## Mine Mules

*(Note: Parts of this section are adapted from unpublished notes of Mike Hornick archived at ERCA)*

Mine mules were an indispensable part of the early mines. Large electric mine locomotives hauled empty mine cars to a location in the mine and loaded mine cars from that same location on the main haulage track. Mules were used to haul the coal cars to and from the working mine face to where the electric locomotive picked them up. Mules were used because they could be hitched in a single file rather then in a side-by-side pair. This allowed the team to walk between the rails that the mine car rode on. Eventually the mules were replaced by the smaller six and eight ton gathering locomotive that could be powered by a reeled electric cable.

Mules were used in the mines instead of horses because the mule could pull a heavier load, stand more abuse, and work harder for a longer period of time then the horse. The mule was slower but more surefooted then horses in a dark coal mine. The mule was less excitable than the horse in the dangerous conditions of the coal mine. The eating habits were also quite different from the horse. Under similar work loads the mule required less feed. The mule, unlike the horse, was more sensible and realized when it had its fill. The mule was also careful not to drink excessively when overheated from work.

The mine mule was specifically bred for working in the mines. The mule was both powerful and efficient for the heavy work encountered in the mines. The mine mule was the hardest type to breed but at the same time commanded the highest price to purchase. The following letter was written from the W.L. Elder Horse and Mule Market, Talboth Stock Yards, Des Moines, Iowa dated July 1941. It was addressed to the General Superintendent of the United States Coal and Coke Company at Gary, WV:

> *Dear Sir:*
>
> *Having shipped today by freight in car numbers Milwaukee 105150 and 105321, twenty two head of big mules and 12 head of small mules under order No. U-286. These mules were shipped one full car twenty four head and on trailer ten head. Total cost of these thirty two head $4978.00 including health certificate.*
>
> *Upon receiving this stock and inspecting same kindly advise me at Uniontown, Pennsylvania of their condition received and time of arrival. Hoping this shipment is satisfactory.*
>
> *Yours Truly*

The following reply was sent on July 29, 1941, acknowledging the shipment:

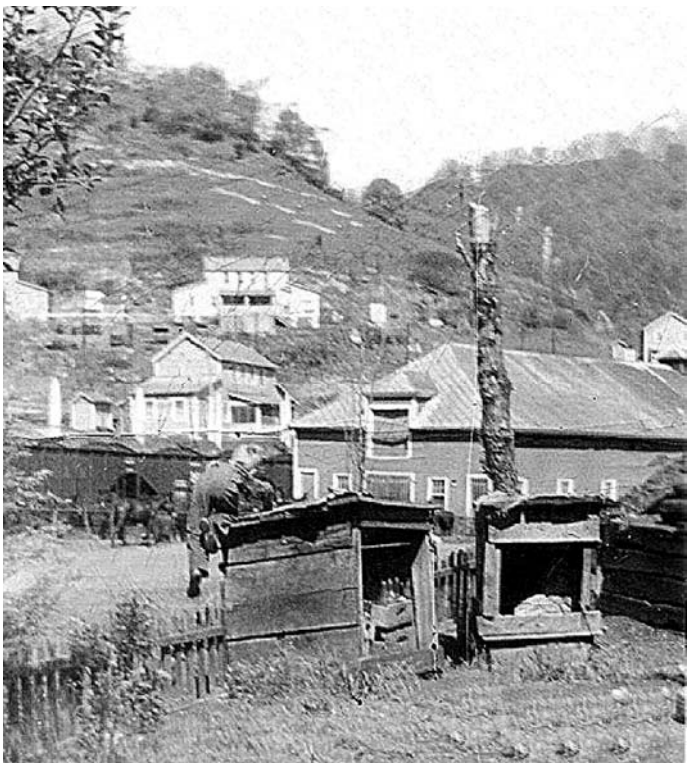
> *Dear Sir:*
>
> *This will acknowledge your letter of July 25 concerning shipment of mules under order No. U-286. These mules arrived here at 8 a.m. Tuesday, July 29. One large mule, bearing Tag No. 31, was found dead in the car. The other mules were apparently in good condition.*
>
> *Yours Very Truly*

**A mule driver getting ready for a day's work**
***(Courtesy of ERCA)***

Usually most of the mules that worked underground were dark in color, such as a dark bay or black. The mine mule was a heavy boned, draft animal and weighed approximately 1000 to 1200 pounds. Although one could find some white mules in the outside stables, these animals were generally employed in service around the plant site on the outside of the mine such as the slate dumps, power line construction and also in logging and timbering. Mule drivers were superstitious and hesitated to take a white mule inside the mine.

