

Pack Mules
Richard E. Killblane
Transportation Corps Historian

General George Crook has been considered by most historians to be the greatest Indian fighter of his time. While he is best remembered for advocating the use of Indians to fight Indians, it was his innovation in transportation that remained his greatest contribution to the Army. Crook was a maneuver commander who understood logistics.

When the Union (US) Army returned West after the Unsuccessful War for Southern Independence or the War of Northern Aggression, it had achieved the greatest military advancements of its day. It had mastered the use of the railroad, telegraph, balloon and steamboat in military operations. The war had seen the invention of the machinegun and the first submarine to sink a ship. Yet, in spite of this, when the Army went West to subjugate the native population of the prairie and desert these advancements had little effect. Until 1869, no railroad extended into the area of operations and then only a few rail lines encroached the wild frontier by the end of the wars. The telegraph likewise followed the railroad. Steamboats had difficulty paddling up the far reaches of the rivers or their shallow tributaries that cut through the prairie. Balloons and the Gatling gun were too cumbersome to employ in pursuit operations. In essence, the nature of the enemy and his environment negated all the advancements of modern warfare. The contest of arms between the American soldier and his Indian adversary would return to the way it had been before the War of Northern Aggression (Civil War).

The natives of the prairie and deserts excelled at their particular mode of warfare. Mounted on fleet prairie-fed ponies, a war party rode until his mount tired then switched to a spare without even slowing down. Unencumbered by the burden of food and equipment, the warrior simply sustained himself from the land. He could ride anywhere from sixty to eighty miles a day on the run. The cavalry trooper riding his one grain-fed horse burdened with saddle and equipment generally averaged twenty to twenty-five miles a day and could only sustain a force march up of forty miles a day only for two days. The Plains Indian of his day represented the finest light cavalry in the world. His method of warfare included hit and run tactics. In effect the Indians had mastered the art of mobile guerrilla warfare.

While the Indian brave sustained himself off the land, the Army soldier had to carry everything with him. The main means to transport supplies in the field at the time was the wagon. On average the infantry required one wagon per company and the cavalry three. Wagons were designed for roads and unfortunately Indian country did not offer very many good roads. Wagons became stuck in mud when it rained, overturned on uneven ground and took time to cross gullies and rivers. The rough terrain also broke many an axle and the repairs cost time. In addition the wagon moved at about the pace of a walking infantry man. For military operations that required speed, the soldiers often found themselves halting in order for the supply train to catch up. To pursue the fleet mounted warrior, the Army needed a better means of transporting supplies.

The mule is a hybrid of a horse and donkey. Collectively four or six mules could carry more in a wagon than they could individually on their backs with the current pack system. The average wagon load was a ton to a ton and a half as compared to only two hundred to two hundred and fifty pounds on a pack. The key issue was that individually they could keep up with the cavalry column while the wagons could not. Crook would find the solution.

Crook had some experience working with pack mules fighting Indians prior to the Civil War. Pack mules were a common sight around the mining areas along the Pacific Coast. When promoted to the Commander of the Department of Arizona in 1871, Crook finally had the resources to work on the problem. He had his quartermaster purchase 15,000 mules and recruited civilian packers. Crook hired Thomas Moore as his chief packer and Dave Mears as his assistant to recruit, train, equip, organize and supervise the pack trains. Crook then treated the study of the pack trains as a science. He learned that if they custom fitted the aparejo pack to each mule, they could increase the weight carried to four hundred pounds. Loading only mission essential items such as food, ammunition and medical supplies made field operations leaner. With the load capacity of each mule increased, Crook then set out to plan the organization of the train.

The ideal pack train contained fifty pack mules and one “bell” mare horse to lead them. When accompanying cavalry, a section of ten pack mules could support a cavalry troop. One packer or “mule skinner” was assigned to supervise loading of five mules and make minor repairs to equipment. Qualifications were high for its time. “He must know how to read and

write; be sound in body, of athletic build, and not addicted to the excessive use of intoxicants or display of bad or ugly temper, and thoroughly imbued with an 'esprit de corps' for the pack service." This seemed to imply there was a problem of working with mules. In the performance of duties the packer should "Be gentle in his treatment of animals; never throw rocks, blinds, or in any way abuse them." In addition hiring preference was given to honorably discharged soldiers. They were charged to "Work for the interest and good name of the train and be jealous of its reputation." Although civilians, like the teamsters, their duty was to accompany the infantry and cavalry on combat operations. Packers over the years of hard campaigning developed an elan all their own.

