ACCLAIM’s mission is the cultivation of indigenous leadership capacity for the improvement of school mathematics in rural places. The project aims to (1) understand the rural context as it pertains to learning and teaching mathematics; (2) articulate in scholarly works, including empirical research, the meaning and utility of that learning and teaching among, for, and by rural people; and (3) improve the professional development of mathematics teachers and leaders in and for rural communities.
Foreword

This paper is the edited transcript of a story told by Avery Allman during a picnic given for the second ACCLAIM cohort and faculty during the summer of 2004, when our students spent their summer on the campus of Ohio University. The story was the centerpiece of the evening’s entertainment, although, as I recall, other episodes were less literary and more raucous—canoe tipping, chorus line skit (“What I want to be when I grow up”), and guitar playing and singing.

Allman teaches social studies at a local rural high school; he can reportedly entertain any gathering, and without advance notice, with his monologues. The talent for such performance is rare, and maybe getting more rare still, as local practices of this sort are crowded out by inferior mass-marketed products—the monkey business of big-buck amusements.

We asked Allman to write out this story, but we were told (were we stupid?) he’s a storyteller, not a writer (get it??). We were, however, smart enough to record the event, and to get it transcribed and edited, and we’re pleased to be able to share it—with the storyteller’s permission—with the rest of the world.

Humor isn’t a big part of doctoral programs, which impose a strong regimen of challenges and frustrations related to the project of learning to ask troubling questions and to search for the answers. Our particular work in the Center, however, involves (as we often say) an appreciation of the ‘lifeworld’ of rural people. It’s here, in this Occasional Paper, in many ways. We hope you can hear it—and sense the sort of things that motivate our work.

Craig Howley
Athens, OH
Lessons from an Old Muleskinner’s Experience

by Avery Allman

This is not a bad place to be today. We could be a lot of places that are worse. I’m from down to Hamden, Ohio, just south of McArthur, north of Wellston, right there in the middle. The hub of my universe is Hamden, and nobody else knows where it is. That’s okay; I don’t expect you to, but you need to kind of get an understanding of where I’m coming from to understand what I’m going to tell you.

I was listening to the radio the other day. I heard this guy on there telling this story. It was about algebra—the fact that he hated algebra. He couldn’t stand algebra. He didn’t understand algebra at all. The first time he went into a classroom to learn algebra, he didn’t know what it was, only that it had something to do with math. But this was the first question he heard the first day of algebra class:

There’s a man that owns a farm and he’s got a 50-acre field and it takes him 14 hours to mow that field with a horse-drawn mowing machine and his team of mules pulling it-14 hours. It takes him 7 hours to mow that same field with his tractor. He mowed with the mules for 2 ½ hours, then the mower broke. He took the mower back to the barn, pulled it back in with the mules and was fixing it. His son came by. His son can mow that same field in 12 hours with the mules and 6 hours with the tractor. His dad had mowed it with the mules for 2 ½ hours. His son decides that he’s going to finish mowing the field with the tractor. How long is it going to take the son to finish mowing that field?
The guy was completely lost. He had no idea how to figure that out. And that’s the way a lot of people are about math. I’m confused, too, but I’m going to tell you a few things I know about math from Hamden.

I go to a mule sale every once in awhile just to kind of see what’s going on in the real world. Now here’s what happens. Three, four, five of us from Hamden get in a vehicle and head south to Tennessee to a mule sale, just plain ole’ hillbilly ridin’ down the road to a mule sale. The first three or four times we went, we didn’t go directly to the mule sale, because we never carry maps with us. We have a very keen sense of direction. I know north, south, and east and west is one of the other two directions. We knew we were going south to Tennessee to a mule sale, so we just got in the car and started driving. Well, we eventually got there. It took us a while. Seven hour trip I think took us about 16 hours, but we made it. We made it in pretty good time, I thought, considering, you know, when you stop and look at the map at where we had been to get there. I mean Alabama isn’t exactly on your way to Tennessee. And Louisiana’s just a little further out of the way. So, I felt like we did pretty good.

But with our keen sense of direction we still consider ourselves to be fairly educated in the five R’s: reading, ’riting, ’rithmetic, responsibility and respect. And that’s kind of what we focus on in Hamden. If you can accomplish those five R’s, you’ve got it made. You’re in good shape. Now, you take three or four hillbillies with their five R’s, put them in a car, and head ‘em south going to a mule sale, these are some of the things that you run into.

