

MULES IN THE GRAND CANYON, THE LAST RIDE

By Terry Wagner



Hermits Trail

The Bright Angel Trail descends off the south rim of the Grand Canyon to the Colorado River, as it has since ancient Indians used it for access to dependable water sources deep in the canyon. Improved by modern man for over a hundred years, it has been a source of controversy every since the first white man saw the intrinsic value of the Grand Canyon as a tourist attraction. The Bright Angel trail was fought over by miners, muleskinners, politicians, railroads, private enterprises and finally, the National Park Service (NPS). Each entity has claimed to know what is best for the trail. Each entity fought to promote its use of the trail, and at the same time, to claim a great stewardship for the preservation of the Bright Angel Trail. In the final analysis, it all comes down to money and the control of a resource.

Make no mistake about it; the Bright Angel Trail is a resource, and a big one, as over 200,000 people a year march down its stony path in an effort to seek the alleged inner piece to be gained from a personal trip into the Grand Canyon. That's an average of 547 people a day on a trail about nine miles in length. At the same time, about 8,000 people a year take a trip down the same trail on the back of mule. Not exactly

a remote wilderness. But it is a colossal traffic jam. I am not wanting to take anything away from the splendor of the Grand Canyon, but I am trying to point out that the removal of the mules from the canyon is one of control, control of a natural resource, control of money, control of people and who can utilize it, and in the end, the imposition of the will of one group over another.

As previously reported by *Western Mule Magazine*, the environmental assessment of the cross-corridor trails, and the mule use of those trails has been completed. By the time you read this, the final, official, date for submission of public comments will have passed and a final determination of stock use may have been announced. *Western Mule Magazine* reported the entire results of the environmental assessment in the April 2010 issue. Please refer to that issue for details of the assessment.

For decades, the mules have been the most famous national and international ambassadors and draw for visitors to the Grand Canyon. Even if a visitor didn't ride a mule at the canyon, they had their photos taken at the mule barn of the south rim, with the mules visible in the background.

It has been over a year and half since *Western Mule Magazine* broke the news to

the world, that the long-standing symbol of the Grand Canyon, the mules, was in jeopardy of being removed from the popular south rim trails. Casey Murph, a long time Grand Canyon mule wrangler, brought this information to the attention of *Western Mule Magazine* editor, Ben Tennison, after Casey was party to a meeting with the National Park Service. In this meeting Bill Allen, NPS Trail maintenance supervisor, told him that the South Kaibab Trail would be closed to stock use for a period of three to four years, while that trail underwent a major reconstruction. According to Casey, Allen further stated, over the course of three more meetings, that when the work on the South Kaibab Trail was completed, the Bright Angel Trail would be closed to the mules while it too received a major overhaul. Following that, the commercial use of mules would be removed from the Bright Angel Trail forever. At the time, Casey was the manager of the mule concession on the south rim of the Grand Canyon, for the concession owner, the Xanterra Corporation.

Everything that Casey said has come to pass. In the process of writing four articles, and now a fifth one on the Grand Canyon, for *Western Mule Magazine*, I have had more than one in depth conversation with

Casey. Casey lives on a cow outfit that he and his family have in northern Arizona. Located a stones throw from the sprawling Navajo Nation, Casey recently told me that he misses not having the Grand Canyon mules to wake up too in the morning.

Western Mule Magazine protected Casey as the source of information for the original article regarding the canyon mules, until Casey advised that it was okay to use his name. Casey told me that he was fired by Xanterra, after he wrote a letter to the editor of one of the largest equine publications in the United States, and that editor sent the letter to the superintendent of the Grand Canyon National Park. That publication has never written one line in defense of the Grand Canyon Mules, that I am aware of.

