

Old Red: A Highway Mule with an Orange County Connection

Ann L. Miller

Highway Mule Teams (early 20th century). Photo courtesy of the Virginia Transportation Research Council.

FROM THE END of the 18th century until well into the 20th century, mules provided a good deal of the muscle for highway work and transportation, as well as for farm work in Virginia. These long-eared hybrids, the offspring of a jack (male donkey) and a mare (female horse) were once common sights on virtually any road in Virginia for draft use as well as for pulling light vehicles and, to a lesser extent, as riding animals.

Mules only made their first appearance in Virginia in the late 18th century, although they had long been well-known in parts of Europe, with particularly fine work mules being bred and used in Spain, and in Spanish America. Good breeding jacks were jealously guarded, and generally were not available for export. It was not until the mid 1780s that George Washington, who had become interested in the possibilities of producing mules for heavy draft work, became one of the first American farmers to import breeding jacks and jennies (female donkeys) from Europe. Hard-working, faster and more maneuverable than oxen, and sturdier and less excitable (although also less showy and elegant) than horses, mules increased in numbers and popularity in Virginia and elsewhere in the U. S. throughout the 19th century.

By the time of the establishment of the Virginia State Highway Commission in 1906, mules were the draft animal of choice for road work. Mules undertook a variety of tasks related to road construction and maintenance: pulling wagons, snow plows, drags, road scrapers and graders, and hauling

equipment and construction materials. The number of horses and mules in use on Virginia's farms peaked in the mid-1920s, then declined as trucks and tractors gained in popularity and availability. This decline in working farm mules paralleled the phasing out of mules for road work that began in the 1930s. By the late 1930s, the replacement of mules on state Department of Highways projects with tractors and other motorized equipment was proceeding. Newspaper articles of the era document the increasingly mechanized nature of the Virginia Department of Highways (now VDOT) through the 1930s, and the gradual selling off of the highway mules that once constituted the majority of the Department's "horsepower."

However, one old highway mule with an Orange County connection dodged the auction block to live out a relatively calm—and long—retirement. Born sometime in the later 1890s, he was a tall, rangy, animal with a reddish coat that earned him the name "Old Red." Red was reportedly one of the first mules purchased by the state at the time of the establishment of the Virginia Primary system in 1918. A veteran of the

See Old Red on page 2.

Old Red (*continued*)

mule teams that worked on the Orange County roads, he was acquired from the Orange County supervisors, and by 1921 he had been sent to the Shenandoah Valley, where he worked in a convict camp between Front Royal and Winchester for a number of years before being transferred to a location near Richmond. Retired from heavy highway work in the late 1920s due to a bad leg, and blind in one eye, he was kept on for light work for what was assumed would be his few remaining years. After all, Old Red was then verging on age 30, usually the end of an equine's lifespan. However, retirement apparently agreed mightily with Old Red. And there hangs a tale . . .

(*Richmond Times-Dispatch*, South Side Supplement section, February 23, 1939)

Oldest Highway Mule at 42 Lives Life of Riley in County

William C. Bourne

Stepping briskly about the barnyard of R. T. Scott, resident Chesterfield mechanic of the State Highway Department about a mile off the Petersburg Pike and a half mile north of Swift Creek, these snappy mornings is a tall gawky mule and he doesn't look a day over 15 years old.

But, stubborn like all mules, this one belies his age and his alert ears. His age is not known exactly, but according to members of the State Highway Department staff, he is at least 42 years old and he may even be approaching 45.

"Wise Old Bird," Says Scott

"Old Red," the mule is called in the highway department, where many believe he has passed to the greener pastures of the great beyond. They should go out and take a look at Old Red and try to approach him when he has been turned out to the comparative freedom of the barnyard. He acts as if he thought they were going to put him back in harness. He prances off and turns to look at you with a cold and fishy eye.

Mr. Scott can explain it all right.

"He is a wise old bird," says Mr. Scott. "He was retired about 14 years ago, long before I [came] here in 1932. I figure he will be 45 in the spring. When I first arrived, we used to use him to cultivate the garden. When I brought him out of the barn in harness, I would bring him over here to the well to give him a drink of water from the bucket. He'd plop his nose down in the water and drink. After he'd had his fill, he'd lift his head and clear his nostrils enough to get a breath of air. If I jerked on the reins, or made out to start off to work, Red [would] plop his nose down in the water again and hold it there watching me out of the corner of his good eye (he's blind in his right eye, you know) with that fishy stare he has. Finally I'd have to pull him away. He much preferred the cold water to work."

