

This month's theme:
Pack Trains



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The Newsletter of the Idaho State Historical Society's Junior Historian Program

PROSPECTOR

February, 2008



Pack Trains

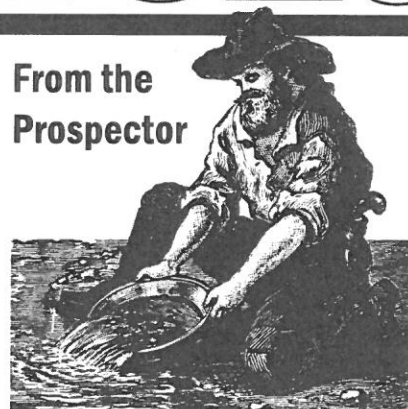
Transporting supplies to Idaho's remote towns is a challenge. Fierce weather and tall mountains can sometimes make it difficult to travel across our vast state. But if you think it's difficult now, imagine how it was in the late 1800's. Back then, many people lived in remote mining camps far away from big cities. Roads to these mines were very poor, some not much better than a dirt trail, and travel could be a long and dangerous process.

What would you have done if you had to haul enough supplies

into an early mining camp to take care of a thousand hungry prospectors during the gold rush? Farms and ranches weren't located all over the state like they are today. Much of the food had to be imported from big cities like Boise or Lewiston. Think too about all of the heavy equipment you would need at a large mine. When most of us think of gold mining, we think of tools like shovels and pick axes and gold pans. But most large mines had much bigger pieces of equipment. For example, a stamp mill was a

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From the Prospector



Howdy Prospectors!

This week it's my mule's birthday. I was having trouble deciding what to give him as a present. He doesn't wear clothes, so those are out. He has too many legs for a skateboard or bicycle. I can't even get him an iPod because the earphones keep slipping off of his enormous ears. Then it hit me. What if I picked my mule's favorite subject for this month's issue? He's always telling me that mules are what made Idaho a great state. Without those critters hauling heavy loads to and from the mines, the gold rush would have never have happened.

So this month's issue is dedicated to the pack trains of Idaho. Happy Birthday, Mule!

Lucky Noah

Pack Trains Continued

large machine that was used to crush ore into smaller pieces and the entire contraption might weigh several tons. How would you transport a gigantic machine like that along a steep, windy path?

After gold was found near the Clearwater River in the 1860's, prospectors spread out across the mountains in search of new strikes. Some of the spots where they found ore were terribly hard to reach. Look at a recent map and find the town of Atlanta east of Idaho City or the Yankee Fork region between Stanley and Challis. Mines in remote locations such as these could be difficult to operate. In some places, miners could build wagon roads in order to haul machinery and supplies to the mining camps. But for many mines, road building might cost too much or be too difficult for the men in the area. The main form of transportation to these remote mines wasn't wagons. The only thing that could negotiate the treacherous trails was a pack train.

A pack train doesn't have an engine or travel on a track like the trains we're used to. Pack trains are actually long lines of horses or mules. These chains were often twenty to thirty animals long. The team was strung together with long ropes, each animal carrying a heavy, perfectly balanced load. Even after modern railroads came to Idaho in the later 1800's, most of the food

and equipment needed for many of Idaho's mines was shipped by mule and packhorse. They could travel where no wheels could run.

Packing was a tough job. Each morning the packers had to get up long before daylight so that they could pack their animals in time to leave the camp. The load on the animals' back had to be perfectly balanced, so that the horse or mule could carry a large amount of weight without tipping over. Big pieces of equipment were broken down into



smaller parts, so that the entire team could share the load. Crates and bags were then secured on individual animals with a web of ropes and knots.

The trains themselves were also carefully assembled. Animals were roped together head to tail to keep the long train stayed together. To make sure the animals moved along at a reasonable pace, men were stationed in the front, middle, and,

back of the train. Each man was usually in charge of about eight animals. Packers always had to be on the lookout for thieves, wild animals, or bad trail conditions that might cause an animal to tumble off the path.

Every evening the group had to find a camp with sufficient grass and water. The animals had to be unpacked to give them a chance to rest. And the men had to cook and get some sleep so they would be ready for an early start.

Although packing was hard work, it could pay very well. Transport companies with good reputations could make their owners very wealthy. During the mining era, the miners themselves rarely got rich. It was the people who supplied the miners with goods and services who made the most money.

Eventually either the mines closed up or roads were built where the pack trails used to travel. Although mining continues to be important to our state, trucks and trains do most of the

hauling of supplies. Still there are a few mule packers left in Idaho. People visiting Idaho's backcountry sometimes use pack trains of mules, horses, and even llamas to carry their supplies into the wilderness. The gold rush is long gone, but in a small way, pack trains continue to help people in the wilds of Idaho.