One thing Casey maintained from the beginning was that the daylong mule ride on the Bright Angel Trail, and the most affordable for the average family, would never return once it was removed. The environmental assessment as reported in the April issue of this magazine, illustrated five choices that were the result of the assessment. The first one, which was a choice of no change, was obviously not even a consideration. The long, expensive process of

the environmental assessment was not going to go forward, and no changes take place in the mule use in the canyon. All four of the remaining choices of action, provided for no daylong ride on the Bright Angel Trail. That ride is gone forever, just as Casey predicted.

During the time the assessment was being completed, I also spoke with Max Johnson. For many years Max was a packer at the canyon, packing supplies down the canyon every day to Phantom Ranch, the lodge operated on the banks of Bright Angel Creek, by Xanterra Corporation, at the bottom of the canyon. Max told me that he left the canyon because in his opinion, Xanterra Corporation had little or no interest in the mule concession or the people they hired to run it. He compared their lack of concern to treating the wranglers like second class citizens. Max said between that and the obvious dislike for the mules by the current NPS administration at the canyon, the mules were doomed.

While we waited for the outcome of the environmental assessment, I learned just how far and wide the mule issues at the Grand Canyon had spread. I began to find postings on the internet from private par-

ties, all supporting the mules in the canyon, including support from hikers. I found only a small handful of nay Sayers. Some people have decided to take the bull by the horns and do something extraordinary to help the mules at the canyon. Laurie Burg, a lady concerned about the future of the mules at the Grand Canyon contacted me in March and expressed her dismay at the possibility of the mules being removed from the Canyon. Laurie explained that she was neither a mule owner nor horse owner. She went on to say that she had taken the mule ride down the Grand Canyon last November, thoroughly enjoying herself in the process. Although dismayed to find out that the South Kaibab Trail was off limits to the mules, due to the trail construction, she said the wranglers, and the mules themselves, made it an unforgettable experience.

Laurie's experience with the ride led her to start researching the Grand Canyon mule ride. She found volumes of information about the environmental assessment, and the various postings about the mules, wranglers, Xanterra, and the NPS. She learned that there seemed to be an undercurrent that wanted to remove the mules from the canyon, and found negative remarks posted

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by hikers, making disparaging remarks about those who rode the mules into the canyon, were somehow, lower class people.

Because of her very positive experience on the mule ride, Laurie decided to take a stand. She formed a Facebook group as a support to the wranglers and mules at the Grand Canyon. It didn't take long to acquire over a hundred members, and as this is being written there are almost 300 members and I would bet a good Barlow pocket knife that there will be way over 300 members by the time you read this.

Laurie is obviously a determined lady, as she has videos on her page that debunks the alleged hoof damage done to the trails by the mules, and sets straight much of the misinformation floating around out there about the mules and the Grand Canyon. The very positive image people have of the Grand Canyon mules is expressed throughout that Facebook site. I have to designate Laurie as a true *mule trail angel*, and encourage everyone to join Laurie and her group's efforts to support the Grand Canyon mules and their continued use in Grand Canyon.

The NPS, as part of the second phase of public input that was required as part of the assessment process, held three meetings in March 2010. I attended the meeting held in Flagstaff, Arizona. Casey Murph rode to the meeting with me, and we met Jim Higgs and his wife Gail, at the meeting location. Jim is active with the Back Country Horsemen of America in Arizona. This meeting was slightly different than the one we attended in June of 2009. The layout of the room was similar, with murals depicting various aspects of the environmental assessment and the options contained therein. Unlike the last meeting, there was a projector set up showing various aspects of the mule issue and the fine points of the assessment.

One thing that was really different was the lack of attendance. The first meeting I attended in June 2008, was attended by at least fifty or more people, and representatives of all the local Flagstaff media. For those of you not familiar with Flagstaff, it is a major university town, with a fairly hefty population. It has a large environmentally sensitive community and lots of "friends of the canyon." I doubt there were more than 25 people in attendance at this second meeting, outside of the folks from the NPS, and no local media persons were present. There were two meetings prior to

the one I attended: one at the canyon itself and one in Kanab, Utah. Circling around the room and listening to the discussions between the NPS people and the attendees, it was obvious that mule supporters seemed to outnumber the mule detractors. In fact, at both meetings I attended, I expected to see a strong showing by environmental groups opposed to the mules being ridden in the Grand Canyon. At the first meeting, a former canyon wrangler made the comment that with the current park administration being what it is, there is no reason for the environmentalist to turn out as they already know the outcome of the whole process.