Mules had personalities just like humans. While some people considered all mules as being alike, the drivers, stable bosses, miners, blacksmiths and farriers all knew the difference. Mules, like individuals, had a name. Along with the name, the mule had a temper that was known to anyone associated with the mule. While a pat on the head may work for one mule, a large whip (even though outlawed in the mines) would be required to show the mule there was work to be done.

Mine mules while at times were quite friendly and easily trainable might take a turn and become balky. It was at a time such as this that the driver and the mule had to come to terms; and it was not always the driver that won out. Usually the driver resorted to means that were frowned on by the management who in many situations showed more consideration of the mule rather than the driver. Mules generally worked well for one driver and not for another. This may have come from a

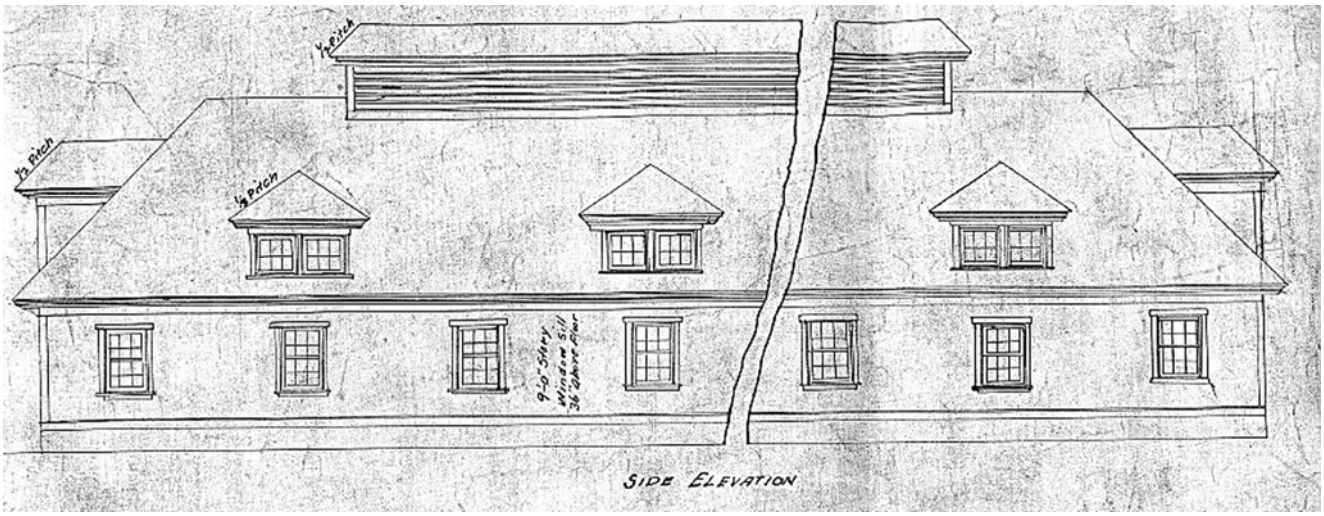


**The author scrambles to get out of the way when the mules break away from the No. 9 stable in 1951**
**(*Courtesy of Alex Schust*)**

communications barrier. Perhaps a lump of sugar meant the difference. There were also instances where the mule refused to work until he got his ration of chewing tobacco from the driver.

