



A LITTLE MULE HISTORY

by Lucas Antoniak • www.libertymule.com

Painted high on a cliff overlooking Highway 70 and Smith Fork, the Mule on Allen's Bluff in Liberty has been DeKalb County landmark for well over a century. A much-loved icon, the Mule was spared during the highway expansion in 2003.

While many origins and meanings have been assigned to the mysterious mule, its true roots has never been verified. Until now – and I'd like to set the record straight.

A Local Icon

To generations of DeKalb County citizens and visitors, the Mule simply lends a bit of whimsy and wonder to our scenic county. For more than 15 years, I've been screen printing Liberty Mule shirts and other Mule-related products I designed as a side hobby to my regular business as an artist/cartoonist.

I'm proud to say my shirts have literally traveled around the world to represent this place we all love. Having a booth at the Fiddlers' Jamboree for most of the past decade, I've heard practically every version of the Mule story. The most common: it was painted by a farmer to commemorate a beloved mule that fell off of the bluff.

I've also heard of racist accusations against the Mule. The 2005 book *Sundown Towns* by James W. Loewen and a 2014 episode from Investigation Discovery's *Injustice Files* both claim the Mule was originally painted as a racist symbol announcing Liberty as a sundown town. Sundown towns were white-run municipalities with racially-prejudiced laws, usually enforced through intimidation and sometimes violence. Often these places had signs and symbols to warn non-whites of the consequences of breaking these laws.

No evidence I found suggests Liberty was ever such a place or had such a

reputation. Neither the author of the book and the documentarians did their due diligence and provide no historical evidence of the Mule in Liberty as a symbol of local racism. Nor was the Mule a memorial to a lost farm animal.

It was simply a prank inspired by a comic strip.

The Artist Revealed

The first evidence of this was rediscovered by the late DeKalb historian Tommy Webb, which he relayed in a 2006 Smithville Review article. While doing other research, Mr. Webb stumbled across a 1957 Review column by Dr. Wayne Robinson, a regular contributor to this paper. In this column Robinson revealed he painted the Mule while a college student in early October of 1906.

Using coal tar to trace the silhouette of Maud the Mule from Frederick Opper's popular comic strip *And Her Name Was Maud*, Robinson kept his graffiti work secret for fifty-one years and, to his delight, let its mystery grow. (To compare, this is not so different from the methods of modern-day graffiti artist Banksy.)

In 1979, Dr. Robinson's daughter Lucile Addington of Dallas wrote into *The Nashville Tennessean* to correct an article on the Mule's mysterious origins. "The whole episode of the mule painting was a prank," she wrote. "It was prompted by a comic strip of that time which featured a mule named Maud. My father always spoke of the painting as Maud the Mule."

Mrs. Addington, a professional illustrator herself, added her father "often recounted how he copied the drawing of the mule from the comic strip, enlarging the image by casting a shadow of it with an oil lamp onto paper fastened to a wall, then tracing around the shadow."

At the time of the article's publication, the Mule had been painted an aluminum color (one of many vandalisms over the decades), and Mrs. Addington expressed a desire that it be restored to her father's original coal tar black.

A Star of Her Day

Before movies and television, comic strips were an incredibly mainstream entertainment enjoyed by everyone. The Sunday comic strip *And Her Name Was Maud*, which ran from 1904 to 1932, was an international hit for its creator Frederick Opper (best remembered for his strip *Happy Hooligan*). The setup of Maud is simple – most strips featured the stubborn mule kicking whomever stood in her way. The strip was collected in several books and popular enough that toys, games, and cartoons were also produced.

Every cartoonists have a unique style. Even a casual reader will recognize how Opper's Maud resembles our local Mule. Driven by my own fascination

surrounding its mystery and a lifelong love of comic strips, I repeatedly attempted to locate the exact Opper drawing that Robinson traced but to no avail.

Mystery Solved

After a recent local debate, I decided to settle the debate and clear the Mule's name once and for all.

It was in a Flickr collection of hundreds of random comics from the early 1900s that I finally stumbled across "The One" – and it's a double whammy.

What's more, several of the panels from this months-long series have an uncanny resemblance to the Mule and its specific location overlooking Smith Fork in Liberty (see Figure 1). Surely this storyline inspired Robinson's chosen location!

After careful comparison of all of Mountain House strips, I believe the Mule was traced from the first panel of the Maud strip published on August 19, 1906 (Figure 2). There are only slight differences from Maud and Liberty's, the most obvious being that the Mule is mirrored and its torso is stretched. This distortion and reflected appearance are likely dependent on how Robinson positioned the source art and oil lamp to cast onto the narrow ledge. Allowing for this distortion and decades of weathering and many repaints, the Mule's head, tail, and leg positions all neatly align to this specific rendition of Maud. (Figure 3.).