At this second meeting, after a period of time, that allowed those in attendance to mingle, Rachel Bennett took the center stage and gave a short introduction to the environmental assessment process. Rachel is an Environmental Protection Specialist with the NPS at the Grand Canyon, and the one most responsible for putting the assessment together. Following Rachel's opening remarks Steve Martin, superintendent of the Grand Canyon National Park (GCNP), took center stage and presented a talk on behalf of the NPS and environmental assessment. He explained the problems with mules in the canyon as he saw it, and the problems with money needed to maintain trails for mule use. One thing he cited was the millions of dollars of deferred trail maintenance in the canyon. Deferred maintenance means we need to fix something, but we don't have the money, so the project gets put under the deferred category, supposedly for future work when the money becomes available.

At this, Martin said he would take questions from the floor. One person asked Martin if he had any personal experience with mules. Martin said that he had thousands of miles of experience with mules in the NPS. His implication was that he was not opposed to mule use in the canyon. He went on to say that it was not possible to work in the canyon without the aid of mules, especially in performing trail maintenance. He cited the economic advantage of using mules over helicopters due to the extremely high hourly cost of operating a helicopter. I am sure his comments about the mules being the most efficient way to maintain the trails was correct.

I don't mean to take anything away from Steve Martin's comments, but I have researched hundreds of articles and stories re-

garding the Grand Canyon. Throughout those articles I have found photos of Mr. Martin hiking in the canyon, and interviews of the man explaining how the mules are a problem from the standpoint of maintenance to manure removal to please hikers. However, I have never found a photo of him riding a mule down the canyon, or an interview of him defending the Grand Canyon mule ride.

Comments were made from members of the audience regarding hiker education and what to do when encountering livestock on the trail and several people noted their positive interactions with hikers while riding mules in the canyon. One person, who had been a resident of the canyon for over thirty-two years, expressed his concern for trail damage caused by the mules, claiming they added to erosion by creating a trough for water to run down, thus enhancing the erosion of the trails. As the man talked, I thought of how he failed to mention such things as soil content, tread make up, or the angle and declination of the trail where he noticed the erosion. All of this has an impact on the maintenance issues of a trail. The same gentleman made note that there is a connecting trail to that area, not open to stock use, and has almost no maintenance issues and no erosion. Another individual familiar with the area pointed out that the eroded portion being referred to is a steep downhill area, while the foot path was a flat trail next to a creek.

Other comments were heard regarding complaints of conflicts between hikers and mule riders. Written material put forward by the NPS always alludes to hiker complaints about the mules. In regard to that, I have asked NPS personnel how many complaints about the mules they receive each year. It's interesting that no one can give me an overall number. Either the NPS is not keeping records of that, or the number is truly unknown.

I asked that question of Bill Allen at the meeting in June 2009. Bill as you recall is the trail maintenance supervisor for the canyon. Bill told me he hears only a little handful of such complaints a year. At this meeting I asked the same question of a young NPS employee who works for Bill Allen. I asked how many complaints he had received from hikers, in the last year, complaining about the mules in any form. He answered two that he could recall. I then told him my take on the question. First off, no one really knows, and for a large part,

the number is probably exaggerated. He asked how that could be, and I told him that I would bet money that a NPS employee gets two complaints and he tells four people about it. Those four tell four more and now the number changes to eight complaints and by the time it gets repeated time and again, the two become two hundred. This is called the gossip telegraph system and it is very much alive in government service and large corporations all over the country. And I'll bet money from what I have heard, that the gossip mill works overtime at the south rim, and what you do in the morning will beat you home by supper time.