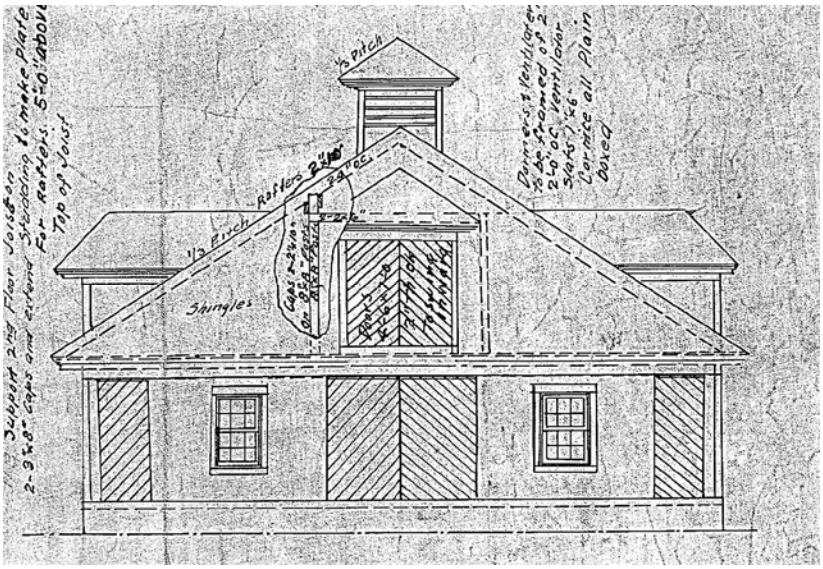
As an example of a communications barrier between man and mule at the No. 9 mine there was a mule that was used exclusively on the slate dump in No. 8 hollow. There were only two men who were able to get this particular mule to work and they both communicated in Italian. These two men worked on the slate dump emptying the mine cars loaded with mine refuse. The mule learned the commands in Italian. Since the slate dump was located about 3 miles from the stable a small stable was constructed on the slate dump isolating the mule from the stable boss, other mules and other languages. One day when both regular drivers attending a funeral a substitute driver was sent to work the slate dump. The native American driver soon learned he would have to walk back to the main stable to get a mule to work since the slate dump mule refused to respond to any of the English commands. Perhaps the regular slate dump mule couldn't understand the driver or the mule was smart enough to know that this was one way to get out of the day's work.

At each mine location utilizing mule power, there was a large two-story stable. The lower part of the stable had individual stalls with feed troughs and water to house the mules. The mule's collar and harness was hung on the post outside the stall. Each mule had its own individual stall and an understanding of which stall was his. At the end of the shift when the mule was brought into the stable from the mine, the mule found his own way back to his stall from the up to 40 stalls in the stable. Some of the stables were arranged that in the event of a fire inside the structure, a mechanical device would be operated so as to release each animal that was hitched in the stall.




**General side view drawing of the stables used at operations Nos. 1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10 and 12. The stables varied in length from 128 feet 8 inches at No. 1 to 68 feet 8 inches at No. 5 and No. 12. The stable at No. 1 had fourteen double stalls and 12 single stalls whereas the stables at No. 5 and No. 12 had six double stalls and four single stalls.**
**Drawing dated September 25, 1908**
***(Courtesy of ERCA)***

The second floor of each stable served as a storage place for hay, oats, corn, lime and other supplies required for the care of the livestock. The stable boss was the man in charge. It was his decision to determine which animal had served its usefulness, to order feed, to perform the work of a vet, to




**End view of the stable drawing**
**Drawing dated September 25, 1908**
***(Courtesy of ERCA)***

supply the stable inside the mine, to maintain the harness, to shoe the mules through the assistance of a blacksmith and to loan the mules to individuals for weekend plowing, etc. The assistant was required to keep the stable clean and free of manure, to water and feed the stock and to groom the mules in need.

The mule drivers would report to the barn before daylight and work time and harness up their team for the trip to the mine portal. Normally the mules were taken by way of a mule "path" cut around the side of the hill or slate dump above the stable site. It was against company rules to ride a mule to or from work.

