

TRAVELING IN A "MULE-A-BAGO"

Carol Maxwell & Ed Gurdjian
April, 2000
www.rvtechstop.com

Ed and I had been doing a little yard work at the back of our property on Saturday, March 11, and we stopped to take a break. As we came around the front of the coach, we saw two people and a white dog riding in a yellow, hard-sided wagon pulled by three mules. The wagon was on the highway burm, approaching from the west. We waved and the people waved back. As they came near, I heard the lady driver say, "We have to stop. Molly needs to go." When she stopped the wagon, one of the mules stretched out and "went." I was amazed. I went out to greet this interesting group and asked the driver, who was wearing a bonnet and calico dress, how she knew Molly's needs. She told us that she had had these animals for some time and she just knew them very well. As we looked closer, we realized there were some interesting things about this wagon and its occupants.



Polly, Molly, and Dolly

Muleskinner, Loretta, her husband, Bob White, and sixteen year old dog, "Snowball," were on an excursion. They had left their home in Salton, California in mid February. They had passed through Yuma, Arizona and planned to continue along

Highway 80 to Gila Bend, Casa Grande, and then lay over in Picacho. From there, they will drop down to Lordsburg, New Mexico, then north to Colorado, and then over to Utah. From Utah they will come back to Arizona, over to

Kingman, and then back home to Salton.

Loretta, mother of ten children, is the driver of the wagon and the driving force of this couple's adventures. Their youngest child is now 26 years old, so Loretta and Bob are free to follow their own trails.

About ten years ago, Loretta was visiting her home state of Michigan when she bought a used Amish hack. She was going to get a horse and drive it back to California, but Bob insisted on bringing it home on a truck. In November of 1991, Loretta and Bob joined twenty to twenty-five other wagons in the annual Forty-niner Trail through Death Valley. Loretta drove the hack and Bob was an outrider on horseback. Since there was little room in the hack, they slept under the wagon. Loretta thought this was a nearly perfect lifestyle, but Bob wanted a few more comfort features.

After this event, Bob built a larger wagon that allowed them to sleep inside. Loretta bought two Belgian Mules to pull the



Loretta, Snowball, and Bob

vehicle, and they made their first trip in 1993, from Blythe to Riverside, following the Pony Express Trail. In 1996, the White's traveled from Salton to Michigan, and then back to Salton. The cost of the five month trip was approximately \$10,000, mostly for the mules. There were two veterinary bills and the mules had to be shod nine times. There were no cooking facilities inside the wagon. On the outside, there were foldout shelves and they cooked over a campfire. Of course, if it rained, they didn't eat! Again, Loretta loved the arrangements, but Bob still wanted more "creature comforts."

Bob planned and built the second and current wagon, which took more than a year to build. It is twenty feet long and seven and a half feet wide. All four wheels are equipped with Cadillac El Dorado disk brakes, which are operated with foot pedals. The brakes are crucial when traveling down hill to keep the wagon from overrunning the mules. The wagon also has a parking brake and leveling jacks. The electrical system includes a

small generator and two solar panels on the roof for charging batteries. The interior amenities include a full bed and a complete kitchen with a dinette. It is also equipped with a T.V., furnace, and complete bathroom. The "Mule-a-ago" carries 80 gallons of water, and the unladed weight is 4,860 pounds. Of course, now that Bob had a bigger and better wagon, he, like most men, wanted "more power." Loretta added another mule. To Bob's delight, Polly, Dolly, and Molly pull the wagon with ease. *Technical note from Ed: Although 1 mulepower is about .625 of 1 horsepower, mule torque, with a factor of 0.93, nearly equals horsetorque (Clydesdales excluded).* The wagon has a back porch where the White's carry hay for the mules. There is a storage area and tack room at the front of the wagon, just behind the



Generator & storage compartment. Also shown are vents for refrigerator, furnace, and water heater



To the left of the complete kitchen is the bathroom door. Upper right is the elevated bed.

driver's seat. The generator and other equipment is on the left, and the right side stores grain, supplies for the mules, and has

slide-out racks for the yokes and other tack.

The "Mule-a-bago" wagon is registered as a recreational vehicle in California. When I asked if they had had any



Back porch & leveling jacks

problems on the highway, Bob told us that Arizona Troopers had stopped them twice. At first, the troopers told them they could not be on the highway, but Bob knew his rights. When the troopers called in, they were told that Bob was correct. Animal drawn vehicles are not only allowed on any road, they have the right-of-way. The White's try to avoid high traffic roads, but sometimes they do not have any viable alternative. The following is an excerpt from the California Driver's Manual.

ANIMAL-DRAWN VEHICLES

Horse-drawn vehicles and riders of horses or other animals are entitled to share the road with you. It is a traffic offense to scare horses or stampede livestock. Slow down or stop, if necessary, and when requested to do so by the riders or herders.

Caution in Passing Animals

21759. The driver of any vehicle approaching any horse drawn vehicle, any ridden animal, or any livestock shall exercise proper control of his vehicle and shall reduce speed or stop as may appear necessary or as may be signalled or otherwise requested by any person driving, riding or in charge of the animal or livestock in order to avoid frightening and to safeguard the animal or livestock and to insure the safety of any person driving or riding the animal or in charge of the livestock.

Some campgrounds allow the animals, but most do not. The

White's stop in fields along the way where they stake out tie lines for the mules and make camp. They normally cover eighteen to twenty miles each day. However, the day before we met them, they had to cover thirty-two miles because there was no where to stop between Yuma and Ligurta Station. They depend upon farmers along the way to replenish the hay and grain supply. To assist in funding, Loretta makes and sells lye soap, snake oil, and crocheted afghans. They also



The White's "Mule-a-bago" is registered as a recreational vehicle in California

appreciate donations. We thoroughly enjoyed our visit with Loretta, Bob, Snowball, Polly, Dolly, and Molly. If you should ever see them, stop to say "Howdy."