The young man countered that he was positive more complaints were made to the park administration. It's just my opinion, but I believe that most people don't have the intestinal fortitude to make a direct complaint to the park superintendent about a mule issue, unless they receive a physical injury and couldn't get in his office to do so.

The displays put up by the NPS personnel at the meeting included a number of photographs depicting trail work under way at various places along the corridor trails.

The corridor trails are, basically, the Bright Angel Trail, the North and South Kaibab Trails, and several connecting trails, a total distance of about thirty-one miles. A photo being placed on the display boards, at that meeting, leads one to believe that the work being done is the result of damage caused by the mules on the trail. One person more familiar with the trails pointed out to me a set of photos taken on the South Kaibab Trail, explaining that the area depicted in the photo washes out every year due to melting snow and not due to mules on the trail. I am sure the NPS was only trying to show how trail maintenance was done on the trails, but a lack of more information makes the NPS suspect in the minds of the public when something like this is pointed out.

During conversations with Casey Murph, I was told that prior to the current administration, trail maintenance was under the supervision of Dan Blackwell. Casey said that during all the years Blackwell was directing the trail maintenance at the canyon there was never talk about the mule being responsible for trail damage and erosion. Blackwell's people took care of the trail, work was done as needed and there was a good working relationship between the wranglers, who were on the trails everyday, and

the NPS trail crews. As soon as Bill Allen arrived, Casey said that all of a sudden the mules were responsible for all the problems. In light of this, I have noticed throughout the meetings I have attended and articles I have read, the current administration keeps accusing the park administrations of the past "sixty years" of not providing the required maintenance, or that they only applied "band aids." For some reason, there appears to be a problem here. Have all the previous park administrators, for sixty years, been negligent in their trail maintenance programs?

During the course of researching and writing about the GCNP and its administration, one old truism keeps popping its head up, and that is an organization, be it private or public reflects the ideas and ideals of the person in charge of it. Steve Martins influence in the mule issue is unmistakable. Martin made reference to his experience with mules, stating that he had thousands of miles of mule experience with the NPS. I may have missed something, but I had the feeling, as did others in the room, that his efforts to portray himself as a friend of the mule ride was less than sincere.

Further, I have been told, that from the very beginning of his administration that he was against the mules being in the canyon. This supposedly came to light, when in 2007, shortly after he took over the reins of the GCNP, he had what he considered a bad experience with a mule wrangler who was guiding a group of mule riders in the canyon. The incident resulted in Martin expressing his dislike for the mules and the wrangler, Phillip Zanesky, losing his job, even though the wrangler's actions were reported to Xanterra as being justified in the interest of safety of his mule riders. This incident has been widely disseminated by former Xanterra wranglers and on the internet. I would hope that Mr. Martin is more mature than to let something like this influence his decision to interpret the NPS General Management Plan as justification, at this time, to put the mule use in the canyon under the microscope.

Another issue that raises its head after looking into the mule use in the canyon is a lack of information of any kind indicating that the NPS is looking for any additional funding for trail maintenance at the canyon. If they are, they aren't telling anyone about it. There are all kinds of private organizations giving money to the NPS for all kinds of projects. The Grand Canyon Association

has given truckloads of money to the NPS for educational purposes over the years. Yet, I don't see much in the way of initiative on the part of the NPS to solicit any monetary help from outside sources for trail work.