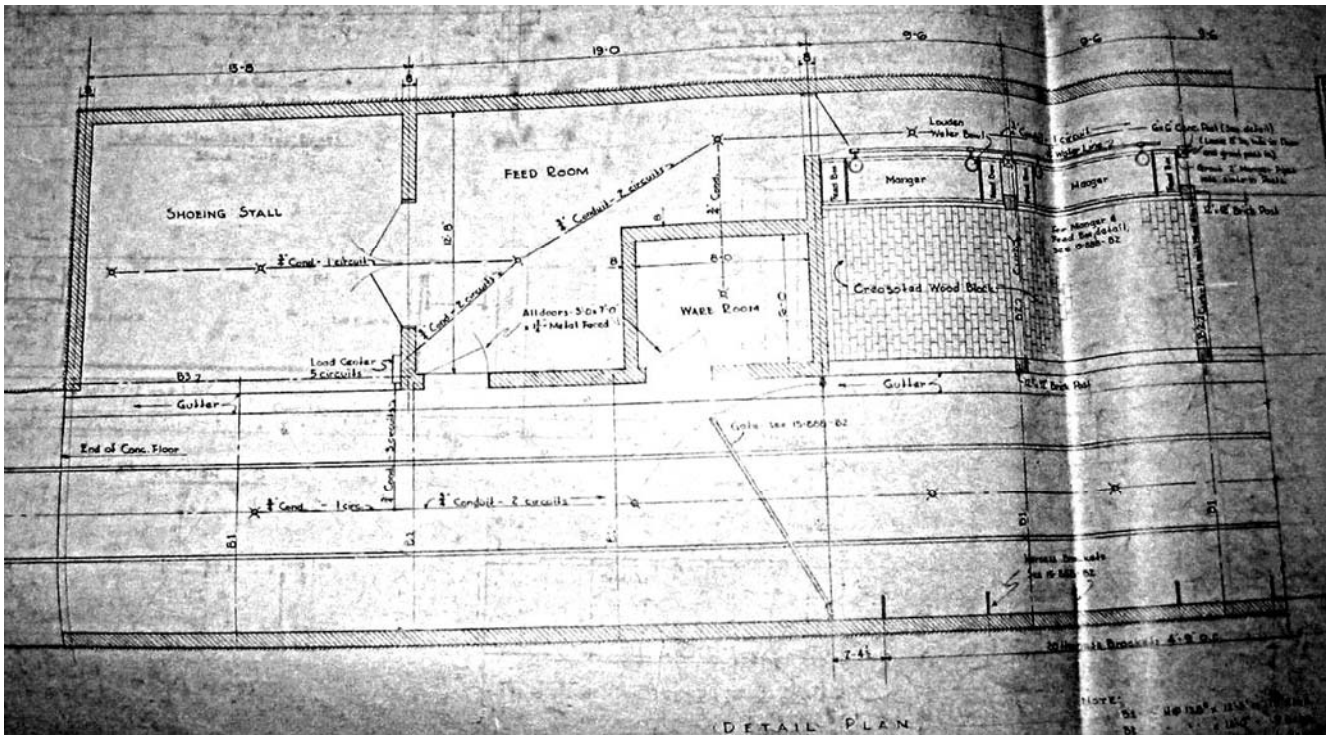
There was a great demand for manure from the barn by the miners who had garden spots and fields in which they raised their own produce. An order for manure was placed with the stable boss who delivered the commodity as it became available. There was always a waiting list for manure that seemed to be more effective than nitrogen fertilizer.

The underground stables in the mines at Gary were show places. They were built in 1924 and had 32 double stalls. These were constructed with more care than the outside stable. Generally the structure was built in an entry with ceramic glazed brick. The building was fire-proof, well-lighted and with running water utilizing stall fountains actuated by the mule pressing its nose against a paddle in the fountain which released water into the drinking fountain. Facilities for shoeing mules were also a part of this underground stable. Feed such as corn, oats and hay were brought into the mines in covered mine cars and stacked for storage in a fireproof section of the inside stable. These stacks protected the blacksmith while he attached the shoes to the mule's hooves. A mine track generally ran through one side of the stable so that stall droppings could be loaded up for transportation to the outside.