This printed evidence, more than a century old, confirms Dr. Robinson's own claims in 1957, and the explanation of his intentions shared by his daughter in 1979, the origin and intent of the Mule on Allen's Bluff is now resolved.

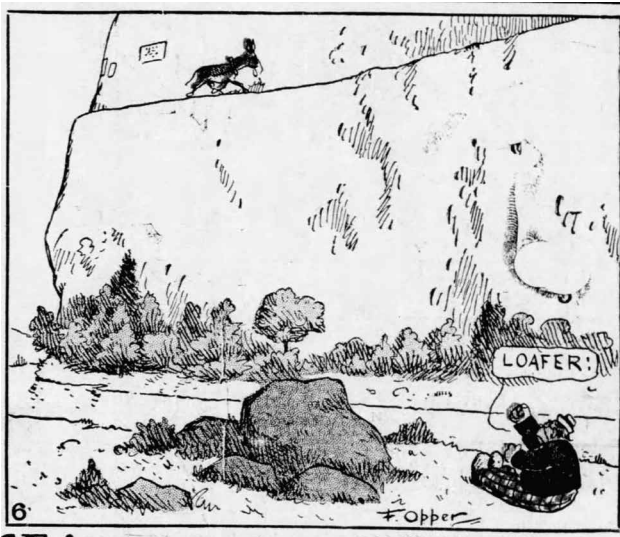


Figure 1: The final panel from Frederick Opper's And Her Name Was Maud strip published on August 12, 1906. Note the strong resemblance to the Allen's Bluff Mule's setting overlooking Smith Fork in Liberty.

MAUD IS ON THE WAY TO THE MOUNTAIN HOUSE!

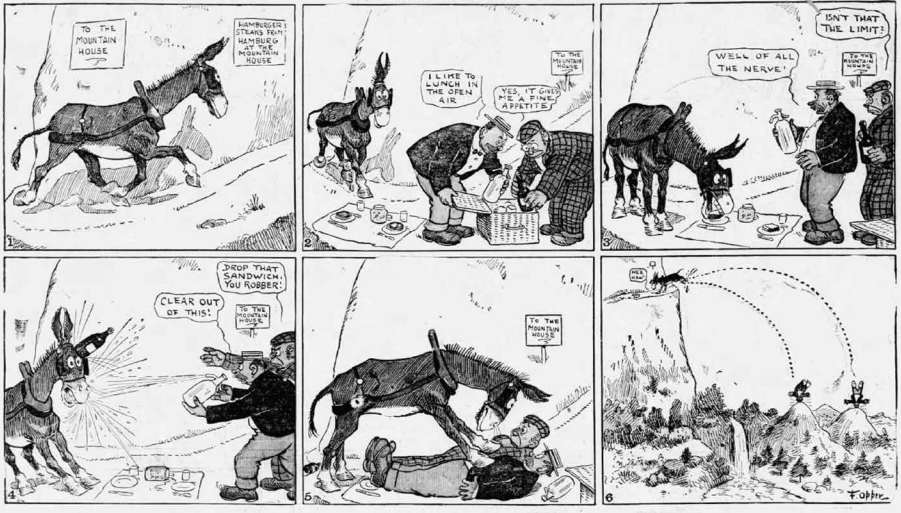


Figure 2: Comic from August 19, 1906, published just weeks before the date given by Dr. Wayne Robinson for his Mule's creation.

As both a whimsical sophomoric prank and a fitting tribute to Frederick Opper's comic, the Mule was made for all to ponder and enjoy. Let's hope the Mule, like her inspiration Maud, will continue to guard the cliffs as she overlooks Smith Fork winding through Liberty for many years to come, welcoming all residents and visitors to our beautiful county.

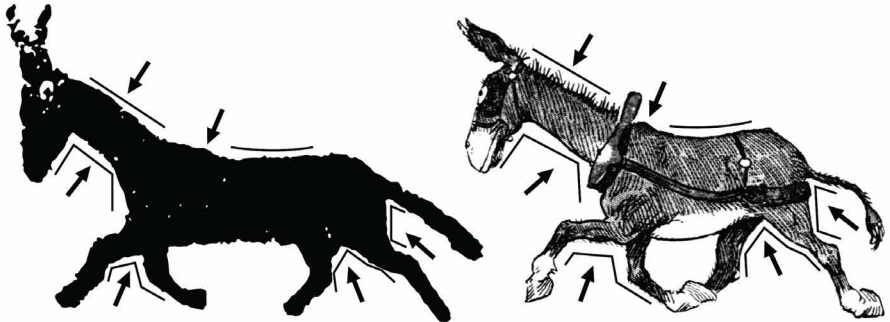


Figure 3: A comparison of the Mule on Allen's Bluff to a mirrored first panel from Figure 2. Allowing for distortion from the image casting/tracing method and decades of weathering and many repaints, the resemblance is uncanny. Diagram by the author.

END

A slightly different version of this article was published in the Smithville Review on November 16, 2022.

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