

The 43rd Annual Benson Mule Days Celebration

By Liz McGarr

"Ah jes' got plumb tired a'looking at the north end of a southbound mule." So goes the farewell slogan for many a Southern plowboy during the exodus from farm to city in the 30s, 40s and 50s. These days, those same plowboys (plus a whole mess of other folks) beat a path to North Carolina's "Mule Capital" to praise the same creature they once despised during Benson's Mule Days Celebration.



"It is a known fact that he [the mule] will labor 10 years willingly and patiently for you, for the privilege of kicking you once."

—William Faulkner

living. Mules replaced the steers and heavy equipment is replacing the mules."

While Mule Days still celebrates the mule with Mule Races and Mule Judging (you can see beauty contestants actually make half-asses of themselves), it has become a huge social event drawing crowds of up to 60,000 to Benson for parties, street dances, and some of the best Downeast barbecue around.

The Benson Chamber of Commerce now sponsors Mule Days and each year sees an improvement in the festival. In 1991, the Johnston County Pork Cookoff was started by the chamber and Johnston County 4-H clubs. The best part about the cookoff is, once the judges have made their choices, this fine North Carolina barbecue (go on Texas, try to top Johnston County BBQ!) goes on sale to the public with proceeds benefitting the 4-H clubs.

Another "tradition" begun in 1991 is the Friday morning wagon train that will carry you through some of the most beautiful country "this side of heaven." This year, Benson Mule Days moves to a new, permanent home. It will be held in "Chamber Park," located on the edge of Benson, 3/10 mile off Hwy. 301. There are campsites available (but going fast, get your reservations in now), plus rodeo parking, a new rodeo arena, and a deepwater well.

So you can sound educated and refined amid so many mule connoisseurs when you get to Mule Days, here's a few tidbits about the mule you can throw out in casual conversation:

- A mule is the result of mating a male jackass (donkey) and a mare (female horse). The offspring of a female jackass (jennet) and a stallion (male horse) is not technically a mule; it is called a hinny and considered quite inferior to mules.
- Mules eat less than horses and can stand the heat better. They will never overeat or overdrink and they won't break into a nervous lather when trying to pull a load in the heat.
- One of the 1982 judges, Tom Newman, said his daddy told him how to tell a good mule from one that ain't so great. "The first thing is his eyes. If they're too close together, he's a bad mule."
- A mare will carry a mule a month longer than she would a colt. Folks guess it's because it takes some extra time to grow those stickout ears.
- George Washington was the first to produce "quality" mules in America.
- Depending on who you're talking to, a mule is either profoundly stubborn or just highly intelligent and so won't follow any commands that it finds distasteful.
- All mules are sterile females.

Benson Mule Days Celebration will be held this year September 24-27. The Chamber of Commerce (see sidebar) will be happy to provide you with information about lodging, food, and events.



The dependable and stubborn mule has now been replaced by tractors and trucks but the animal's contribution to Americana has not gone unnoticed.

What: Benson Mule Days
When: September 24-27
What: Parades, crafts, food (LOTS of barbecue), Miss Benson Pageant, Mule Pulling and Mule Judging, street dances, Mule Race, bands, rodeo, bluegrass, clogging, camping available — basically everything you need to make a fall weekend complete. Sponsored by the Benson Chamber of Commerce. Call (919) 894-3825 for information.
Who:
Where: Benson in southwestern Johnston County. See map on page 8.

Schedule of Events

Friday, Sept. 18
 *1 pm Mule Days Tee Off (advance registration)

Saturday, Sept. 19
 *8 pm Miss Benson Pageant

Tuesday-Sunday, Sept. 22-27
 *Carnival rides

Thursday, Sept. 24
 *7 pm Little Miss Benson Pageant

Friday, Sept. 25
 9 am Mule Pulling & Judging
 10 am Wagon Train
 4 pm Mule Race
 *7:30 pm Rodeo
 *9 pm Street Dance

Saturday, Sept. 26
 9 am-6 pm Arts & Crafts
 9:45 am Miniature Float Judging
 10:30 am Parade
 11 am Johnston County Park Cookoff
 12 noon VIP Luncheon
 1 pm-5 pm Bluegrass & Clogging
 *2:30 pm Rodeo
 *7:30 pm Rodeo
 *9 pm Street Dance

Sunday, Sept. 27
 *2:30 pm Rodeo
 (*Admission charge)