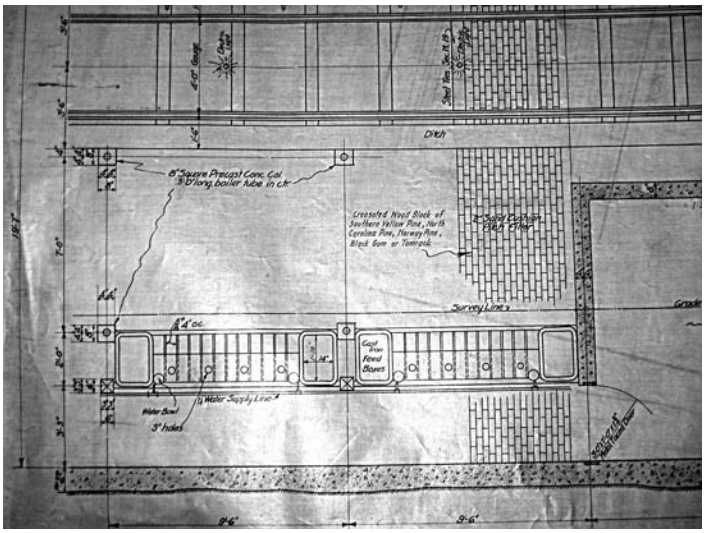
Where underground stables and mules are found one can also find mine rats since the rat's diet was principally mule feed. Some of these rats would grow to an enormous size often times measuring a foot from head to tail. A well fed rodent would be a harmless, playful creature but when their food supply was threatened or cut off the rats would become savage. Rats driven to hunger would gnaw on the mules hooves despite the mules constant kicking and trampling. Stable bosses would find the floors cluttered with rats that had been trampled to death by the mules in self-defense.

Underground mules developed a keen sense of sight by working in the dark. While the main haulage ways had some semblance of lighting the branch entries were lacking and the only light was that from the drivers cap lamp or where a team was used, the lead mule usually had a light fastened to its harness by which to light the way in a limited fashion. Head guards made of leather were made a part of the

bridle gear to protect the mule from rock and slate protruding from the mine roof. Mine mules generally kept their ears straightened so the ears would contact the roof projection before the skull.




**The No. 6 underground stable was 130 feet 4 inches long, 24 feet 4 inches wide and contained 10 double stalls, a shoeing stall, feed room and ware room. There were tracks along one side of the stable that were laid in a concrete floor. There was a gate across the tracks. The stable floor was made of creosoted blocks of wood. Each mule had a water bowl, hay manger, oat bin and corn bin. Harnesses were hung on racks across the tracks. The stable was built in January 1941**
***(Courtesy of ERCA)***




**The double stall layout in the No. 6 inside stable included feed manger for hay, feed boxes for grains and water bowls**
***(Courtesy of ERCA)***

Mules that were kept in underground stables might spend years in darkness and only during prolonged periods of mine idleness were the mules brought to the surface and turned loose in the fields. These mules suffered only a temporary blackout and soon recovered their sight after becoming accustomed to daylight. They also lost their taste for natural grasses growing in the fields.

A section of the "Operating Standard" for USC&C as written "For the Government and Operation of its Mines and Plants" dealt with transporting coal and care of livestock. This was in the early 1940's. It read in part:

1. Drivers shall be responsible for the condition of their mules and harness. Each mule shall be curried and cleaned before harnessing, and the harness, particularly the collars and such portions as come in contact with the mule shall be kept clean. Proper care shall be taken of the stock while at work so that injury and strain will be avoided.
2. When taking their stock to and from the stable, drivers shall stay with their stock and lead them until destination is reached. Stock shall not be permitted to travel faster than a walk at such times, nor shall the drivers ride the mules in going to and from work.
3. Drivers shall walk at least six feet behind the tail chain while traveling from place to place.
4. Drivers shall be responsible for their stock at all times while on duty and shall ascertain where motors are before taking stock onto haulage road.
5. Drivers shall not carry or use whips, straps or boards, nor in any manner abuse the stock.
6. Drivers shall not haul coal where there is power on the trolley wire.
7. Drivers shall handle only one car at a time in rooms and pillars.
8. In steep places where there is any danger of the car getting out of control, the mules shall follow the loaded car out of the places, or be securely tied or penned in a safe place while the car is being dropped out.
9. In placing cars, mules shall not travel faster then a walk. Cars shall not be swung into working places and shall be brought to a stop before mules are uncoupled.
10. Brakemen shall see that workmen, drivers, and their livestock are in the clear before putting in power switches.