Doesn't Trust Strangers

"Several years ago, one of the highways workers took Red out of his stall and led him down toward a hay rick on the side of the hill. Red thought he was going to feed him. Instead, he took Red on beyond the

rick and made him drag some logs out of the woods. Ever since he's given strangers a wide berth."

And it's true. When he lets Red out of that stall into the barnyard, you can't get within 15 feet of him. He keeps moving back, always with his good eye peeled. He takes no chances on going to work.

Mr. Scott said A. H. Pettigrew, assistant engineer of the department, probably knew Red's history best, but Mr. Pettigrew referred the reporter to Turner R. Loughborough, construction engineer, with the remark that he's (Old Red) probably older than I am."

Loughborough Is Amazed

Mr. Loughborough expressed amazement when asked about the mule. "You mean Old Red! I thought he was dead long ago. Is he a tall, powerful-looking mule with reddish-brown hair? Is he blind in one eye? That's Old Red all right. I'll go out to see him. I can't believe he's still alive."

When he was told that Old Red not only was alive but as frisky and tricky as a 15-year-old, he said: "I remember he was a little bit tricky when we had him on construction."

"Old Red," said Mr. Loughborough, "was one of the first, if not the first, mule ever bought by the State Highway Department after it was established. I came to the department in 1921. He had been working east of Front Royal between Front Royal and Winchester, for some time prior to that time. They had had him in a convict camp. The department got him from the Orange County Board of Supervisors when the State took over the county [primary] roads. He must have been 16 or 18 when they sent him down here.¹ He had a bad leg and we retired him in 1927 or 1928.

"I don't believe anybody can say authentically exactly how old Red is, but by my own calculations he must be at least 42. I have heard of some horses and mules which have lived to be 36 and one horse which lived to 39, but I never heard of a mule living that long. I'm glad you called me. I'm going out to see Old Red the very first chance I get."²

Acknowledgements

A longer, multi-part version of this article (titled "When Our Horsepower Wore Long Ears") appeared in 2006-2007 in *The Road Ahead*, the newsletter of the Virginia Local Technical Assistance Program (LTAP). Appreciation is due to LTAP Director William E. Kelsh for permission to use portions of this material as the basis of the present article.

Special thanks are also due to Wendy Addison and the other staff members of the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* News Research Library for their assistance and cooperation during the preparation of the initial articles.

1 A search of the Orange County road records for the period from 1916 through 1920 yielded only one reference to the sale of a mule. Although no name or description was given, possibly this was "Old Red." The Orange County Supervisors' minutes for November 4, 1918 record that, "W. G. Buckner reported the sale of one of the mules belonging to the Barbour [magisterial] district for \$40.00, which said amount is turned over to O. B. Watson, Treas[urer] to be placed to the credit of the Barbour District Road fund."

2 A shorter article based on the *Times-Dispatch* piece was featured in the *Virginia Highway Bulletin*, Vol. 5, # 5, March 1939.

Programs & Picnics

Lynne Lewis & John Floyd

Now This. . .

History became magical at the Research Center on Monday, September 28, 2009. The program that evening was presented by Ross Hunter of Dominion Marketing Research, who elaborated on the history of WJMA, Orange County's own radio station, focusing on its first 35 years of operation (1949-1984). Not only did many in the standing-room-only audience remember listening to WJMA back then, sprinkled among them were folks who had actually worked at the station during that time, most notably, Arch Harrison, owner and general manager of WJMA from 1961-1985. Ross had worked at the station for many of those years, and the audience was quickly swept up into his intensely fond memories of those times.

The members, friends and guests were first treated to a documentary video, co-produced with fellow WJMA alumnus Russ Roberts, that was replete with illustrations and interviews with many of the key players who still reside in this area, such as Jean Love, Clint Estes, Bill Little, Patricia McArver, Bob Wade, Phil Audibert, and of course Arch Harrison himself. Also heard from were now-deceased station icons such as Red Shipley and Art Livick. The video is a long labor of love for Ross and his cohorts, who have been working on it for at least five years, and possibly longer. The video was always informative and by turns funny and touching (often both). Ross, his co-producer and everyone involved received a long standing ovation at the end of the presentation for their fine work.