We stopped at a fuel station. We weren’t lost. We just needed directions on how to get out of where we were. So it’s about 3:30, 4:00 in the morning. We’d been driving
9, 10 hours and stopped to fuel up the car. I go up to the counter and ask the guy how to get to Nashville, Tennessee. He looked at me and said, “You just go down this road out here and turn to the right.” I said, “Okay.” That’s all the directions I needed.

So I go back toward the car and I’m looking at some maps and some stuff they’ve just got there for sale. I didn’t buy any cause I don’t like to spend money if I don’t have to. I’ve got good directions. I’m going down the road a little bit and turn to the right to go to Nashville. Well, one of the guys I was riding with, goes with us, we call him John Deere, and if you ever tried to say Wingedorf, you’d say no wonder you call him John Deere cause it’s like, it’s a mouthful, but that’s his real last name. We just call him John Deere.

He was standing there at the counter at this little gas station. Had him a bottle there he’s going to purchase. Fellow walks up to him, I didn’t know who he was, and asks John Deere if he had a dollar so he could buy a bottle of pop. Now back to the five R’s, John very quickly informed him that if he wanted a dollar he should get his lazy self up early in the morning and go find himself a job, and by the end of the day he would have a dollar. John gets kind of wound-up on this a little bit, so this conversation got kind of heated. And the guy behind the counter’s, like, picking up the phone, you know, calling 922 or whoever it is, you know, and like... well, cause John’s getting ready to, like, send this guy right out the door. I told John just settle down, and I reached down into my pocket. I wasn’t going to give the guy a dollar, but I just out of habit put my hand down in my pocket, and John informed, you know, “Don’t you dare give him a dollar, make him get out there and get him a job.” So I’m not giving him a dollar. There’s no
way. Well, the guy picks up the phone again and calls the cops while I’m like talking about this dollar business with John Deere. He says the cops are on their way.

My experience tells me we gotta go. “Come on guys—get in the car,” I say. They’re like, “We don’t know where we’re going.” I said, “Yeah we do, we’re going down the road and we’re turning to the right. Here we go.”

We’re going down the road, we turn to the right, I get tired, switch off drivers, next thing I know I wake up and we’re in Alabama. So I drive for a little bit, try to get up back towards Tennessee, switch drivers again, fall asleep, and wake up in Louisiana.

We get to Tennessee.

All right, now: mules are a cross between a female horse and a male donkey. My first trip down there I thought, well you know, there might be a hundred mules down here for sale. There are 12 hotels at that exit where that sale barn is, every room in every hotel was full. Twelve hotels, 100 rooms and they’re all full. I’m trying to think, you know, all these people are going to the mule sale; yeah they were. It was the biggest sale I’d ever seen. We go over to the barn and I’m expecting a hundred mules, tops. There are over 2,000 mules all ready there and this is the day before the sale starts. The sale doesn’t start until 10:00 the next morning. There’s already 2,000 mules there. So I’m just doing some quick thinking here. For every mule that’s there, there’s at least 3 or 4 people. That place is packed. I mean seriously packed. So we just kind of loaf around and check things out.

Well, I like horse people. They’re okay. I hope none of you folks are horse people. I mean, not that I hope none of you are horse people, it’s okay if you’re a horse person. That’s alright. But mule people are a lot different. Mule people are just honest,
down-home, meet-in-the-dirt-and-don’t-care-type people. Some horse people are like that but some horse people are all clean and well, you know, like drive fancier vehicles. ‘Bout the third sale, I had figured everything out about this sale thing. Up front by the main entrance, there’s people playing banjos and fiddles and guitars and singing, “Amazing Grace, How Sweet The Sound,” handing out little pieces of paper— you need to be saved, Jesus can help you. And they’re doing a fine job out there. And then right out front of them, all these people are selling, it’s like a big flea market for mule stuff— pictures of mules, mule equipment, there’s saddles, it’s just, you just can’t hardly describe it in words. You just take a flea market and put it in a stock sale with 2,000 mules there. On the back side of the barn, there’s some guys who come up from Alabama every year to sell what they call homemade lemonade. Now you hang out back there on that back side of that barn very long and you buy any of that homemade lemonade off these boys, you’ll be right up there preaching with the guys in the front, ’cause you won’t care where you are or what you’re doing.

