his eyes. When he reached the shade, he collapsed, stretched his neck and emitted groans he thought sounded like death rattles.

My first experience with Dick in the shade was terrifying. I thought he was knocking on death's door. I pondered the situation, wondering what to do. Knowing I might regret my action, I finally kicked him in the rump and scolded him.

Dick sprang to life and was just fine until we again reached the shade where he once again developed colic symptoms and collapsed in feigned pain.

If there had been an Academy Award for mules, Dick would have been a sure winner.

There were other mules. Bill, whose gait was jerky but whose disposition was constantly benevolent, was a favorite. We broke young mules with Bill as their teammate. And Jack, our best mule for plowing, who allowed nobody on his back.

I can imagine Ol' Sal hitched to an Erie Canal barge and working day after day. I am sure she generated the same affection that our family had for our mules as we worked a hillside farm decades ago.

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I wrote this column just before St. Patrick's birthday, which is celebrated by all who have a drop of Irish blood trickling through their veins. 'Twould have been nice to have written a verse about the patron saint of Ireland. So, I'll fill the rest of my space, not in a salute to the saint but with five lines I wrote in a distinctive verse form that is said to have originated on Limerick, Ireland. To Wit:

Once a grebe and a grouse and a mouse
Decided they would buy a wee house.
But their plans gang a-glax
When the mouse ran away,
'Cause the grebe was so gross to the grouse.

(J.B. Leftwich is a veteran journalist and a columnist for The Lebanon Democrat.
Email: leftwichjb@charter.net)

<http://www.ajlambert.com>