

LUCKY THREE RANCH

By Meredith Hodges

Mule Crossing- October 1986 - "Mules of Molokai"

It is no secret that mules, due to their innate sensibility and incredible surefootedness, are the equine of choice for packing and riding into untamed wilderness areas. Dependable mules, each year, carry thousands of tourists down the steep trails of the Grand Canyon, enabling many to take in the splendor and beauty of an otherwise nearly inaccessible corner of the world. Not limited to Mainland activities, mules are also used on the island of Molokai in Hawaii to carry tourists on a memorable ride down the Kalaupapa Trail to the Makanalua Peninsula and the settlement of Kalaupapa. Years ago, before it was discovered that leprosy was not highly contagious, afflicted persons were taken to the Makanalua Peninsula by boat and left there. The sheer cliffs on the landside of the peninsula prevented them from leaving. Father Damien de Veuster of Belgium built the first church and brought hope to the old settlement of Kalawao.

Today, parents are allowed to come and go and the settlement are permitted to delight in some of the modern-day conveniences. Though the settlement is only twelve square miles, there are cars and mini-buses to aid in transportation. After the mule ride down the cliff trail, mini-buses give personal tours around the settlement where you can learn about everyday life then and now; you'll see their homes, general store, dock, medical facilities, lonely graveyards, the old settlement of Kalawao and Father Damien's church, St. Philomena. After a picnic lunch in one of Hawaii's most spectacular spots overlooking cliffs and waterfalls, dramatic ocean rock formations and crashing surf, the mules make their way safely back up the steep trail. The trail begins at an elevation of 1600 feet; it is 3 miles long with 26 switchbacks. It is not, however, just a sheer, open drop all the way down; it makes it's way through lush rain forest with splendorous vistas of the peninsula and the startling blues of the Pacific Ocean. It has some of the most spectacular scenery in the world!

Buzzy and Clyde Sproat are the owners and operators of this tropical excursion. The trail to the settlement was built over 100 years ago; Buzzy and Clyde's grandfather was instrumental in the renovation of the trail for use with mules several years later. Clyde spends much of his time on the other islands while Buzzy tends to the mules. Most of the mules they are using have

been purchased on the Mainland from George Chamberlain's ranch in Los Olivos, California, or from the Fonner Windy Valley Ranch, which was in Healdsburg, California. The mules are trained for the cliff trail primarily by Buzzy; he will lead them down and ride or let them follow, back up the trail the first few times. The mules are not broke to rein and are expected only walk and follow. Passing is discouraged. Should a mule decide that he prefers to speed over the trail, Clyde enters the scene and quickly puts any thought of speed out of the mule's head. If the mule wishes to "run" the trail, Clyde will oblige him...over and over, until the mule decides that slow is better! Any that do not comply, they will not use. With all the inexperienced riders with which they must deal, these mules must be fail-safe!

The mules themselves are well cared for; when not in use, they graze peacefully on pastures of lush green Molokai grass. The Sproats keep a string of about forty mules; all of the mules are shod by Buzzy to prevent any foot problems and they are not overworked. Generally, they will make two trips a day down and back up the trail to the settlement; each mule is only required to make the trip every other day. Saddles and tack are carefully fitted to each mule to insure their comfort as well as that of the rider. No spirited mules are used for packing tourists down the trail; only the most calm and sensible mules can "make the grade." They come in all different colors and range in size from 14 to 16 hands to accommodate the different-sized riders they must carry.

Upon arrival at the trailhead, tourists are asked to fill out forms stating their size and riding ability in addition to legal prerequisites. Then each tourist is matched with a mule suitable for his needs; wranglers are situated at the front, middle, and back of the mule string to insure a safe trip. The trail is all these mules know and they know it well! One mule, "General Sherman" exhibited this steady, calm dependability when he was matched with a rather heavy greenhorn from Washington D.C.; the man, who had probably never ridden anything in his life, whooped and wailed his way down the trail. He was sure, I'm sure, that he would falloff and plummet to his death! But "General Sherman" ignored all the commotion and carried him safely through the excursion, striking another positive chord for mules! If you thought that Hawaii was only for those who love lolling on the beach in a tropical paradise, think again. The mules on Molokai can contribute a lot more to your tropical vacation; they can take you on quite an historic adventure through the most beautiful and spectacular scenery in the world. Without the mules, this would not be as safely possible. These trail trips, of course, must be limited to those who are

physically fit, weighing no more than 225 pounds, and not too advanced in age. A minimum age of 16 years is required by state Law to enter the Kalaupapa Settlement. The owners of the Molokai Mule Ride, Buzzy and Clyde Sproat, have taken every reasonable precaution to help make this an enjoyable and unforgettable experience. Should you be interested in taking this excursion, you can contact them for further information through your travel agent or write: Molokai Mule Ride, P.O. Box 200, Kualapuu, Molokai, 96757. "Wouldn't you rather be riding a mule on Molokai?"