*Adapted from an article
in Prospector #4, 1972
Idaho State Historical Society*



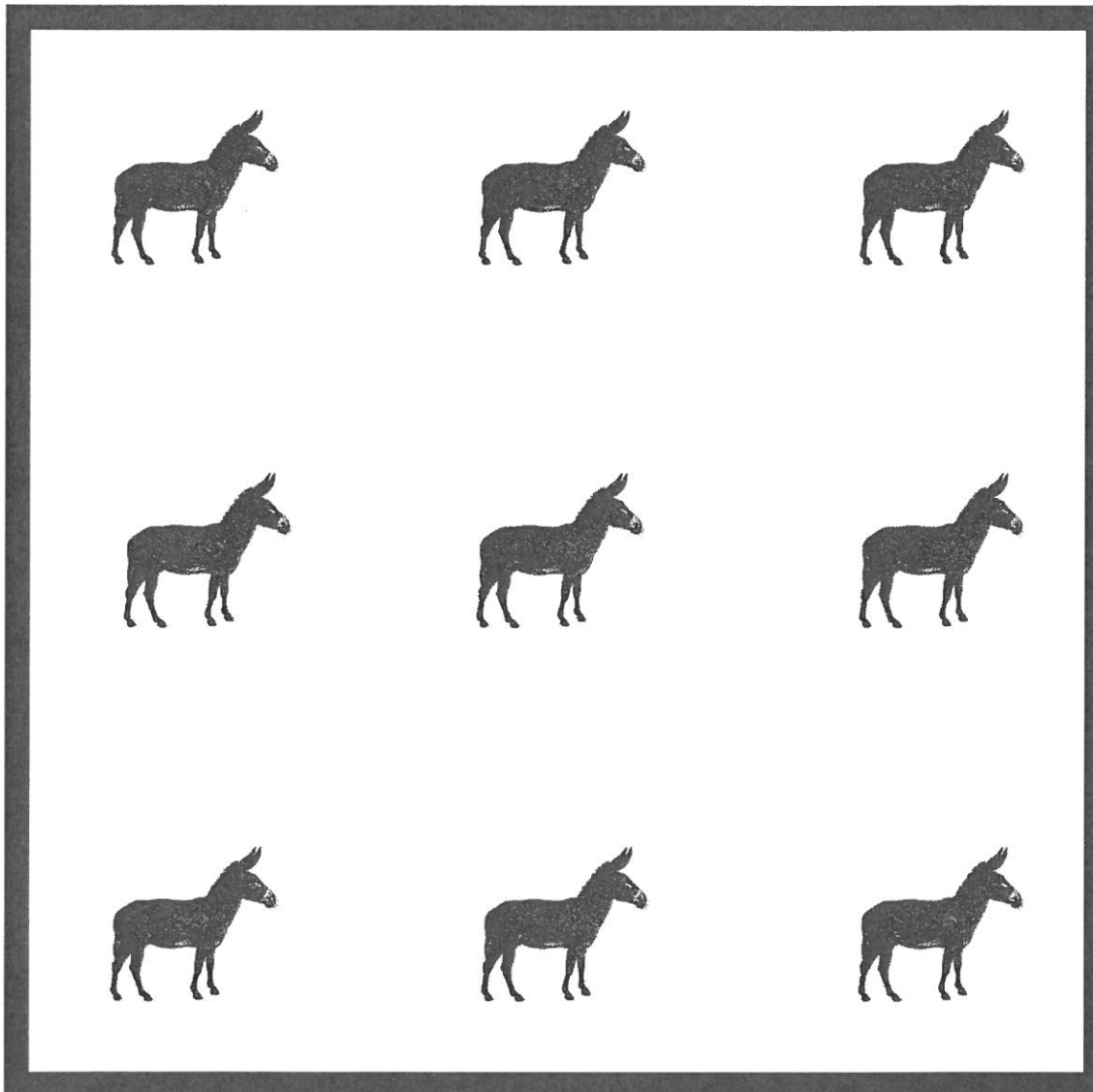
The Fun Page

Mule Trouble

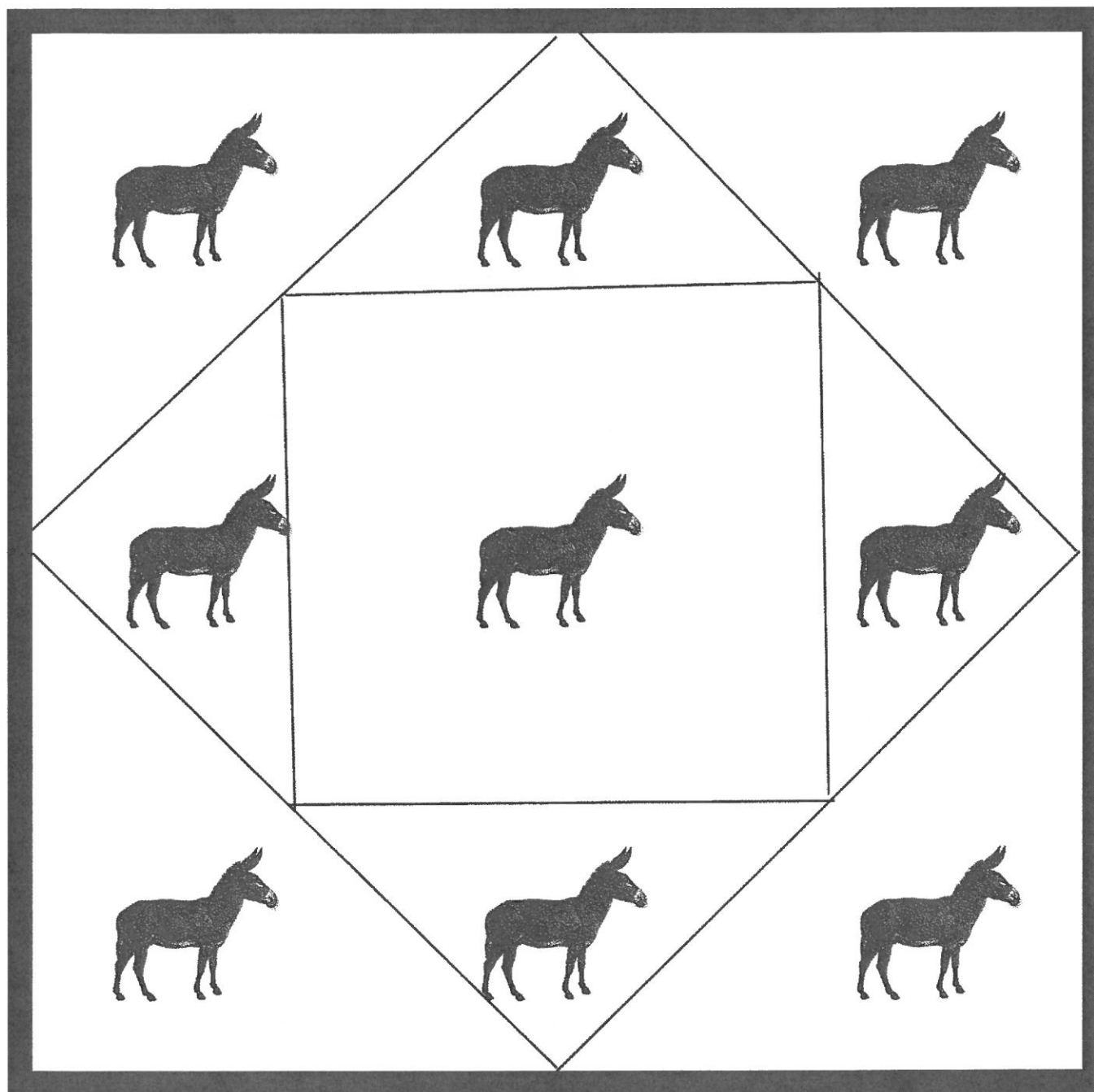
The mules are causing trouble again! Every night in camp the critters start to fight. Between their snorting and their kicking, nobody can get a wink of sleep. As head packer it's your job

to solve the problem. You need to create a separate pen for each mule so that they can't fight with each other. There is a problem, though. You only have enough wood to create two pens. Look at the

diagram below and see if you can separate all of the mules by drawing only two squares. The squares can be any size you want, but each mule has to be in its own pen. Good luck!



Solution





Next Month's Activities

Well, we've told you all we know about pack trains, now it's your turn. This month you can pick from one of the activities listed below or make up your own pack train project and send it to our Prospector Headquarters. We'll take some of your best work and print it in next month's magazine. Remember to include your name, the town and school where you are from, and the name of your Prospector Club. We can't wait to see what you come up with!

A Mule's Life:

Working as a packer was a tough life.

Long days on the trail could be very tiring for the men delivering supplies to the mines. As hard as it was for the people though, it was even harder on the animals. The mules and the horses had to carry huge loads up and down treacherous mountain paths. Tell us what life was like for an animal on the trail. Pretend you are an Idaho pack mule back in the 1800's and tell us what pack trains are like from your point-

of-view. Do you love your job or hate it? What was your greatest adventure? What's the largest thing you ever carried? We can't wait to hear your story!

Ghost Town: During gold rush days, towns could spring out of nowhere. As long as there was gold



nearby, people would move into the area. Unfortunately though, when the gold ran out people just as quickly moved away. All around Idaho there are ghost towns. Some of them still have old buildings and mining equipment rusting away in the open air. Others have disappeared completely, with only their name on an old map to tell you where they used to be. Do a little research and find out the story of one of these

ghost towns. Where was it located? What did it used to look like? What does it look like today?

The Perfect Pack: Imagine you are an inventor in the 1870's. You've noticed how hard it can be to pack supplies to the mines and you want to come up with a new solution.

Using your inventing skills, create a device to make it easier for the mule packers. Is it a new pack saddle with fancy pockets and pouches? Is it a mechanical robot mule built to climb the mountains? Or will you create a balloon-powered pack train that flies

over the peaks? Draw us a picture and explain your new invention to the rest of the Prospectors.

Send in your work by
March 24th to:
Prospector Club/Lucky Noah
Idaho State Historical Museum
610 North Julia Davis Drive
Boise, ID 83702
Or email it to us at
kurtzwolfer@ishs.idaho.gov