Volunteers for trail work, as a way of deferring costs, seems to be minimal. There are over fifty full time and seasonal employees assigned to trail work during the good weather months at the canyon. I understand, from Bill Allen, there is a small group of volunteers from the Flagstaff area that help with trail work. There is a very active chapter of the Back Country Horseman of America, in Coconino County, which is the county wherein a big part of the Grand Canyon is located. I have been told by Jim Higgs, coordinator for that BCHA chapter that they have only been approached one time to assist at the Grand Canyon. On that occasion they were asked if they could help paint a barn at the south rim. Higgs told me that the BCHA have never been asked to help with trail work at the Grand Canyon, yet they are a group certified to perform trail work by government agencies. Granted the major overhaul of the South Kaibab Trail may require full time employees to perform, but there are numerous other trail maintenance projects the BCHA could perform. Manure and urine pool control being just one of those jobs, besides clearing rocks, and packing out trash.

Several years ago the Xanterra Corporation started a four man trail crew that according to Casey Murph, were to spend their time clearing the trails of debris, manure and urine pools. However, Casey said it was only a short time before they were doing actual repairs to the trails. Casey said when a wrangler had a minor trail repair they felt was a safety issue, it was much faster to get the Xanterra crew out to effect the repairs than to wait for Bill Allen to get the work done.

When it comes to the proper utilization of trail maintenance funds, I asked NPS personnel about that at the meeting. I was assured the due to the bare bones funding available to the NPS administration, every effort was being made to get the most return for every dollar spent. I am sure that response was made in good faith, and for some people at the NPS, I am sure they follow that rule.

However, while I was at the meeting, I recalled a story that was related to me several months ago. As the story was told, back

in the 1990's, Bill Allen came into a wind-fall of extra money for the trails. So, the decision was made by him, or someone on his side, to construct a new bike trail on the rim. The trail apparently was over built, and the funds ran out before the trail was completed. The trail ended up coming to an abrupt halt next to a juniper tree. The trail, as it was related to me, came to be called the "trail to nowhere." Now, what happened to the concern for the millions of dollars in deferred trail projects that have supposedly been sitting in the wings for years? The person relating the story does not know if the trail has ever been completed.

Speaking of money, the Xanterra South Rim LLC, the official name for the Xanterra enterprises on the south rim to which the mule concession belongs, has been the silent entity throughout this process. Some say that is because they don't want to incur the wrath of the NPS and endanger their contracts. I might add that Xanterra is a giant company with 7,000 employees nationwide and the operator of the guest concessions at the biggest national parks in the country. It is almost as though they are the major national parks.

However, anyone who has fed very many head of livestock knows the costs involved. Xanterra has about 150 mules at the canyon they are feeding, numerous wranglers on the payroll, insurance to pay (not cheap in Arizona), workman's compensation and other employee expenses, not to mention building and vehicle maintenance associ-

ated with the mules. All this is supposed to come out of the approximately one million dollars a year the mules generate in gross income. A tough deal in any ones back yard to be sure. It just may be that the demise of the commercial use of mules at the canyon may be a savings to Xanterra. This is something that has never been discussed. Why haven't we heard something from Xanterra, or are they just going with the NPS flow?

It was pointed out to me at the second Flagstaff meeting, that there is nothing left to do to implement any of the five options in the environmental assessment. It has already been done, and as one person put it, "the signage is already up." The popular day ride for the mules is gone from the Bright Angel Trail, and the only thing left is the ride to Phantom Ranch and the rim ride referred to in the options, is already going. The selection of an option is just a formality to reinforce what is already in play.

One thing that seems to have survived the process is the private stock use in the canyon. Although somewhat limited in scope, under all options, small groups will still be able to get a permit to ride the corridor trails.

In spite of everything, I have come to have great respect for many of the NPS employees. The GCNP Public Affairs office is great to deal with. They perform their assigned task in a very professional and efficient manner. During the meeting I had the great pleasure of getting to talk at some length with Rachel Bennett, the young lady

who wrote the environmental assessment. After talking with her, I came to the conclusion that she is a very competent professional and organized person. She is obviously very enthused about her work, and her position with the GCNP, and I have no doubt that the environmental assessment was produced in accordance with the instructions she received, as compelled by the National Environmental Policy Act. However, the final document fails to quote any studies that verify trail damage by mules or hikers. If it exists, it must not have been made available for inclusion in the final draft.