Other rules for drivers read as such:

"It shall be the duty of the driver to take care of his mule or horse and see that it is properly fed and watered. He must not whip or abuse it unnecessarily or allow any other person to do so. He shall drive it carefully and when ascending a steep grade, allow it to rest frequently. When drawing cars upon a grade road, he shall be careful to sprag or block the car sufficiently to prevent them from running upon himself or mule. If any person abuses his mule or horse, he must report the same to the mine boss, nor will they be allowed to delegate any other person to take out or return their mules to the barn, nor drive their mules to or from the barn faster then a walk."

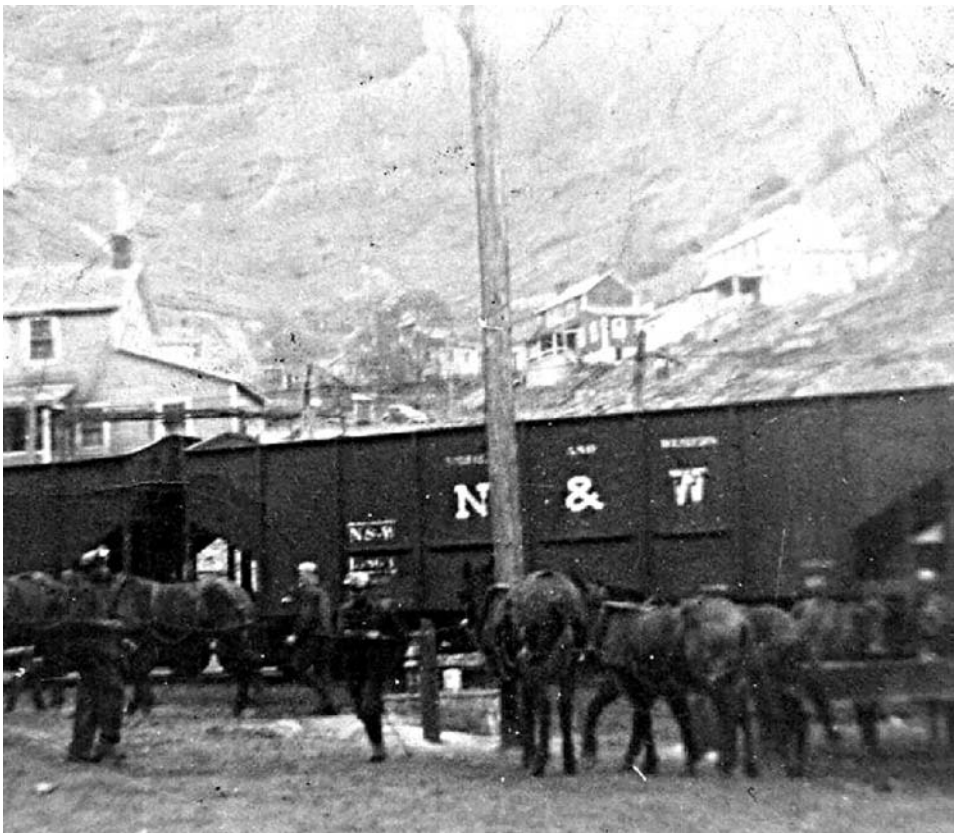
"The driver boss shall see that the drivers are at the stables in proper time in the morning and ready to begin work at the appointed time. He must see that the mules are regularly fed and watered and properly attended to. If the safety of persons or animals requires a safety block or latch to be thrown across the track, near the face of the working place, he shall see that one or the other be put on at once."

The stories concerning the mine mules were numerous as the heads of the stock in the barn. Each mule had individuality and with each there was a story to relate. Names such as Bug Dust, Smoky Midnight, Lightning, Zeke, Sally and the like were all found on the service record of the animal together with the place of birth, purchase price, date of birth, etc.

Feed for the mules was brought in by the box car load and had to be unloaded in a hurry. The carrying of the grain, hay, and other necessities was a job for all of the outside hands around the timber yard, car shop and town site maintenance crews. The grain or feed boxcar was dropped in on the tipple track along with empty railroad cars. The mule barn was located alongside the tipple track and as the car

reached the proper spot next to the barn, all hands were summoned to the feed detail so as not to hold up the dumping of coal into the empty cars while the feed car was being unloaded and the contents carried up the stairs to the stable loft.

