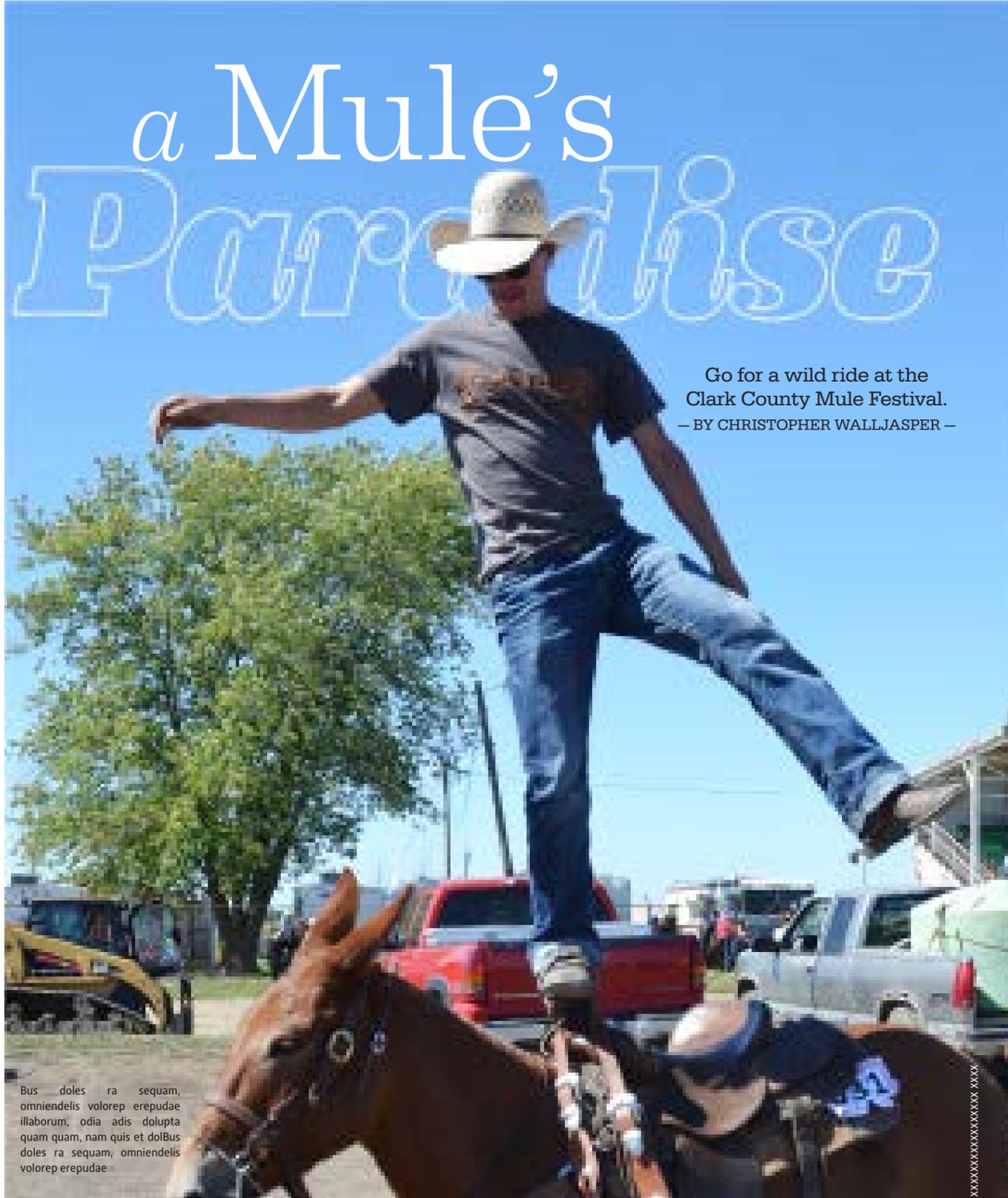


a Mule's Paradise

Go for a wild ride at the Clark County Mule Festival.

— BY CHRISTOPHER WALLJASPER —



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COLTON WELDON is everywhere. One minute, he's preparing to ride his mule, a steady mare named Surprise, in the egg-and-spoon race. The next he's teasing a young cowgirl who's braiding her mule's tail. Later on, he's entertaining a gaggle of young cowboys as he pulls out his gear to ride wild mules and bucking bulls at the Saturday-night rodeo, in front of thousands of rowdy onlookers and proud locals.