Now what happens? I can't help but refer back to what long time Grand Canyon mule wrangler Harry Barnson said, "The only answer is to designate a trail for mules only." No where is that a consideration or even talked about by the NPS. Why not? That may, in the long run, be the only answer. The number of hikers on the cross-corridor trails is only going to increase. Put 200,000 hikers on any trail and they are going to create maintenance problems in their own right. Why not a trail just for mules, even if only for part of the year!

There are trails that have previous commercial mule use history, the Hermits Rest Trail is one of them, and the Grand View Trail another. History has created a large group of people who want to ride a mule into the inner canyon, below the rim, either because they can't hike down those hot trails in the summer, or they just prefer that mode of transportation. Whatever the reason, they want to descend into the canyon on mules. Using the Hermits Rest Trail as an example, the historical facts of the trail is that the railroad built the visitor center, and improved the Old Miners Trail for mule use, and it was operated by the Fred Harvey Company, starting in 1911. The undertaking was an effort to offer a mule ride into the canyon without paying the toll required to use the Bright Angel Trail at that time. The NPS got control over the Bright Angel Trail in 1924, and the mules were moved from the Hermits Rest Trail to the Bright Angel Trail in 1931. A camp was built at Hermits Creek for the guests to stay overnight. I understand there are some remnants of the camp still there. Currently there is a campground at Hermits Creek. The trail is about 8.9 miles long, but only about 7.8 miles to Hermits Creek.

It is not out of the realm of possibility that a tent lodge could be placed at Hermits



Creek for the mule riders to spend overnights in, and day rides to other parts of the trail could be offered as well. This could be offered for the period of May through November, then the camp packed out and the area allowed to rehab itself during the winter months. During this time the trail would be closed to hikers, and then reopened to them during the winter and early spring months. This kind of mule ride could be run with fewer mules and personnel and still provide an overnight adventure for those wanting a real wilderness experience in the old west tradition.

The Hermits trail has several interconnecting trails that are also possibilities. It seems there are options here that haven't been explored, or if they have been, there has been no public discussion of it. Shorter day ride locations are also available. This would obviously take some work and money. But, if a trail can be built to "no where," anything is possible.

In my research, I have learned that one wrangler and fifteen pack mules have been killed on the South Kaibab Trail. Former wranglers have expressed their concern over the safety of taking inexperienced riders down the South Kaibab Trail due to the steepness of the trail. They feel it is safe going up, but not down. The wrangler who was killed was a Fred Harvey employee who got off his mule to adjust a packsaddle and the mule bumped him off the trail. I have been told that the pack mules were killed in the same fashion. An inexperienced pack mule will move up along side another pack mule and push him off the trail. This type of accident was explained to me as one of the biggest fears of the wranglers, and it's a possibility for a hiker. Why not eliminate this issue, before it becomes the excuse to remove the commercial use of the mules in the inner canyon? Give the mules their designated trail. There are choices here for this that hasn't been part of the discussion to date.

By the time you see this; the official time for public input will have long passed. However, by the wording of chapter one in the environmental assessment, the NPS can make any changes they see fit, at any time they want in the mule concession. It is never too late to make the will of the public known about the Grand Canyon mules.

In conclusion, I have reported here what has happened to date, and information that "twas told to me." I have also related my own observations of facts and those ex-



One of the beautiful sights on Hermits Trail.

plained to me by others more knowledgeable about the GCNP than I am. The NPS will always have to use their mules in the trail maintenance. However, the commercial use of mules in the canyon, as they have been used for over a hundred years, is coming to an end. Why not lobby for a fresh new century of commercial mule use in the Grand Canyon National Park?

Also, there was one glorious moment in the months that have passed. That came when a NPS employee made a passing and innocent comment that I have to quote, "The mules could change again, with funding or a new park administration." PRICELESS!!

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