

Colby



Colby Magazine

Volume 90
Issue 1 *Winter 2001*

Article 12

January 2001

The Last Page

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Recommended Citation

Collins, Stephen (2001) "The Last Page," *Colby Magazine*: Vol. 90: Iss. 1, Article 12.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.colby.edu/colbymagazine/vol90/iss1/12>

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the last page

a many-mule team

By Stephen Collins '74

Leo Pando, staff illustrator for *Colby* magazine, is a talented artist who combines a discriminating eye with a bold graphic style. Owner and rider of Navajo, a young pinto mare that boards in the stable just across the highway from the campus, he is also an experienced horseman.

Between vocation and avocation, it's no surprise that Leo knows about rendering equine species. (Render as in drawing, not gluemaking.) It is his opinion that, over the years, Colby illustrators have been as unkind to the vaunted White Mule as irascible muleskinners were to the hardworking species by which they earned their livings. There's too much contrariness in the mule's historical stereotyped, Leo maintains, and there's too much donkey cuteness in most depictions of the Colby mule.

Leo rarely tires of talking about horses, and he throws away lines like "I rode a Percheron once; it was like riding a bus." So when he says mules have gotten a bum rap, you can bet there's some truth in it. Indeed, a survey of recent literature reveals that mules are hardier, stronger and more industrious than horses. They are far more sensible insofar as they won't overeat or drink too much (students take note). If they get stuck in the mud, instead of panicking like a horse they merely relax and wait for help.

A mule is the offspring of a male donkey (aka a jackass) and a female horse (a mare). The reverse—the offspring of a female donkey (aka a jenny) and a stallion—is called a hinny, but unless you know the parents, hinnies can't be told from mules. Though they have an odd number of chromosomes thanks to their mixed parentage and, hence, cannot reproduce, mules are among a handful of animal species that could come back from extinction, so long as there are horses and donkeys around.

In the middle half of the 20th century, the mechanical tractor all but extinguished America's mule population. Almost six million existed in 1925, but it took a minor mule revival to bring numbers back up from historical lows to some 300,000 in the mid-1980s. By then recreational mule events included racing and rodeos and even dressage competitions. (The preferred mule race is 350 yards. Though mules have terrific acceleration, if pushed to run a mile they tend to stop in their tracks at the top of the homestretch. "They've run as far as they want to, and that's that," one mule fancier explained.)

At Colby the White Mule was adopted as the school's mascot after *Echo* editor Joseph Coburn Smith '24 suggested in a November 7, 1923, edito-

rial that the success of the football team had made its customary "dark horse" label obsolete. "Why should we not have a mascot, and what would make a better mascot than a little white mule?" he postulated, calling it "the antithesis of 'The Dark Horse.'"

Back then, with millions of mules in America, securing a white one in time for the Bates football game posed no great problem. Beating Bates was only somewhat harder; the newly dubbed Mules won 9-6 largely on the strength of their kicking game—a winning field goal and strong punting were reported.

But as the football team has had its ups and downs in the intervening years, so too its mascots. Currently there's a costume with a giant mule's head, known to students as "Morty." For many years a succession of true equine mascots bore the name "Ybloc," most of them, alas, donkeys rather than pure (or rather crossbred) mules. An early moniker for the mascot was "Aristotle."

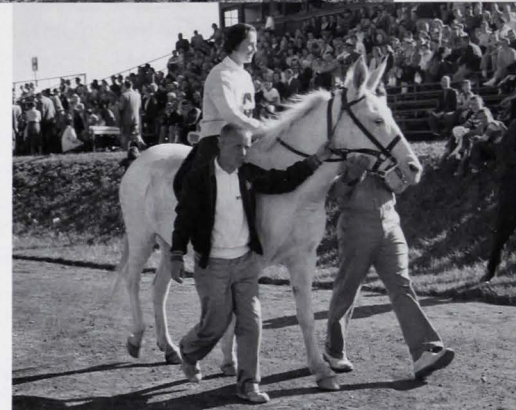
The most celebrated was a middle-aged Sicilian donkey named Louis, who arrived in Waterville (rail freight) in 1953. Louis, the Associated Press reported, came to Colby following a stage career in New York, during which he appeared on television with Jackie Gleason, Garry Moore and Arthur Godfrey. He even took a turn with the Metropolitan Opera as a cast member in *Aida*.

There was much ballyhoo about Louis's arrival for a homecoming game against the University of Maine that year. The outcome of the game received less notice. The fate of the donkey least of all. A curious document in the College's mule file suggests that Louis was traded in at a Winthrop stable the following year as little more than a downpayment on a real mule. Various benefactors (Colby's, not Louis's) contributed \$50 each to buy a white mule for \$296—\$250 in cash "with an allowance of \$46 for the donkey."

Of course Louis was, literally, a jackass. There may have been just cause for his abrupt dismissal. The files contain no rendering, so to speak, of his subsequent life, and there is nothing about his replacement.

Recent efforts by the dean of the College to change Colby's mascot to a moose were met with a general lack of enthusiasm, and this year the University of Maine at Augusta announced it would call its teams the Moose. "All hope is lost," said Dean Earl Smith. "We're stuck with a sterile mule."

So what does the new president make of all this?



In the long line of Mayflower Hill mascots, a true white mule (lower photo), shown taking a star turn at Seaverns Field, has been the exception. It says Colby, but the mascot in top photo is a donkey, not a mule. Admiring the impostor are, from left, an unidentified donkey handler; H. Ridgely Bullock, the late chairman of the Board of Trustees, former President William R. Cotter and Jim Cook '78.

Bro Adams, recently a Bison (Bucknell), formerly a Tiger (Colorado College), has no problem with the mule. "A mule is strong, steadfast, determined," he said. "It's good." Reviewing other NESCAC mascots—as banal as the Bates Bobcats and colorful as the Connecticut College Camel—Adams put the Mule at least in the middle of the pack. "Amherst is the Lord Jeffs," he said with unconcealed disdain. "It sounds like a British rock group from 1968." Picture Austin Powers as lead singer. And the Williams Ephmen, perhaps wearing fraternity cardigans and singing barbershop harmonies.

Did we mention the University of California at Santa Clara, where Adams got his Ph.D.? It boasts the Banana Slug as a mascot. "I admired the banana slug," Adams said. "A creature who has survived, though not one of great speed or grace perhaps."

While some may not embrace the mule as a mascot, true mule aficionados go one better. Lovelorn students should note an old saying that's posted at www.mule.com, a site maintained by the North American Saddle Mule Association. "Kiss a mule, cure a cold."

Try that with your banana slug.