A lively question, answer and reminiscence period followed and it was well after 9 p.m. when the last guest left the building. It was an evening that will be long remembered.

Dogwood Village

Another local historian has emerged in the person of OCHS president Carol Couch. On October 26, 2009, Carol presented a history of the Orange County Nursing Home, which has recently re-christened itself Dogwood Village of Orange. The program was graciously hosted by Dogwood Village and members had an opportunity to tour the recently-added facilities.

Carol found her sources in interviews with people who recalled the events of four decades ago, and by examining the copious records made available in the archives of the *Orange County Review*.

In 1966 the Board of Supervisors was debating a number of building projects. One of these was an ambitious and unique proposal to build a home for aged adults. The county experienced sticker shock at the \$500,000 estimate for the 50-bed facility. It was observed that each \$10,000 "bed" in the home could fund a 32-student classroom in the county. Shock turned to dismay when the "low" bid came in at \$800,000 and the undertaking appeared ready to collapse. However, when \$500,000 was returned unused from winter maintenance funds, things somehow came together and Orange County established the first and only county-owned nursing home in Virginia.

In researching and presenting the history of the nursing home Ms. Couch uncovered and revealed a great deal about the dynamic

and ambitious personalities in County government in the late sixties and early seventies. Anyone thinking that it is only recently that Orange County politics turned so contentious would benefit from a review of this period.

Finally, there were a few "you had to be there" moments where audience members recounted the sort of memories about public figures that help to complete the picture of local politics; the sorts of moments that made the evening perfect.

St. Thomas Church

Saint Thomas Church stands diagonally across from the Orange County Historical Society Research Center and is a prominent contributing structure to downtown Orange's historic district. On November 30, 2009, a full-house audience was treated to a very special evening when long-time member and past president Joseph Y. Rowe presented a wonderful talk on his latest (and sixth) publication, *St. Thomas Church: A History*. Joe started the evening with a bang, by chiding Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee for stealing his idea of giving all audience members a copy of his book – and then went ahead and did just that, to the delight of everyone. And it was an autographed copy!

Joe first described how the book came about, and how he went about writing it, including an outline of the chapters. He then provided a very informative summary of the history of the church from the founding of St. Thomas Parish in 1740, through the 'bad years' of the American Revolution and the first years of the new republic, and the reasons for this, and then the rebirth of the church, marked by the building, in 1833, of the original core of today's church.

Everyone appreciated not only Mr. Rowe's generosity, but also his sharing his knowledge about St. Thomas Church. This seemed like a very fitting way to end our 2009 programs, and a fine harbinger of things to come in 2010.

Annual Membership Meeting

Be sure to mark your calendars for Sunday, January 24, 2010 from 2:00 - 4:00 p.m. This is the date of our Annual Membership Meeting, where we will provide a year-end summary and elect new members to the Board of Directors. There will also be a special presentation and exhibit of local postcards collected by member John Faulconer. But the afternoon will not end there. We will also be honoring our own Ann Miller and celebrating her 30 years of service to the Orange County Historical Society. In the course of those 30 years, Ann has authored several books, assisted innumerable members and visitors in their research efforts, and produced many of our quality monthly programs. Please join us for this happy occasion. Light refreshments will be provided.

Please remember that we have no program meeting in February. The next regularly scheduled meeting will be held on Monday, March 29, 2010, beginning at 7:00 p.m.

“The very idea . . . makes me dizzy”: some 1926 Orange County Road Trips

Ann Miller

In the early 1900s, telephone service and improved roads were rare items in Orange County. However, by the mid-1920s, telephone service was fairly commonplace in many areas, and improvements to at least a few of the main roads were in progress. The following text is excerpted from an April 22, 1926 letter between Capt. Philip Henshaw Scott (then visiting family in Gordonsville) and his wife.

. . . Mary Cameron called me up and asked me to lunch and spend the evening with Barton. Miss Mary & Miss Jean [Cameron] were to be there to lunch, they having driven up from Richmond for the Garden Club. Truly, it does sound as if the world had gone crazy these days. The very idea of two ladies driving from Richmond here for a visit[,] a luncheon, and a club meeting then back the same day, makes me dizzy. But after this very fine lunch where everything was as fine as could be even to corn ponies and old Madeira, Barton suggested we drive to Stanardsville via Somerset and back by the Spotswood Trail.

