

the finished product. A grain sack was 3½-4 feet high, weighed 100-115 pounds, and held about 3½ bushels. When the moisture content of the grain was high, the sacks were only filled two-thirds full to facilitate handling. The tops were twisted slightly to close them off.

As the sacks were filled, they were lifted into the standard three-foot by ten-and-one-half-foot steel-wheeled wagon. Wagons with low wheels were preferred because the sacks didn't have to be lifted so high. From the threshing site, the grain was taken to the granary where the sacks were stored. Lacking modern-day drying facilities, the farmer had to pay more attention to moisture conditions, heating and the resulting molding.

The farmer seldom sold his grain, but fed it out to his livestock. Combines eliminated much of the hard work when they came into general use around 1925-1930, and the community effort and spirit generated by the threshing days diminished.

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Don't Spare The Horses

by Richard McKlveen

THE "HORSE AND BUGGY DAYS" have never left for one man in the Decorah area. He is Mr. Francis Sexton, who at one time owned and worked three teams of horses. Mr. Sexton now keeps only one team mainly for his own pleasure, but these two horses can still do their share of work, as was demonstrated for the Foxfire Interim group when Mr. Sexton, after feeding his cattle from the horse-drawn sleigh, took all twenty-five of us for a sleighride.



Photograph by Steve Buck

Francis Sexton

The Sexton farm lies ten minutes by car (thirty minutes by horse) west on the Pole Line Road. Mr. Sexton at age fifty-eight and his sons are still actively farming the home place. The Sexton family is Irish, and they belong to the Catholic parish in Bluffton. But the Pole Line Road is, as Mr. Sexton describes it, "Norwegian on one side, and Irish on the other," so most of his neighbors are Norwegian Lutherans. Mr. Sexton went to country school with them, played with them, worked with them, and even spoke Norwegian with them. He sees no difference.

The two interviews with Mr. Sexton were extremely easy to conduct. My partner, Margi Pleiss, and I would sit back with a cup of coffee, and Mr. Sexton, a hand-rolled "Prince Albert" cigarette in hand, would proceed to tell us about his favorite subject: horses. Before talking to him, my understanding of horsepower had been limited to metal blocks, pistons and cylinders, but he presented a picture to us of actual snorting and sweating *Horse Power*.

We started from the beginning. The two horses that Mr. Sexton owns are bays who were foaled from previous horses he owned. As a colt, the workhorse would be the kids' to ride and play with. When the horse was about two years old, Mr. Sexton would start breaking it for a team. He told us, "Very seldom would'ya start a horse less'n two years old. The older they gets, the worse they get. They get arnry and want to rip everything to pieces. They don't like to be confined to stuff."

How would you first start breaking a horse? "Oh, sometimes I'd take and drive him and drive him around by themselves to learn'em what "ho" and "gettiup" is. After I did that a little while, maybe a half an hour for two or three days, then I'd put him with another horse. When you hitch him up it seems to help a lot. But a lot of times you don't have time, so when you want to go out and work, you just hitch them up and go. . . ."

The farmer depended on his teams to work every day of spring planting and at harvest time. But most farms did not have extra teams, so the same team often had to pull a plow all day. Horses would be pounded on into a job to beat the upcoming rain that would surely stop work for three days. This over-working was hard on the horses. Mr. Sexton said that after a hot day of work a horse would develop the "heavies." The horse would breath so hard that its sides would almost make a popping noise from mov-

*Francis Sexton and sons**Photograph by Steve Buck*

ing in and out so fast. Dirty hay was said to be the cause. Mr. Sexton also told us about bone spavins, a disease that hits the hock-joint of the knee. A sack of lymph fluid (spavin) develops and can be detected by a lump in the joint. On a cool morning, a horse with a spavin can take maybe two hours to warm up enough to keep pace with the rest of the team. According to Mr. Sexton, a horse originally gets a bone spavin from lack of exercise.

The best team of horses Mr. Sexton ever saw could pull a full railroad car. This team would lean and lean on the harness until the car finally started to move. The effort took really smart and strong horses. But sometimes a horse would pull so hard that he would hurt himself.

"I've heard of horses being pulled blind. They used to have horses that had blind staggers. They'd go crazy when they'd get a little excited. Some it don't even bother. I 'spose it's just like a person, sometimes you can lift and some more times you can't.

Rest as a rule will get the horse back to shape before so long. Years ago the guys wouldn't rest them. They only had so many horses and they had to go every day. It was just like a working man to lay off if he wanted to. I've seen horses that were in bad shape, limping or off one foot, but they'd pound them along."

Mr. Sexton told us of the days when there were three harness makers in Decorah. Now only saddle shops exist and most of them don't fix harnesses so he has to do the job himself. "The old timers used to make harnesses. They'd take two pieces of leather, and put them together and then his tool was a foot pedal that opens it up, then you stick the leather in there, then you leave a little sticking up . . ."

The tool he talks about is simply a bench with a rectangular hole in it. A "Y" shaped board, about thirty inches long, fits sideways in the hole. The board has been notched all the way through the middle and increased in width closer to the top. As the board is pulled down through the hole in the bench, the top of the notch will close to hold the harness leather in place.

". . . Then you take an awl and you poke a hole through both straps with the awl. Then you have waxed thread that you wax and pull it up. Black-wax is best—it was a mixture of beeswax and tar. Then you would roll this thread on your knee in this wax. It was Irish linen thread. Then the needles were blunt on the end cause if they were sharp they'd catch on the sides and they wouldn't go in. They'd start out with two needles, one on each side, through the same hole then you'd pull it up tight. Then you'd put another hole with the awl right next to it. Then when you finished with that length in the tool, you'd move it along. Pretty slow work and it took a lot of time to make a rein from the front of the horse back to the wagon. But them old guys, they'd move so fast you could hardly see their hands at all."

The horses Mr. Sexton used to depend on for his livelihood are now more of a hobby than a business asset. But in the summer Mr. Sexton still prefers to mow and rake his hay with horses. He says he can cut a much straighter path than with a motorized mower, since he is closer to the ground, and maintains that the horse power "lays the hay down so much nicer." He considers the horses entertaining. "They are my snowmobile in the winter and motor-cycle in the summer." Oh, but to have the quiet jingling of sleigh bells instead of the roar of a snowmobile!

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