

Packing the Train

Along the Old Spanish Trail sound animals, good packing equipment, and a capable crew were the prerequisites of a successful pack train. The success of the trip depended on the skills and abilities of those who packed and drove the animals that carried the merchandise.

New Mexicans had a well-deserved reputation as excellent horsemen and muleteers. American eyewitnesses marveled at the dexterity and skill with which they harnessed and adjusted packs of merchandise. Experienced travelers suggested that New Mexicans should always be used as teamsters for they "can catch up and roll up in half the time the average person does."

Packers were always in demand and utilized a variety of skills. They secured loads with intricate knots, splices and hitches; they acted as veterinarians and blacksmiths. They estimated the safe carrying capacity of a mule, and identified and treated animals suffering from improperly balanced loads. They timed the travel day to stop at a meadow or creek bottom that provided good forage. Packers also had to be able to lift heavy loads, be good farriers, and "accomplish marvels with the axe and screw key and a young sapling for a lever."

Beasts of Burden

Mules had incredible strength and endurance, fared better than horses where water was scarce and forage poor, and recovered more rapidly after periods of hardship. Their hard and small hoofs withstood the shock and abrasion of rocky, boulder-strewn terrain.



The Equipment

While the mule was the heart of the transportation system, the packing equipment played an equally significant role. The *aparejo* (packsaddle) was the central piece of gear and carried heavy, odd-sized items safely over long distances without injuring the animal. It was described by one observer as "nearer to what I consider perfection in a pack saddle, than any other form of pack saddle yet invented."