To say Colton is friendly would be putting it mildly. He has the energy of the hunting dogs he breeds and the laid back calmness of an old farmer. And if you ask him why he loves mules, you'll get a frank and unsurprised answer:

"I just like their dispositions a lot better."

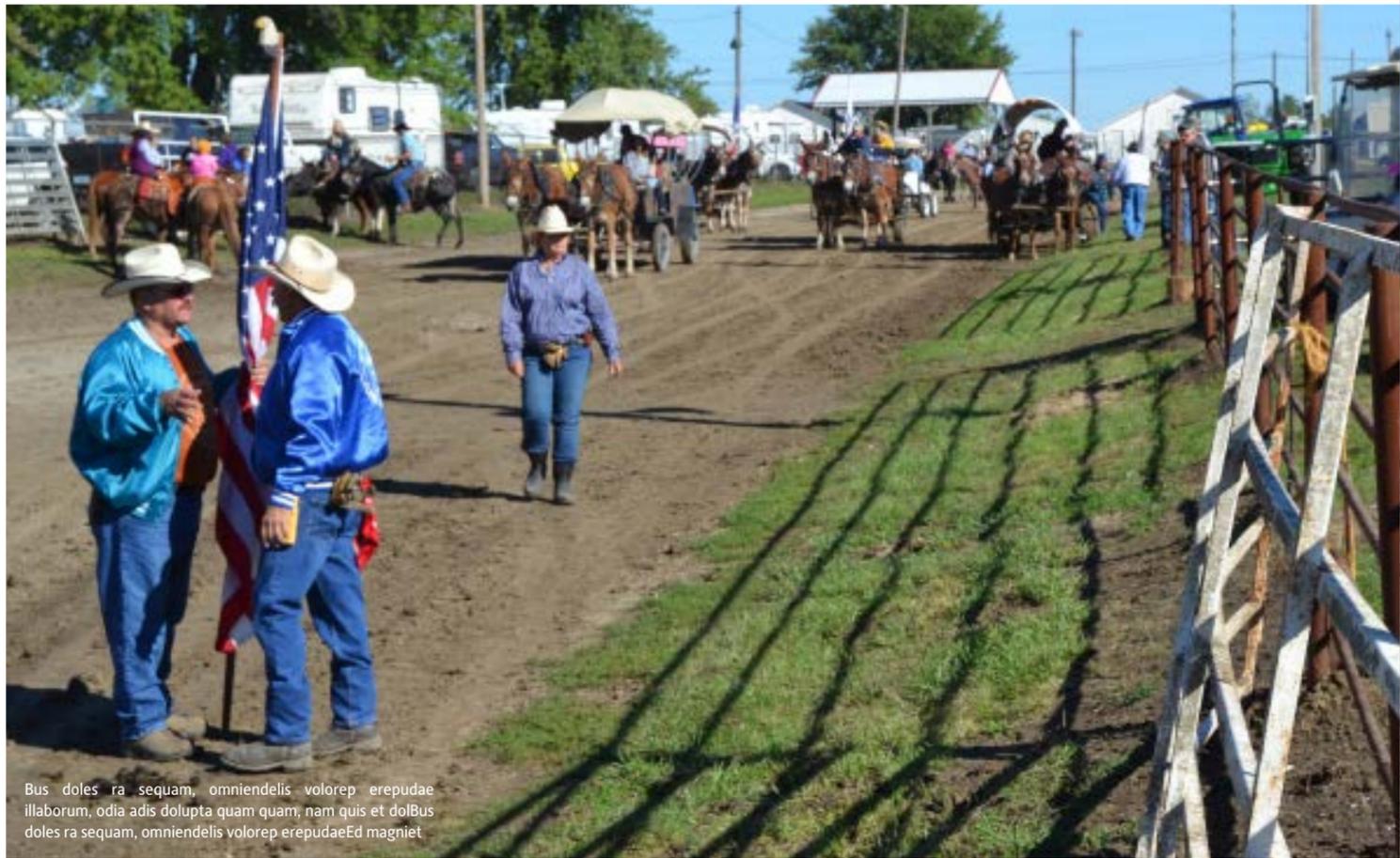
Colton's not the only one to shower praises on Missouri's state animal. Ask any one of the more than six thousand visitors to the Clark County Mule Festival each year, and most will jump at the chance to celebrate the mule's work ethic, smarts, and proper place in America's history.