While the pack master had all accountability and supervisory responsibility for the entire train the cargador or assistant pack master supervised the loads and equipment maintenance. A farrier or blacksmith followed at the rear of the train to determine which mules needed new shoes and make any equipment repairs. In his treatment of the mule he was reminded, "Do not abuse him; remember the animal is dumb and you are intelligent and human." The final member was the cook who traveled at the lead of the train with his field stove and mess kitchen ready to set up a meal upon the halt at the end of the day. "There is nothing that will add more to the comfort and good will among a crew of packers than a good, clean, fast cook." These civilian packers rode their own mules in addition to those assigned for packing and were well armed to defend their train. In addition, Crook generally assigned eight infantry men to help defend the train. The pack train then became a self-contained mobile unit.

This pack train enabled numerous small patrols (which could travel faster than large columns) to hound the renegade Apaches during the 1871-74 Tonto Basin War. Relentlessly pursued, the Apaches surrendered. Having succeeded with his experiment in transportation in the Arizona Department, Crook was then transferred to the Department of the Platte in 1875 to suppress the increasing hostilities of the Sioux, Cheyenne and Arapaho.

Crook took his a number of his pack trains with him. There other commanders saw the merit of his pack train. Crook still used the wagon train to establish his supply base at Goose Creek while his pack train allowed him to "cut loose." His pack train could follow at a slightly slower rate but travel anywhere his mounted troops could. Lieutenant-colonel George Custer even borrowed one pack train for his 1876 Little Big Horn Campaign. Its link up with Major

Marcus Reno's battalion helped them stand off three days of siege. Widespread acceptance of the pack train by other notable officers such as General Ronald MacKenzie, O. O. Howard, Alfred Terry and Nelson Miles even inspired West Point to purchase one to train its cadets. By the end of the 1870s, the pack mule had become an integral part of the U. S. Army.

During the 1886 Geronimo Campaign, Captain Henry Lawton, a veteran campaigner who had served under Crook, used a system of relay pack trains to sustain his pursuit of the elusive band of Chiracahua Apache. The average radius of sustainment for a wagon train was a three hundred miles which equated into one hundred and fifty out and one hundred and fifty back to its supply base. The Army column resembled a dog on a leash, deadly within its reach but helpless beyond. The supply train was that leash. The relay pack trains, however, allowed Lawton to remain in the field for several months and each train averaged seven hundred miles.

The wagon, which hauled greater tonnage, continued to stock the supply base while the pack mules accompanied combat operations. Pack mules served the U.S. Army through every war to include World War II. They carried supplies over the muddy jungle trails, which bogged down wagons, to the front line troops at Santiago, Cuba. Similarly mules followed men through the jungle trails of the Philippines. Even with the advent of military trucks during World War I, the Army still pressed pack mules into service to transport supplies from the rail depots to the front lines. During World War II, Fifth and Seventh Army commanders realized the usefulness of pack mules in the rugged mountains of Sicily and Italy. Similarly mules accompanied American troops through the jungles of Burma.

Mechanization of the Army finally brought the end of the pack service. This did not mean that the pack mule had outlasted its usefulness but that that a modern army had no place for such an antiquated means of transportation. Unfortunately, for light infantry men, the same austere conditions that his predecessors faced in the Indian Wars still exist today. Modern wheeled vehicles require the same good roads as wagons. Few roads extend into the area of operations in most underdeveloped countries and when the tropical rains pour, the roads resemble molasses. Light infantry soldiers consequently still have to suffer carrying heavy loads over rugged terrain in violation of S.L.A. Marshall's argument about soldiers' load. Only the Marines in their mountain school at Bridgeport, California exhibit the wisdom to still teach the use of pack mules. Special Forces annually send teams to their school to learn the use of pack animals.

Crook's genius was in recognizing the need for a reliable means of transportation that could keep pace with the mounted arm over any type of terrain then developing that solution from resources readily available. Pack mules had been used by the Army as early as the War with Mexico. Crook, however, found a way to improve the load capacity by tailoring each pack to the mule. Then he organized a standard train that remained unchanged through its history. The U. S. Army's Pack Service existed for less than seventy years but represents a proud chapter in the history of Army transportation. While most historians will remember Crook as one of the top Indian campaigners, packers remembered him as the father of the pack service.

During the Indian Wars, packers adopted a practice to identify particularly new unruly mules. They would shave their manes and tails. Thus the term "shave tail" came into the military vernacular and endured as a title for brand new second lieutenants.