Mules became short-winded and worn out just like miners and at the first sign of weakness they were given easier hauls or pensioned off with an easier life in the coal field. Many of the mules were sold off to individuals who had use for a plow animal. This was easier work than pulling mine cars. A good mule was only efficient for 2 or 3 years in the coal mine after which time, work and age began to show its signs.



**Bringing the mules back to the stable after a day's work in the No. 9 mines.**
**Circa 1950**
***(Courtesy of Alex Schust)***

When a mule was injured due to a rock fall or a run away mine car or other mishap or perhaps had broken a leg, the stable boss disposed of the animal by shooting it. Occasionally a mine mule would break loose from the driver and start running with his tail chain bouncing along the rails and wood ties. Often his tail chain, which was a part of the harness would bounce up into the trolley wire and would electrocute the mule. Regardless of how, when a mule died, the carcass would be hauled to a disposal site where it was covered with wood mine ties and burned.

The 1938 plant description includes the following:

No. 2 mine, 53 mules, inside and outside stables
No. 4 mine, 51 mules, outside stable
No. 5 mine, 19 mules, outside stable
No. 6 mine, 57 mules, inside and outside stables
No. 7 mine, 65 mules, inside and outside stables
No. 8 mine, outside stable
No. 9 mine, 20 mules, outside stable

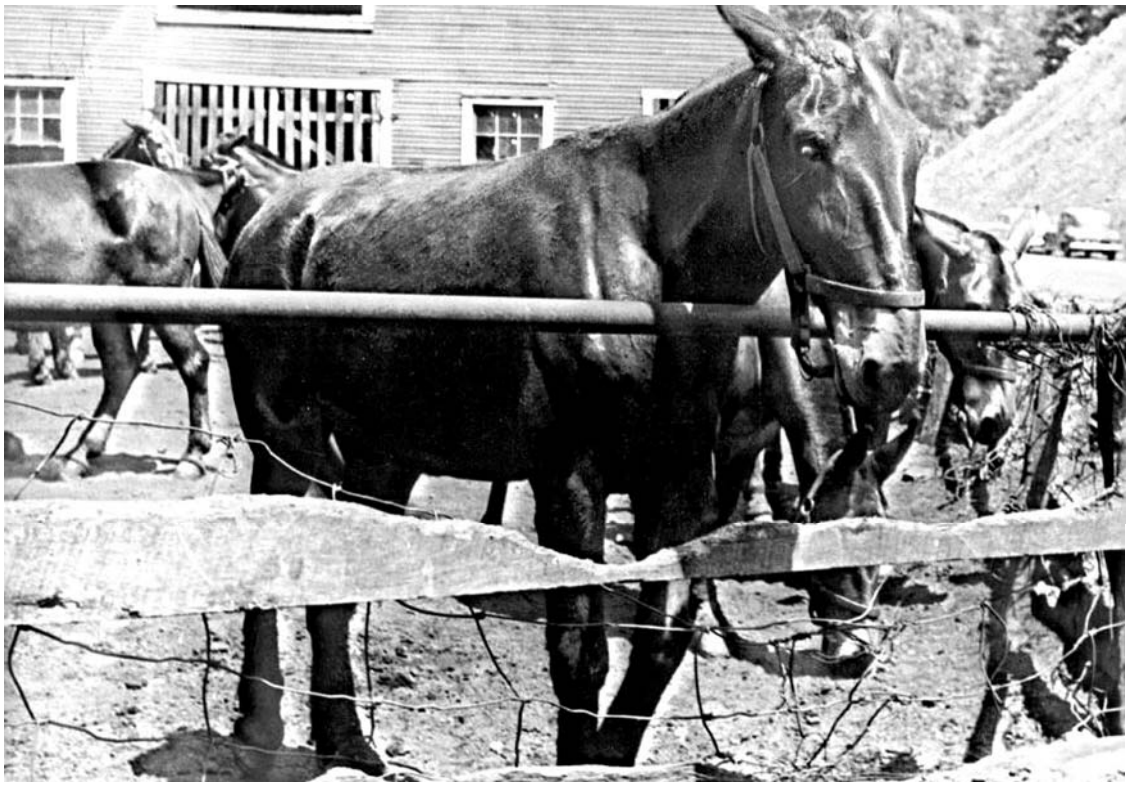
The No. 3 mine had an inside stable and there were outside stables at No. 10, No. 11 and No. 12, however these mines were idle in 1938 and had no mules in the stables.