In his letter, Capt. Scott, son of State Law Librarian and Orange County historian W. W. Scott, described a number of events that would have been unknown during his younger years: receiving a phone call and taking trips by automobile. The phone call inviting him to visit with neighbors Mr. and Mrs. Barton Cameron, who owned “Inverness” just northwest of Gordonsville, is noted as a matter-of-fact event by the time that the letter was written. However, Capt. Scott (born in 1873) apparently was a bit amazed by the idea of the one-day jaunt by automobile—from Richmond to Gordonsville and back to Richmond again—undertaken by the unmarried Cameron sisters. In addition to the trip itself (which probably would have taken several days during Capt. Scott’s—and the Cameron siblings’—earlier years), the ladies managed to pack a family visit, luncheon, and attendance at a Garden Club meeting into their day. The very idea, Capt. Scott noted, “makes me dizzy.”

In a cap to their exceedingly pleasant lunch, Capt. Scott and Barton Cameron took a road trip of their own, driving through Somerset to Stanardsville, and back via the “Spotswood Trail.” In modern terms, their route likely took them along, approximately, Route 609 from Somerset to Stanardsville; they then returned along Route 33 (the “Spotswood Trail”). Both of these routes had their origins in 18th-century roads, with various later improvements.

A copy of the original letter was donated to the Society by Capt. Scott’s son (and long-time Society member and supporter), the late Johnny Scott of Gordonsville.

Ford Model As Visit Montpelier

Lynne Lewis



Late September – cooler air, the first signs of fall and 250 Ford Model As? Yes, central Virginia and Orange County saw the arrival of the first ever Model A Restorers Club National Tour¹ (September 20-23). The Mount Vernon Region Chapter of MARC hosted the Tour, and Charlottesville served as their base of operations. Participants came from as far away as Kansas and Ontario! The visit to Montpelier took place on the final day of the Tour.

Ford began Model A² production after it discontinued the Model T in 1927. The name Model A was actually first used by Ford for a car produced from 1903 to 1905, and the “modern” Model A was named after it. The new car featured a comparatively luxurious interior and a more powerful engine, and additions included a glass windshield, bumpers and automatic windshield wipers. Top speed was around 65 mph! Model A production ended in 1931.

Montpelier was quite a sight with all that shiny, colorful metal parked on the front lawn. Many of the owners and their passengers were attired in clothing from the period. Visitors and staff alike were fascinated with the cars, and charmed by the willingness of the owners to answer questions and share information.

Montpelier was not their only stop in Orange County. Participants also visited the Barboursville Vineyards and Ellwood/Wilderness Battlefield while they were in the area.

¹ <http://www.gwcmodeleda.com/2009MARCtour.htm>

² <http://www.ford.com/about-ford/heritage/vehicles/1928modela/671-model-a-1928>

Message from the President

Carol Couch

The most amazing thing I have learned this year while serving as president is how many people are willing to give of their time to help the Society carry out its mission.

For example, Joe and Carla Wascalas and the LOW AARP hosted all five of our winter lectures doing all the set up, coffee and clean up. Over 70 people attended each of Frank Walker's lectures and he mastered PowerPoint to enhance his lessons. Then our board member and new employee Jayne Blair took on the 400+ membership list and put it in a spread sheet so mailings can now be customized. Member Carol Hunter of the Orange County School System organized a county wide fourth grade "Orange History Day." Her husband Ross Hunter presented the September program on the history of WJMA—it was standing room only with over 100 attendees! Board member Sam Elswick, Innkeeper of the Holladay House, has taken

on the Society's web page. Check it out! Member Pat Stewart digitized hundreds of pages in our family file collection. Member Lynne Lewis edited four outstanding newsletters. Clara Colby did all the lay out for all postcard announcements and newsletters. Frank Walker has trained volunteers to give walking tours of downtown Orange. Bike Virginia visitors were the first to receive the tours. John Floyd has orchestrated 10 monthly programs working with all the presenters so everything goes smoothly. Many people have donated maps, books and papers for our collection. Orange County Board of Supervisors and the Town of Orange granted the Society property tax exemption. Those mentioned and many others have worked to make 2009 a very good year for our Society. So what is the president's job? To say THANK YOU, THANK YOU to each and every one.