Well I was sitting back there one time, this sale, third or fourth sale I was going to, sitting on a bale of straw, just enjoying a nice afternoon. I look up and 4 or 5 of the fanciest trucks I’ve ever seen come rolling in there. All of ‘em still got temporary tags on ‘em. Fellow just bought ‘em brand new. Big aluminum trailers, name of the farm in lights right there on the front of the trailer.

Old boy gets out of the truck, and they kind of gather around and talk to each other a little bit, and they’ve all got on clean clothes and decent looking boots without holes in ‘em. And I’m just sitting there kind of leaned up against the barn, and this old boy walks over to me, he’s probably 60 years of age or so. He said, “Boy, what are you
“doing?” I said, “Just sitting here, buddy.” He reached down in his pocket, pulled out a hundred dollar bill, and flipped it at me. “There you go buddy. Watch my truck while I go inside. I said sure enough.

So I sat there and watched those trucks. You know what? They didn’t do anything. Those trucks just set there. So you know what I did? I went out front and spent the hundred dollars. Trucks aren’t going to do anything.

Got to know the guy, though. Call him Arizona. He comes in and buys riding mules and takes them out there to the Grand Canyon and takes people up to the Grand Canyon. Charges them a bunch of money to go for this mule ride up the Grand Canyon. Heck of a nice guy. He has got more money then three generations could spend if they just wanted to go around handing out hundred dollar bills. He’s loaded. He likes what he does, enjoys life.

Well out there in the front, while I was doing some trading, I run across this other guy and looked at his mule he was trying to sell. It wouldn’t be unusual for one person to buy, swap, trade, sell—I might own the same mule in that front parking lot five or six times before the day’s over, ‘cause you just kind of keep trading. Well I got to talking to this old fellow, his name was Bill, and he got to telling me his life story. He had worked two public jobs in his life. He worked one for two days and quit. Didn’t like it. He worked another job for three weeks and quit. Didn’t like it. Spent the rest of his entire life on his farm of 80 acres. He raises tobacco and sells it for his taxes and utilities. He raises corn and sells it, I think in liquid form, for his other expenses, and trades mules. And that’s what he does for a living. He didn’t have on fancy clothes. Didn’t even have a truck to drive to the sale. Had to ride with somebody. But he enjoys life. So whatever
kind of education you get, whatever kind of lifestyle you choose, you can be content with
a lot of money, or you can be content with no money and only one mule.

Well, after I talked to Bill for a while, I went back there to the back of the barn. I
was sitting there, enjoying that bale of straw, and they were loading mules. The sale was
going on. People were buying then, you know, and loading them to haul ‘em out. And
this old boy come in there and backed the trailer up in and bought this mule. He was
having a terrible time trying to get it loaded. So I just watched him for a while and I
thought, “Man, that poor boy. He’s only about 15 years old. I’ll help him.” So I walked
up there, you know, and started helping him try to get that mule in that trailer. I’ll tell
you what, if you’d give $2 for that trailer I’d say you paid too much. It was absolutely
falling apart. Over on the other side of the trailer there’s an old fellow sitting there, bib
overalls on, just a whittling on a stick. And I walked up asked that guy, boy if I could
help him load that mule. He said yeah, he’d sure appreciate it in a good southern-twang
voice. I said, Well we’ll get that mule in there.”

And this old fellow over there whittling that stick said, “Boys you’ll never get that
mule in that trailer.” By golly, I’ll tell you what, you tell somebody from Hamden you
can’t do something and you have just made a mistake, because we’re going to do it. So I
looked over there at John Deere, who was a sitting over there on another bail of straw,
and I hollered, “Hey, John Deere, come here!” He rolled off that bail of straw, he was
about half asleep. “Get over here and help me load that mule.” My uncle Gerald was
over there, talking to somebody about a harness or something he was trying to buy off of
him. I hollered at him and he came over, and I said, “We’re going to put that mule in that
trailer.” John Deere looked at me and said, “Will it fit?” And I said, “Yeah it will.” So I
had Uncle Gerald get a hold of the roof right at the front of the trailer and started leaning on to it. Old John locked arms with me and we got a good run about 15 yards. We come up behind the back of that mule and swept it right up in that trailer, and its nose come out the front end. Gerald fell down in the bed of that truck and held on tight with that rope—“Whoa, mule!”—holding onto it for dear life. He took that rope and wrapped it around the tongue of that trailer.

