



Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Mule South to Tractor South: Mules, Machines, and the Transformation of the Cotton South* by George B. Ellenberg

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Mule South to Tractor South: Mules, Machines, and the Transformation of the Cotton South by George B. Ellenberg. (Tuscaloosa: University Press of Alabama, 2007. Acknowledgements, introduction, conclusion, illustrations, notes, index. Pp. ix, 219. \$42.50 cloth.)

My father's favorite story about his family's mule was the one when John carried ten-year-old Ann to the mailbox, some half-mile distant, let her down off his neck, and proceeded to trot back to the house without waiting for her to finish checking the box. Or was it the one about the time his father thought he had killed recalcitrant John with a hastily-flung hammer when the mule decided to lean over while being shod? (John survived; he also stood ramrod straight at every subsequent shoeing.) It seems that everyone who grew up in the rural South before World War II has a favorite mule story, and, as Jerry Leath Mills has argued, every southern story has a dead mule in it. Despite its ubiquity in southern culture, the mule has not had its historian. George B. Ellenberg, an associate dean and associate professor of history at the University of West Florida, remedies this sad situation in his fine monograph.

The mule is a hybrid animal created by the mating of a male (jack) ass with a female (mare) horse; it cannot produce viable offspring. The preferred mode of farm power in the South for roughly a century, the mule was especially popular among staple crop farmers. Ellenberg argues that the mule's popularity followed the expansion of the cotton economy in the second third of the nineteenth century. Seeing mules as an improvement over the horses and oxen—they could be put to work younger, worked longer, harder and on lesser food than horses, and at greater speed than oxen; many also believed mules were smarter than either in the traces—planters believed mules to be the perfect draft animals for their to their slaves, whom, they believed, could not be trusted with more fragile stock. The postwar expansion of cotton agriculture and sharecropping only increased demand for mules. Cotton planters, however, relied largely on breeders outside the region for their mule supply largely because of the costs and intricacies of keeping and mating jacks and mares. Ellenberg ably reconstructs the trade networks that connected breeders in Kentucky, Missouri, and Texas, with the planters of the Cotton South, and explores both the economics and culture of mule trading.

Early twentieth-century agricultural reformers complained that planters' reliance on outside sources for mules added to the region's poverty and encouraged local mule production. However, Ellenberg argues, it was not until the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) sponsored programs in mule breeding in the 1920s and 1930s that rural southerners attempted to breed their own stock. At that point, however, it was already too late: the tractor was on its way into the fields. Or was it? In his most compelling chapter – drawn from a 2000 essay in *Agricultural History* – Ellenberg demonstrates that the appearance of small tractors in the 1930s and 1940s did not spell the immediate end of the South's relationship with the mule. Instead, southern cotton farmers continued to rely on mules for most of the work on the farm until the development of the mechanical cotton harvester made it possible for them to consolidate their landholdings. Like sharecroppers, mules had little place in the modern Cotton South. Indeed, as Ellenberg shows in his final chapter – this one drawn from a 1998 essay in *Agricultural History* – the disappearance of both at the same time was hardly accidental, but the product of cultural assumptions (many that explicitly linked mules and African Americans) about the place of either on the modern farm.

Ellenberg's respect for the mule and the southern rural world it represented is apparent throughout this work, but he never falls for romantic vision of the southern agrarian past or its assumption that modernization did nothing but harm to the fabric of southern society. One of the strengths of Ellenberg's work is that he picks up nicely on the bureaucratic tension within the USDA created by its dual missions of improving life for rural people and modernizing agriculture, a tension that, for example, had the department simultaneously supporting programs in mule breeding and tractor demonstration. Ellenberg, however, is not an apologist for the USDA, its programs, or the assumptions of agricultural modernization in general. He never flinches from demonstrating the wrenching changes on rural people's lives affected by state policy or the power agricultural elites—from tractor manufacturers to large planters—had in shaping these policies. What is most impressive about Ellenberg's work is the way he places the process of agricultural change squarely back in the hands of the people instead of forces. There was nothing inevitable about the disappearance of the southern mule, or the mechanization of southern agriculture in general; no unrelenting force of modernization

made planters or bureaucrats buy tractors (or chemicals or harvesters). They made choices based on their own circumstances and experiences—often very foolish, racist, and short-sighted choices, for sure—but their own choices nonetheless, a lesson rural historians of all stripes should take to heart.

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For Jobs and Freedom: Race and Labor in America Since 1865. By Robert H. Zieger. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007. Pp x. 276. \$37.50 cloth.)

Only a few years ago, the subject of race and labor constituted a historiographical minefield. Scholarship and politics mingled freely, with the latter often informing and, in some instances, shaping the former. Few works in the field escaped the spotlight shined upon them by Herbert Hill, the polemical industrial relations scholar who harshly condemned and dismissed many studies for failing his litmus test of condemning union racial practices. The so-called Hill-Gutman debate, launched by Hill following the death of social historian Herbert Gutman, unfortunately framed—and polarized—the field for many years. From a somewhat different vantage point, whiteness studies took labor history to task for its supposed ignoring or downplaying of race. Contentiousness, to put it mildly, was rife.

Under such inauspicious circumstances, could synthesis even be possible? The answer, it turns out, is yes. An abundance of solid case studies of African-American workers and trade union race relations, much of it nuanced and sophisticated, belied the accusations of Hill and the whiteness crowd and provided an empirical foundation essential to such a project. Ironically, for a field dominated by political progressives, the first recent attempts at synthesis were authored by conservatives David Bernstein and Paul Moreno, who, like Hill, portray unions (to varying degrees) in a negative light and, unlike Hill, depict an unfettered labor market in a positive way.

Robert Zieger's *For Jobs and Freedom* is much more representative of the tone and substance of the thrust of the field. Like most labor historians, he unabashedly embraces the labor movement as a "legitimate and essential component of a democratic society," (4) stresses its role in "fostering workplace equity and civic