

### ***Mules and horses made the Old Spanish Trail trade successful.***

Long before highways and railways, they served as the beasts of burden that carried goods between New Mexico and California—real horsepower delivering the goods.

Traders packed woolen goods west to Los Angeles. When traders headed back to Santa Fé, they herded hundreds of California-raised mules and horses. These animals themselves became the east-bound trade goods, trotting to the New Mexico market under their own power.

On the return trips from California, some of the horses served as tribute to the Paiutes and Utes through whose lands they traveled. In Santa Fé, traders sold mules to Missouri traders. They took them east to sell to farmers. Other horses and mules stayed in New Mexico serving to plow the fields and transport the farmers and their families.

People did not travel Old Spanish Trail with wagons. The roughness, steepness, and water crossings ruled in favor of riding horses or mules, or walking.

After 1849, only the western part of the trail became regularly used by wagons linking Salt Lake City to Los Angeles.

### **The Goods Transported**

Two blankets from New Mexico were traded for 1 horse from California. Herds of up to 2000 horses were driven back from California along with mules, burros, and Chinese silks.

Per Hafen & Hafen (in *Old Spanish Trail*, 1954), an 1833 pack train on the Spanish Trail headed to California carried the following: “1645 serapes, 341 fresadas, 171 colchos, and 4 tirutas”[sic]

Colchas = Embroidered bedcovers

Fresadas/frazadas = Blankets

Serapes/sarapes = Woolen ponchos, capes or shawls

Tirutas = possibly a mistranscription of ‘tapete’ or rug.

Jerga = rug or mat

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# Mules

*These beasts of burden made the Old Spanish Trail function.*



Old Spanish Trail Association  
[www.oldspanishtrail.org](http://www.oldspanishtrail.org)

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## About Mules

“When man learned wild animals could be tamed, he stopped being his own pack animal.” By 3000 B.C., people had learned that horses and donkeys could join to make man’s favorite pack animal, the mule.

Usually sterile, a *mule* is born of a female horse (mare) and a male donkey (jack). A *hinny*—usually smaller and weaker—is born of a jennet donkey and a stallion horse. From the horse, the mule gets its height, uniform coat, appetite, and shape of neck and rump. From the donkey, it gets long ears, short, wide head, thin legs, and small hoofs and common sense.

The mule can respond to spoken orders and to a packer’s or rider’s emotions. It has a good sense of direction, in daylight or dark. Like donkeys, they refuse to do anything that might hurt them or their loads. If overloaded, they just lie down. If the pack comes loose or something drops from it, the pack mule will stop. If led to dangerous ground or a bear, they sense it and won’t move ahead.

Mules have advantages over horses—more patient, sure-footed, hardy, and long-lived. They also less obstinate, faster, and more intelligent than donkeys.

## The Pack Train

The pack trains left New Mexico in the fall when water crossing were easier, and returned in the early spring before the snowmelt swelled the rivers. The whole outfit was overseen by a *majordomo* or foreman/boss. His assistant was a head packer, called a *cargador*. He oversaw the individual packers, called *arrieros*.

There were 150 to 200 animals in a train (*recura*) and it was divided into segments called *atajos*. Pack trains, unlike wagons, could meander across the terrain, taking advantage of the best routes at a given moment and avoiding potential dangers.

Rations were carried for the people on the journey, but the animals would forage for themselves.



## Arrieros and the Arrieria

The word “*arrieria*” has Arabic roots and is the Spanish word for the profession of packing. The job of packing mules, burros, and horses is centuries old and is a cultural system and tradition of important economic impact based on trust and a handshake.

Arrieros were responsible for the transport of many families’ woolen goods which provided them income for an entire year.

## The Aparejo

The load was distributed evenly over the back of each mule using a pack saddle called an *aparejo*. Originating in Mexico, this was a simple pad made of leather stuffed flat with grass. It can be wetted down and as it dries, it conforms to the back of the mule. Unlike wooden frames (“sawbucks”) it can handle very heavy loads.