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A Case for the Mule

Despite their depiction in popular culture as stubborn, obnoxious animals that constantly infuriate their masters, mules have proven themselves time and time again to be dependable working stock that outperform their thoroughbred cousins where it really counts.

Dr. John Dodam has advised the Mule Club at the University of Missouri-College of Vet-

erinary Medicine for twenty years and has two draft mules that he uses to mow pastures, plow snow, rake hay, and do other chores. He says it's important to realize that it's intelligence, not ignorance, that makes mules so difficult to handle.

"Mules are intelligent and possess a strong survival instinct," John says. "Mule trainers need to be more intelligent than the mule, and more patient, too."

Historically, a mule's toughness and cunning could have meant the difference between life and death for a pioneer who depended on draft animals for farming and hauling. John says that mules helped build the West as the frontier expanded past the Mississippi.

"In the late 1800s and up to 1900, Missouri had more mules than any other state," he says.

They were bred big and hearty and sold in massive markets where farmers, railroad men, and the military would buy them by the pair or by the dozens. John explains that in the early twentieth century, the Army took advantage of these markets to acquire animals that met its needs. Missouri mules were shipped to the front lines in Europe to help dig trenches and move machinery.

But the Clark County Mule Festival is about much more than just the animals and their rich history here in Missouri. It's also about the community. When you ask die-hard Mule

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Fest visitors about their life, they measure it in festivals: the year the Mississippi river flooded so badly that it almost swallowed up the Mule Fest grounds nearly ten miles away, or the year Mike Schantz, the Mule Festival's president, got married and was at the festival the next week.

However, it doesn't matter if you have never stepped foot in Kahoka or if you've been coming to the Mule Festival since 1986 when it began as a handful of mule-riding fanatics in Northeast Missouri. Once you cross the threshold of that old metal arch that reads, "Clark County Fairgrounds," you become a member of the Mule Fest family.

All Work and No Play

Most rodeo events are born out of some real-life skill. Breaking horses begot bronco busting, and without cattle drives, barrel racing and calf roping probably wouldn't be spectator sports.

But it's hard to see the utility in a grown man struggling to pull a bra over his shirt, stuff water balloons in each cup, and race a

mule down a dirt track. Festival president Mike Schantz explains it away with a logical answer over a plate of biscuits and gravy the morning before the games begin.

"It's just people having fun," Mike says. "There's nowhere in the world you could go to watch a three-day event for two dollars."

Fun and affordability are the keys to the Mule Festival's success. Many of the events that take place on Saturday and Sunday are exactly that: fun. The "back-to-back" event puts two riders on a saddleless mule. The first team to successfully switch places without touching the ground wins. A steady mule that won't mind a person fumbling over its hindquarters is crucial to a successful team. More skittish mules leave their riders in the dust when the contortions get too rowdy.

For a few of the events, it's not hard to imagine the skills on display in real life scenarios, despite how zany they are to watch in the arena. The egg-and-spoon race requires balance and a steady steed if the egg is going to stay in the spoon, which happens to be in the





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rider's mouth. Then, there's a mounted version of musical chairs called "musical carpets." When the music stops, the riders race to get their mules to the nearest three-by-three patch of carpet that's been placed around the arena. The rider has to dismount and make it onto the square and, as in the childhood game, the last one on a square is eliminated.

Other festival competitions have clear ties to life on a farm. Friday night is filled with more traditional rodeo events, only executed by mule rather than horse. The team sorting event puts two riders, this time on separate mules, up to the task of herding specific calves out of a scared bunch. Roping is a sim-

ilar idea—only the calf is alone, racing across the arena at a breakneck speed, and looking for anywhere to go that's away from the rider.

And then, there is the one event that typifies the mule's stubbornness but also its self-preserving smarts—the mule jump. A long metal pole is suspended from two posts, and the mules engage in a sort of reverse limbo, each round jumping higher and higher to clear the pole. But despite their owners prodding, pulling, screaming, pleading, and cajoling, some mules know their limits and simply will not budge if they think they might get hurt. Two things make mule jumping fun to watch: the ridiculous heights some of these mules can hurdle and the ridiculous lengths to which some mule-owners will go just to coax a mule into jumping over a bar.

