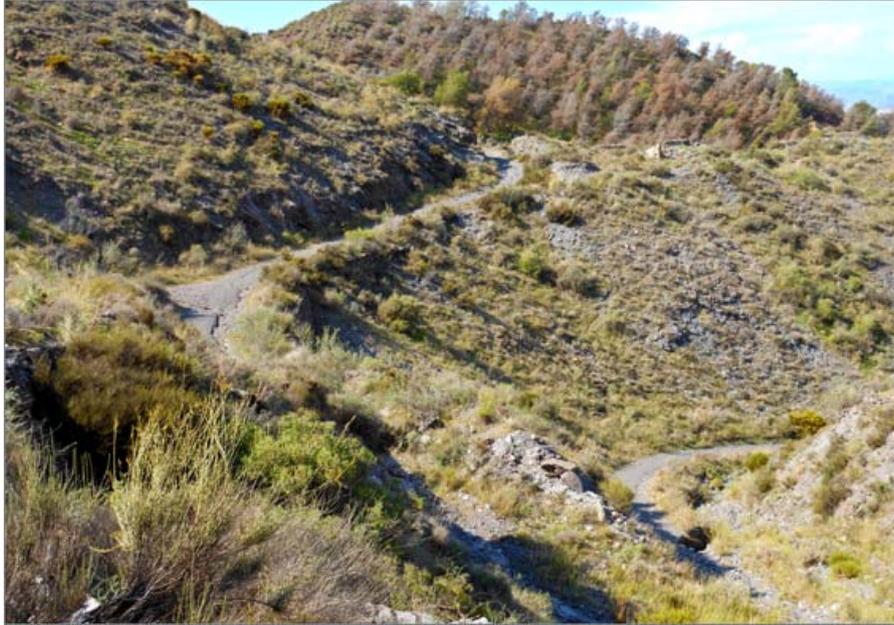


## ***The Tale of the Peruana Mule.***

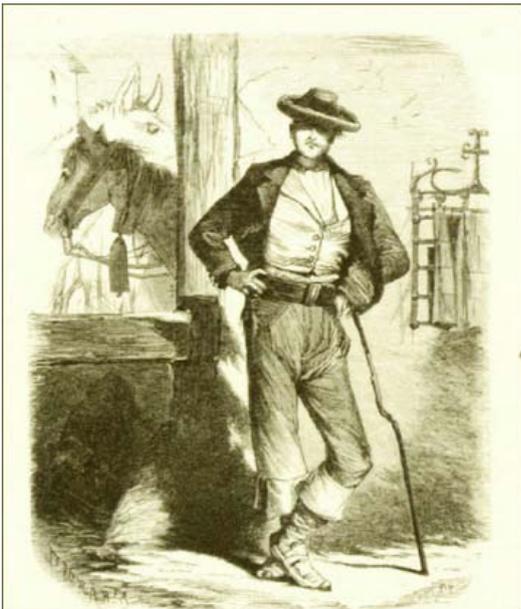


**“Darne pan”**, literally, “give me bread”, was a real, heartfelt cry here until relatively recently. Actual starvation did stalk the streets of towns like Garrucha, and hunger, for all but the wealthy, was a day to day reality. The black humour in the tale of the Peruana Mule was perpetuated and passed down in the expression ‘hungry as the Peruana mule’.



*The path to the Peruana.*

The story is set at the mine La Peruana, sheltered by the pine trees which clothe the side of the Barranco Chico la Torre. A suitably picturesque spot for such a tale. In those days, winches were operated by men to a certain depth, and then by mule as the depth of the shaft increased. Mules were highly valued commodities, and were well looked after. They worked shorter shifts than their human co-workers and had much better accommodation and rations. Their working life though was shorter, four years working on a deep shaft winch, a few years longer at a lesser depth, and this despite the care given to them by their dedicated carer.



And so it came to pass ... .. Estaban, for that was the muleman’s name, was looking forward to a few days of adequate food and other home comforts, like water to wash in, and a change of clothes. He had worked every day for the last three months and couldn’t wait for ‘The Break’, that blessed time, when work in the mines came to a halt for a couple of weeks. The mule was also probably ready for a rest as he too had worked continuously, walking first one way round, to lower the empty containers down the shaft, and then back the other way, to raise the full, heavy ones up again. Round and round, plod plod, heave and haul, the days sliding into weeks, and the weeks into months.

*Meet Estaban.  
Villa de Arbeteta*



*The mule.*  
*Keith Levit*

*The mule's shaft.*



*The vigilante.* *Ferranruiz.net*

For the mule though, the break was to be a stay-cation, not a vacation, he was to be looked after by one of the few people who did not enjoy a few days away from the mountain and the mine, the vigilantes. Every mine had at least one of these vigilantes, or guards, who were charged with preventing the theft of the valuable ore from the above ground bunkers, as well as from underground. Not that they ventured underground, especially during The Break, it was far too dangerous to wander around underground alone. There was always the chance that you might meet up with some 'macuteros, miners who used this time to fill a macuto, or rucksack, with ore to sell on the black market. Like rabbits, these men could pop down one hole and appear up another, travelling along the warren of galleries, from one mine to another. It would need a bag full of ferrets to flush them out, not a night watchman who, in any case, preferred to take a backhand for looking the other way, while ore was pilfered from above ground.

Unfortunately for poor Estaban, the watchman became ill and couldn't look after the mine nor the mule. So, like Cinderella, Estaban was denied the chance to go to the ball, or in this case, the Cuevas Festival and should stay behind to guard the mine and the mule. Not wishing to cry in the cinders, nor await a visit from the Fairy Godmother, Estaban considered his options. Should he stay, or should he go?

Cuevas festival was the highlight of the year, he had just been paid, he needed a break and after all, the mule was sensible enough to be left unattended for a few hours. So Estaban, being a thoughtful man, put the mule in the shade of its stable, saw to it that there was plenty for it to eat and drink and set off to join in the fun.

But, in the way of these things, it wasn't just the mule that had plenty to eat and drink. Estaban had a fine time, meeting friends and drinking, carousing and drinking, drinking and drinking. Sobering up on the third day, he recalled that he had left the mule unattended for more than the few hours that he had promised it, and so he set off to resume his duties.



*Cuevas Festival.*

*Col. Enrique Garcia Paniagua. Relatos Fotográficos de Almería. Bolea.*

But what of the mule, abandoned and imprisoned in the stable, by now bereft of hay and short of water? Being a wise mule, he had no intention of starving to death, so he started by nibbling the pegs of the empty tool rack which was hanging on the wall. The second course was a handful of almond tree staves destined to be tool handles, while dessert was the head frame of the locked door. They all bore his teeth marks. Time passed and still no Estaban and therefore no sweet hay. The mule then turned his hunger to the water tub, the staves took his fancy, but the hoops, being made of iron, were not to his liking, so he left those intact. By now, he had got the hang of this new diet and so the next day he started on the roof, gnawing and chomping on the cross beams which supported it, oblivious to the danger that he was putting himself in. And just as the weakened beams started to sag on the now much weakened mule, and with the whole stable about to collapse, Estaban arrived to save the day and the mule. Although probably not his job.

*The stable diet.  
Dreamstime*

The ordeal of the poor beast soon became the watchword for real hunger, and the phrase 'hungrier than the Peruana mule' passed into the local lexicography.

Is it a true story? It's certainly a credible story, the setting, the characters, the foibles of both man and beast, its happy ending and its longevity give it more than a ring of truth.

I like to believe it and will think of it every time that I pass the Peruana on my way to the 'lost village' of San Juan.