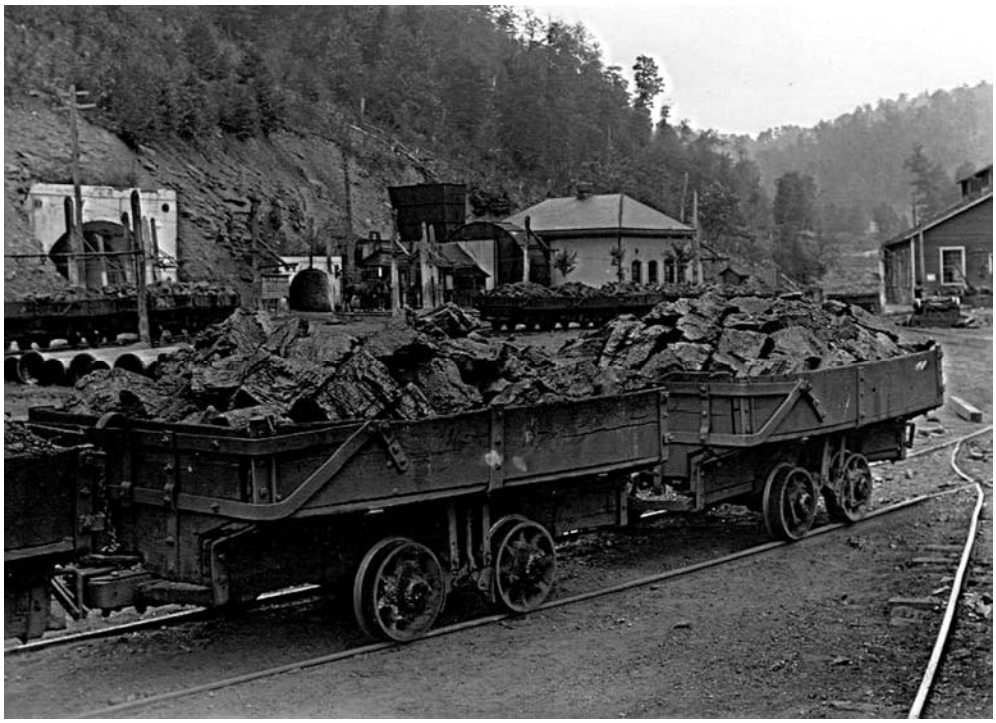
Mules were being used in the No. 9 mine for hauling coal as late as 1955. These mules were used for placing cars for hand loaders. On the outside of the mine mules were used for pulling cars on the slate dump where mine refuse was disposed of. Eventually slate dumping was partially mechanized with the installation electrically powered rope hoists.

While there have been a multitude of mine bosses, blacksmiths and others who cared for the mules, McBryan Collins is thought to have driven the last nail into a mule shoe at No. 9 in the late 1950s.

Even though mine mules were used in Gary until the mid to late 1950's, as early as 1900 General Electric was publishing cost analysis that indicated it was cheaper to use mine motors as compared to mules. GE cost showed that mule haulage cost 9.1 cents/ton whereas the use of an electric motor cost 4.45 cents/ton. Regardless of GE's analysis, USC&C found it more economical to use mules for at least half a century.

**Mules hauling a loaded mine car in No. 9 mine**
***(Courtesy of ERCA)***





**Top: Zeke the mule enjoys a day in the sunshine at the No. 9 stable in the early 1950s.**
**Bottom: Coal on the way to the tipple from No. 6 mine in 1926**
***(Top picture is courtesy of WVSA and bottom picture is courtesy of ERCA)***