We shoved the door closed in the back. I went back to the front, put another rope on that mule’s head, pulled its head down, tied it off real tight on the front of that trailer, kind of stood back there at the back of that trailer and just watched. You know, I was kind of proud of what we had done. That old man was still just sitting over there whittling and never said a word. About that time that mule stood up in that trailer and picked the whole top of that trailer up and took off across the parking lot carrying that trailer on it’s back just bouncing it off people’s cars, off their trucks, everything going on here. And they’re like, “How do we stop him; what do we do??” I’m like, “I don’t know what, you got a mess.” ‘Cause that mule’s just walking around that parking lot, couldn’t see a thing, and just carrying that trailer and just hee-hawing like you couldn’t believe. And I looked over at that old boy sitting there, whittling on that stick, and I said, “By golly we got her loaded, didn’t we?” He paused his whittling for just a second and said, “You could call it that.” I said, “That’s what I’ll call it.” That mule was loaded. It might be walking down the interstate right now with a trailer on its back, but it was loaded at one time.

Stubborn. Responsibility, respect, reading, ‘riting and ‘rithmetic. Doing something right. Doing it the first time right, best you can. Now all these people that I
have met over the past 10 years going to these sales have really brought me into a new way of thinking about life in general, about human behavior, and about people interacting with each other. I’ve watched mules work together down there. I’ve watched them pull together and I’ve heard old-timers talk about them a lot. And I’ve seen a lot of “willing teams”: One mule is willing to let the other mule do all the work.

And if you’re not careful we’ll all become willing teams. We’ll get hitched up with somebody or some group and we’ll let somebody else do all the work or we might get stuck doing all the work. Now there’s nothing wrong with a willing team as long as the job gets done, but you’ve always got that one mule there that you’re never going to trust. Can’t trust it to go out and accomplish the goal that you need to accomplish that day.

Now with all these people and all this trading going on is the biggest circus that I have ever seen. I bought a horse trailer down there one time and I dealt on it for about six hours, talked the guy down about $1,200. He didn’t want to haul it back to Georgia. I thought well, the longer I wait, the cheaper that trailer’s going to get. So I just kept talking and he kept trying to sell it. We’d get mad and leave, then come back and meet trying to find a trailer. He cut his price way down. He went to his truck right in front of that trailer and was getting the title out when two old boys from Texas drove up, stopped right there, rolled the window down in their truck and said, “Is that trailer for sale?” And that old boy leaned back out of his truck and said, “No, I’ve already sold it to this man.” I looked over to the boys from Texas and I said, “Yeah that trailer’s for sale. Get out and look at it fellows, it would make you a nice one.” That guy from Georgia looked at me like I was ... like oh ... if looks could kill, and he said, “What are ya gonna do—sell my
trailer? You just bought it.” And I said, “Just be quiet. I’ll cut you in for half the profit, whatever I can get out of it.” All right. Good deal. So I kept going, and I sold those boys in Texas that trailer. Me and that boy from Georgia both made $700 right there in about 45 minutes. Now he had to throw in a hitch off of his truck so they could pull that trailer back to Texas. Down the road it went. And we all walked away with an extra 700 bucks in our pockets.

Now, I said Texas. I mentioned Tennessee. You know I’m from Ohio. I have counted as high as 30 different states’ license plates in the parking lot for that mule sale. People come from everywhere, but they’re all the same: They’re just there for mules. Old Arizona with all that money could just sit down there with Bill with no money and talk for five or six hours about one mule. So when we’re teaming up with somebody, make sure you’re teaming up with the right person that you’re going to be working with. If you’re teaching somebody something, you need to team up with the person you’re trying to get to learn how to do it—not somebody else, not the administrators, not the guidance counselors. Team up with the people you’re actually working with.

Now, all these facts that I’ve given you about the mule sale don’t do it justice. If you get a chance, the first weekend in November, the second weekend in January, stop by Dixon, Tennessee. I’ll be there. And there’ll be a bunch of mules and a lot of nice people. And I’ll let you guys figure out the rest.