Steamy Late Summer Days in Somerset



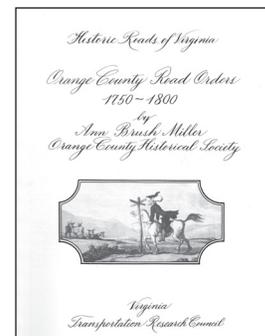
Bryan Wright

The Somerset Steam and Gas Engine Association held its annual Pasture Party from September 11-13. Begun in the mid-1970s, this event has grown into a treasured tradition. Thousands of people come from far and near to see the antique tractors and cars, demonstrations of steam-powered sawmills and other equipment, tractor pulls and much more.

Publications for Sale

Members receive a 10% discount on all publications.

🔗 *Orange County Road Orders, 1750-1800*, by Ann B. Miller



Roads were easily the most important public improvement in a colonial Virginia county. The creation and maintenance of a road involved its adjoining landowners, their tithables, and their lands – and virtually everything involving them went through the courts system. County road orders are thus not only the most significant identifiers of persons and properties in a county, they are oftentimes the only sources of such information. The researcher/author of road order volumes for a number of Virginia counties, Ann Miller has produced two volumes of Orange County road orders that span the years from the county's establishment to the end of the colonial era (1734-1800). This is the second volume, covering the years 1750 to 1800.

\$25.00 (softcover, 394 pp.). Members receive a 10% discount on this and all Society publications.

The first volume, *Orange County Road Orders, 1734-1749*, is no longer available for sale from the Orange County Historical Society. However, you may download it in its entirety from the Virginia Department of Transportation website: http://www.virginiadot.org/VTRC/main/online_reports/pdf/85-r2.pdf.

For additional publications, be sure to see our website, www.orangecovahist.org, or drop by our Research Center (130 Caroline Street, Orange, VA) for a complete list.

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Please Join Us!

We invite you to join the Orange County Historical Society. Please provide your name and mailing information as you wish it to appear in our records and select the appropriate dues level. Mail the completed form, along with a check payable to The Orange County Historical Society (OCHS), to 130 Caroline Street, Orange, VA 22960.

The Orange County Historical Society is a non-profit organization. Your membership fees are tax deductible to the extent allowed by law.

Name: _____

(If business/organization member, name of business or organization)

Street: _____

City: _____

State: _____ **Zip:** _____

Telephone: _____

Email: _____

Membership Status: New Renewal Address, Name, etc. Update

Would you be willing to receive meeting notices via email in lieu of a postcard? Yes No

Membership Level: Society dues are for the period of January 1 - December 31, 2010.

Annual Individual Member: \$20

Annual Student Member (High School or College): \$12.50

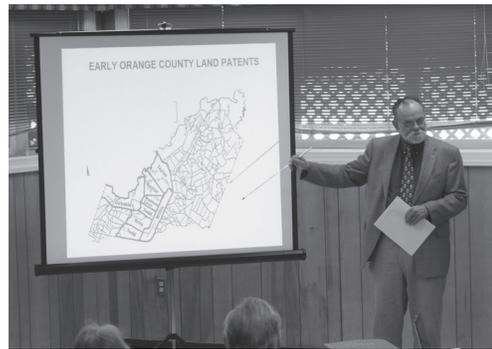
Annual Family Member: \$30

Annual Sustaining Member: \$100

Annual Patron Member: \$200

Annual Sponsor Member: \$300

The Winter Seminar Series



Frank Walker giving one of his winter lectures at Lake of the Woods, February 2009.

We are extremely pleased to announce that for the 5th year running, Frank Walker, noted historian and author, will be offering his history lectures. Running for five consecutive Saturdays beginning February 5 and ending March 6, the series is being held in DuPont Hall at Grymes Memorial School (13775 Spicers Mill Road, Orange). Go to www.grymesschool.org and once there open the 'Contact Us' page to find a link for directions.

Sponsored by the Orange County Historical Society and Grymes Memorial School, each session will run from 10:00 a.m. to no later than 11:15 a.m., and will be hosted by a different organization.

Please Don't Forget...

To renew your membership! Did you know that membership dues make up almost 20% of our annual income (another 20% coming from the kindness of our annual fund drive donors)? You can see why your membership is so important to us, and if you haven't yet had the chance to renew, please do take a moment to do so. Thank you!