There is a Big Hitch event in the Central Valley of California that is becoming an almost annual event because of a small group of dedicated teamsters. These teamsters have one common goal – keeping the tradition of pulling old farm equipment with equine power alive and passing along this valuable information to the next generation. In a world of technological advances and abundant gadgets, these old traditions are becoming a lost art among the present generation.

I was invited to follow this event for four days in late June which was organized by Luke Messenger, who has been driving for more than sixteen years. I met Luke and some of the other teamsters at various events and heard all the talk about the Big Hitch in the Central Valley. I was thrilled to attend and watch the process of working a big hitch.

I first wondered how the idea of this particular hitch started. According to Messenger, “In 2008, George Cabral started working with the Schandoney Equalizing Hitch. Later that year, Antique Caterpillar Machine Owners Club (ACMOC) asked George to put together a mule team to pull a 1904 Holt, a ground-driven hill-side combine.” Ground driven equipment refers to the power for the operation of the equipment being provided by the draft of the animals – no engine power.

For the 2008 Hitch, George Cabral provided the expertise in hooking the mules. Gene Hilti, an expert in the art of big hitches, also made valuable contributions since he understood the nuances of the Schandoney Hitch. And Paul Reno, an important part of the team, was the one who collected and restored the Schandoney Hitch that was used for the Big Hitch in 2008. The group of teamsters successfully hooked twenty-seven mules to the combine that year.

“There were many helpers that year and I was one of them…and I always found myself under a mule. There were many owners who helped and contributed to the effort - no one owner supplied more than four mules. And most of the mules had never worked together before, making it a meaningful experience,” Messenger adds.

In 2011, Messenger was asked by ACMOC to put together thirty-two mules to pull the same combine, as part of the Best Show on Tracks. Messenger agreed to organize the hitch only if Cabral and Hilti assisted in the effort. That year, Messenger, Cabral, and Hilti took turns driving thirty-three mules – a memory cherished for
all involved. The partnership with Cabral passed along a wealth of knowledge to all involved in those hitches. The beloved Cabral passed away in 2014, and fortunately some of his expertise has been passed down to the next generation of teamsters trying to keep the tradition alive.

In recent years, Messenger has assembled three hitches – 2012 Satley CA Hitch, 2014 Hennigan Farms Hitch, and the hitch I attended - the 2017 Stoney Creek Shire Ranch Hitch. The 2017 Hitch was targeting a hitch of thirty-three horses and mules pulling a sixteen foot disc but the heat became an obstacle in achieving that goal. The teamsters and animals had to endure heat of 110-115 degrees through most of the week. Because of the forecasted heat, there were many cancellations. It was a bit disappointing for those who organized the event but there was a lot of knowledge and expertise still to be shared among the group. The hitch ultimately succeeded in hitching seventeen mules and four horses. The group of teamsters included Luke Messenger, Rick Edney (recent World Champion at Bishop Mule Days), Norm Noftsier and Mary Jo Steele (with about 25+ years of driving experience), Nolan Darnell (with approximately 25 years of driving experience), Ben Dubose (with 30-40 years of driving experience), Larry Jacobs, Margie Macke, Jon Mettler, and Stan Marriott. My estimate is about 130+ years of driving experience in the group. But total driving experience does not really count in the big picture since big hitch work is different from driving a team.

Many of us are acquainted with the big hitches used to haul freight – like the Borax mule teams and the Big Hitch in Alberta, Canada. Many of the working freight hitches used 10-ups and 12-ups (pairs of horses in tandem). To pull the farm equipment, the Schandoney Hitch was utilized because it was designed to equalize the loads among spans of six abreast. Additionally the six abreast spans allowed more horses and/or mules to be used in close proximity to the driver allowing for better control and turning capability in the field. And the turning capability is a very important factor in the field.

As Messenger notes, “The challenge with hooking up the Schandoney hitch is timing and tuning all the animals to work as one unit. Once all the adjustments have been made, the hook-up is relatively quick and the operation is very smooth.”

He also added, “When we first start to assemble these hitches, we usually have some animals that have not worked together and many of them have never worked six abreast. We are very mindful of safety for both man and beast. With that said, we begin by working groups of six abreast with the leaders in the front. We always use a safety measure to stop the team if needed. This year we used a ten-foot hydraulic disc. Other times, we have simply pulled a heavy truck.”

As the spans of six are worked and tweaked, the teamsters get a better

Emma Riley and Rick Edney bringing in the mules after a long, hot day of driving.
idea of what order each span will have in the hitch. Usually the better behaved and mature animals will be near the front. Once the spans are “trained to drive six abreast”, the teamsters hook all the spans together. Initially the teamsters have lines on every span and enough drivers on the cart to handle the lines.

As time progresses and adjustments are made, Messenger begins to take lines off one span at a time. This allows him time to focus on the individual spans and get them adjusted the best he can. Proudly Messenger states, “By Saturday, we were driving only the leaders. We had lines on the wheel span as a safety precaution, but they were held slack.”

There are a few recurring problems that have to be addressed for each hitch. Rick Edney also adds, “We don’t get the opportunity to perform these hitches often enough. One forgets so much in a couple years and sometimes we spend valuable time solving similar problems that we had on previous hitches.”

Asked how he deals with problem or challenging animals, Messenger shared, “We usually have at least one or two mules that have very limited or sometimes no experience. I always find this challenge to be the most rewarding and it’s an excellent time to introduce an animal to this type of work. If they are tied in correctly, they can throw their fits and it only affects them. It is wonderful to see how quickly they figure it out.”

The heat was also a huge challenge this year but it is always a slow process getting the animals acquainted with the hitch so that helps the animals cope with the heat. As a bonus for enduring the heat, the hosts Earl and Vickie Strand took many of the guests out to Stoney Creek for wagon and horse rides at sunset. The Strands have been raising Shire draft horses for the past fifteen years at their ranch in Orland, California. And the heat we endured created some beautiful sunsets for all to enjoy!

From my perspective, this was living history at its best and I was never prouder to be a part of this group and watch it evolve over a four day period. It will be interesting to follow this group over the next decade or two. As Rick Edney sums it up, “I have been involved with four big hitches with my first one mentored by Cabral and Hilti. They possessed a huge wealth of knowledge and always had an answer for any questions that arose. They are both gone now along with our safety net, so it is up to us to keep educating ourselves and keep the hitch going.”