

IOWA HISTORY



Photo Courtesy Library of Congress
Army mule

“Automobile Truck” Threatens Army Mules

Dubuque was bustling with activity and excitement early in the summer of 1912. U.S. Army battalions from four states were arriving in June. About 2,000 men would camp south of the city after traveling from Minnesota, Michigan, Nebraska and Illinois.

The soldiers were going to be testing some new equipment for the war department. City leaders hoped the soldiers would perform their drills and maneuvers in an exhibition for the public. It was expected to be the “most spectacular event Dubuque had ever seen” according to a news report.

But the Army was only using Dubuque as a base for operations. As soon as all the soldiers were in place, they would be setting out for a 200-mile march to Sparta, Wis., by way of

Madison. During the trek they would be testing several new items that promised to “revolutionize” the Army’s transportation system.

The war department had invested a “painstaking effort” into the development of a new pack that would allow soldiers to more comfortably carry everything they needed in the field. The new pack, a “marvel of compactness” weighed only 46.5 pounds compared to the old “blanket roll” pack that weighed in at 58 pounds.

Soldiers typically carried a bayonet, canteen and a knapsack all attached to their waists. Entrenching tools consisting of three shovels, a pick, knife, and wire cutters—distributed among eight men—were also carried around the waist. The constant bumping against the legs made marching “torture.” The new pack hung by two straps from the shoulder rather than the waist.

Newly designed tents eliminated the need for the marching soldier to carry poles. Instead, one end of the tent was held up by the soldier’s bayonet, the other by his rifle. And the new tent had flaps at both ends, rather than one.

Improvements had also been made to the eating equipment. Plates, pans, canteens and cups were made of aluminum instead of heavier steel and tin. The new canteens were in the shape of a bottle with a screw top. Both the canteen and the cup fit into a felt-lined pouch that kept liquids cold for hours.

Maybe the biggest, and most controversial, test facing the soldiers who had gathered in Dubuque that summer had to do with mules. The long-eared animals were used to carry supplies, but the Army was eager to try out the new “automobile trucks” with the thought of possibly replacing the mules. Twelve different models of these new machines had been brought in to Dubuque by the Army. It was up to the soldiers marching between Dubuque and Sparta to give them a try.

Newspapers delighted in reporting the progress of the “newfangled machines” and the “old reliables.” Covering less than 20 miles a day, each night the competing teams set up camp. The first day the mules pulled their wagons into camp ahead of the motorized vehicles. The second day it was a tie. The third day the mules won again. They were running a “neck and neck” race until weather changed the course of events.

For two days the clouds dumped heavy sheets of rain on the soldiers. While “slow as an army mule” was a common phrase at the time, the mules at least were able to move through the thick mire of the western Wisconsin roadways. But it was fatal for the automobile trucks. They became “hopelessly stalled” in the mud near Platteville. The mud didn’t stop the mules. The “patient, plodding, willing” mules proceeded slowly through Wisconsin to Sparta.

Newspapers blasted the headlines:

“Army Mule is Not Outdone”

“Army Mules Win in Mud”

“Army Mule Proves Its Value in Long March”

By June 27 Captain M.E. Faville issued this statement, "The automobile demonstration has been such as to warrant the conclusion tht it is unwise and unsafe to supersede army mules and wagons with the troops by any other form of locomotion."

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