A Partnership Built on Trust

Colton Weldon's trusted mount, Surprise, has practiced many of these events beforehand. Colton rides her regularly on his farm in central Iowa, running down calves or hunting coyotes and raccoons. He says he rode horses for most of his life until the day his uncle gave him Surprise.

"I've got a horse, and I don't like her," Colton says.

Surprise won him over almost immediately. Colton talks about her with a smile that gives away their connection.

"That just comes from using them, working them," he says. "You've gotta get in there and rope a baby and drag him up to the house. I tell you what, you better be riding something you can operate and handle."

Among all the mules and mule owners, their relationship stands out as one of steadfast trust and mutual respect.

A Community of Mules

The thirty-year history of the Clark County Mule Festival is largely contained in a corrugated tin building in the middle of the festival grounds. T-shirts from years gone by are for sale in various sizes and colors. Old buttons are on display alongside handbills and faded pictures.

Mike says in the early days, the town of Kahoka looked at the mule riders with some uncertainty.

"The first couple years, everybody laughed at it or didn't know what we were doing," he says. After a few years, however, the community came around: "It's just a ton of involvement—total community involvement."

Student groups now pick up trash on the grounds, host fish dinners, and park cars. In town, homemade signs advertising yard sales litter the streets and tempt visitors with hand-me-down treasures. The otherwise sleepy town is abuzz the week of the Clark County Mule Festival.

Mike says family reunions are planned around the festival, and families are started there, too. Mike's daughter attended her first Mule Festival before she turned one month old. In 2012, Richard and Evelyn Van

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De Kerckhove got married on the festival grounds, and the festival has been their anniversary celebration ever since.

Dottie Tonnie's funnel cakes are another tradition at the festival. As she fries the dough, she does as much catching up with old friends as she does cooking. Although she may not remember everyone's name, she says the faces are familiar and they make her job fun.

Dottie shakes a freshly fried funnel cake. Grease glistens as it hits the metal counter top. The hot soft cake splits apart, and Dottie scolds herself for the error but finds a way to make it positive. Glancing at the customer, an old regular, she says, "She's going to say, 'You've got to break it to eat it anyway.'"

Dottie dusts the cake with powdered sugar, which covers the split in the cake and fills the little trailer with fine white dust.

"Alright, I kind of broke it," Dottie says, admitting her error as she hands the cake through a little door in the trailer's screen.

"That's alright. We'll break it anyhow." Across the arena, a new generation of cowboys and cowgirls are practicing barrel racing and roping in a rough corral. The mules are patient with the children, who are eager to learn what they see in the ring. Some are already riding on their family farms, while



others only get a chance at country living this week, when they visit family at the Mule Festival.

The Steadiness of the Mule

Colton Weldon doesn't need to prove his trust in Surprise.

"I could walk off, go eat, and she'd stay right here," he says.

Instead, Colton hoists himself from the saddle and stands on her back. Then, he points his toe, connecting with the saddle horn that juts from the front of the seat. Arms extended, he lifts himself onto one toe and smirks with satisfaction.

Surprise barely bats an eye. Her straw-colored tail swats a fly away, but her rust-brown hindquarters don't even twitch as Colton low-

ers himself back down to her saddle. He settles himself into a reclined position and crosses his legs like he's a guest on a late-night talk show.

"She's a superstar in her own right," Colton says as he smirks. "She knows she's cool."

And just like Surprise, the Clark County Mule Festival is steady. For the past three decades, it has been a constant in the lives of the hard-working people who live in northeast Missouri. But it has also slowly grown from a handful of trail riders to a jam-packed weekend of family fun, touched with just enough rowdy roughness to remind visitors of the Western frontier that gave the mule, and Missouri, its proud legacy.

The festival has a steady presence, much like the mule itself—dependable, a little quirky, and a whole lot of fun.



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**Thirtieth Annual
Clark County
Mule Festival**
September 18 to 20
Clark County Fairgrounds
Highway 136, Kahoka

The festival kicks off when the vendors open at 8 AM on Friday and events start later in the afternoon. Events are held throughout the weekend until Sunday night when the arena race closes out the festival. Admission is \$2 person. Children under ten are free. Camping is available. Visit clarkcountymulefestival.com or call Mike Schantz at 660-866-2330 for more information.

