

Sierra Gold Mine Wants to Return to Mule Power

Submitted by Roger Peterson from a local newspaper.

In the good old days they stood shoulder to shoulder - miner and mule breathing the same dust 10 hours a day.

Now a Northern California mining company wants to bring the beasts back to haul gold ore.

"Willing-to-work hayburner needed for new Sierra County venture," read a recent ad in Downieville's weekly newspaper, the Mountain Messenger. Four steady legs and a certain stubbornness required.

The Original Sixteen to One Mine, the ad stated, does not discriminate because of race, creed, national origin, sex or "size of ears."

"We're looking for a good mule or two," said Michael Miller, president of the mining company.

In the heyday of hard rock mining, mules with names such as Duke, Fannie and Jasper worked all day before retiring to lighted underground stalls.

Never seeing sunlight for decades, they lived long lives, up to 35 years old, due in part to good medical care. Veterinarians were mindful of mules getting hernias from pulling heavy loads and of the development of fungus growth on hooves from constant dampness.

Any miner who hit or kicked a mule was fired on the spot. A miner could be replaced, but a mule was company property.

The Original Sixteen to One plans to use its modern-day mules in the Rainbow mine, an

underground passage that produced a fair amount of gold around 1860-70.

"It has been on our mind because of the interest in the sesquicentennial," Miller said. "We are going back to our roots with this mine."

Recently, a crew found 100 ounces of gold in the area. But the mine's track is old, subject to wear if a locomotive is used rather than a mule.

"We are going in with a lowprofile operation," said Miller, "But the effort will be serious enough to give it a look. The thought to use a mule was a joke, I think, at first. But then we thought: Why not?"

An animal would haul 15 tons a day. Three 1-ton cars each time. The mules would be corralled outside the mine and be welltended, said Miller.

The Original Sixteen to One, about 70 miles northeast of Sacramento in the Sierra County town of Alleghany, employs 46 workers. The mining company hit a good pocket in 1993, removing \$1 million in gold in one work shift. A couple of years later, the mine produced \$2 million in four days.

Miller knows little about mules. But Rick Doyle and tour guides at the Empire Mine State Historic Park in Grass Valley are well versed in mine mule minutiae.

The Empire Mine, which opened in 1850, saw its first mules around the turn of the century, a docent manual states. The animals were needed as the mine shaft got deeper.

The life of a mine mule was not easy, but the work was made less difficult because drifts - horizontal passages off the main shaft were drilled at a slight incline. This allowed water to flow out of the drift. Mules pulled a train of six to nine empty ore cars up the grade. After the 1-ton-capacity cars were filled with rock by miners, the mule was taken and harnessed to the other end of the ore train and it headed downhill sometime at a trot.

The 44 mules that worked the Empire Mine are the favorite subject of visitors, especially schoolchildren. "The more irritating the mules are to the miners in the stories, the more the kids get a kick out of it," said Doyle.

A favorite trick was for a mule to escape from a stall and go on a mad run.

"The miner would chase him in the pitch black," said Doyle. "When the mule saw the miner's light coming, he would move further down the drift for fun."

Doyle said mine mules are ornery and intelligent. One widebodied mule delighted in shifting against the wall to block a miner's path. "She would see the miner's lunch bucket and know there was a carrot, apple or chewing tobacco in there. If the miner bluffed her and scooted by without sharing his lunch, she would bite him right on the tush."

Legend has it that mules counted the number of ore cars locked into place, refusing to haul if there were too many. One mule dumped her load of ore on a quick turn, understanding that a spilled load meant she could nap.

Doyle has tape-recorded oral histories of "mule skimmers," the workers who tended the animals. They groomed the mules, checked for harness sores, led them from place to place and hauled methane-producing manure out of the mine.

Mules went blind in the absence of light at some mines, but at the Empire; which was outfitted with lights. The need for mules at the mine ended with the close of the Empire in 1956.

Doyle thinks the Original Sixteen to One Mine's desire for mule power is a fine idea. But he wonders if the proper mule and trainer can be found.

"Where do you find a mule-skinner?" Doyle asked. "The mule has to be trained to a harness pull and respond to voice commands."

Sixteen to One's president has similar concerns, but feels that the mine and Allegheny's small mining museum will profit by going retro.

"Cost-wise it will be a wash he said. "Fun-wise it will be really interesting, helping the mining museum up here by showing how it is done in a working mine."

