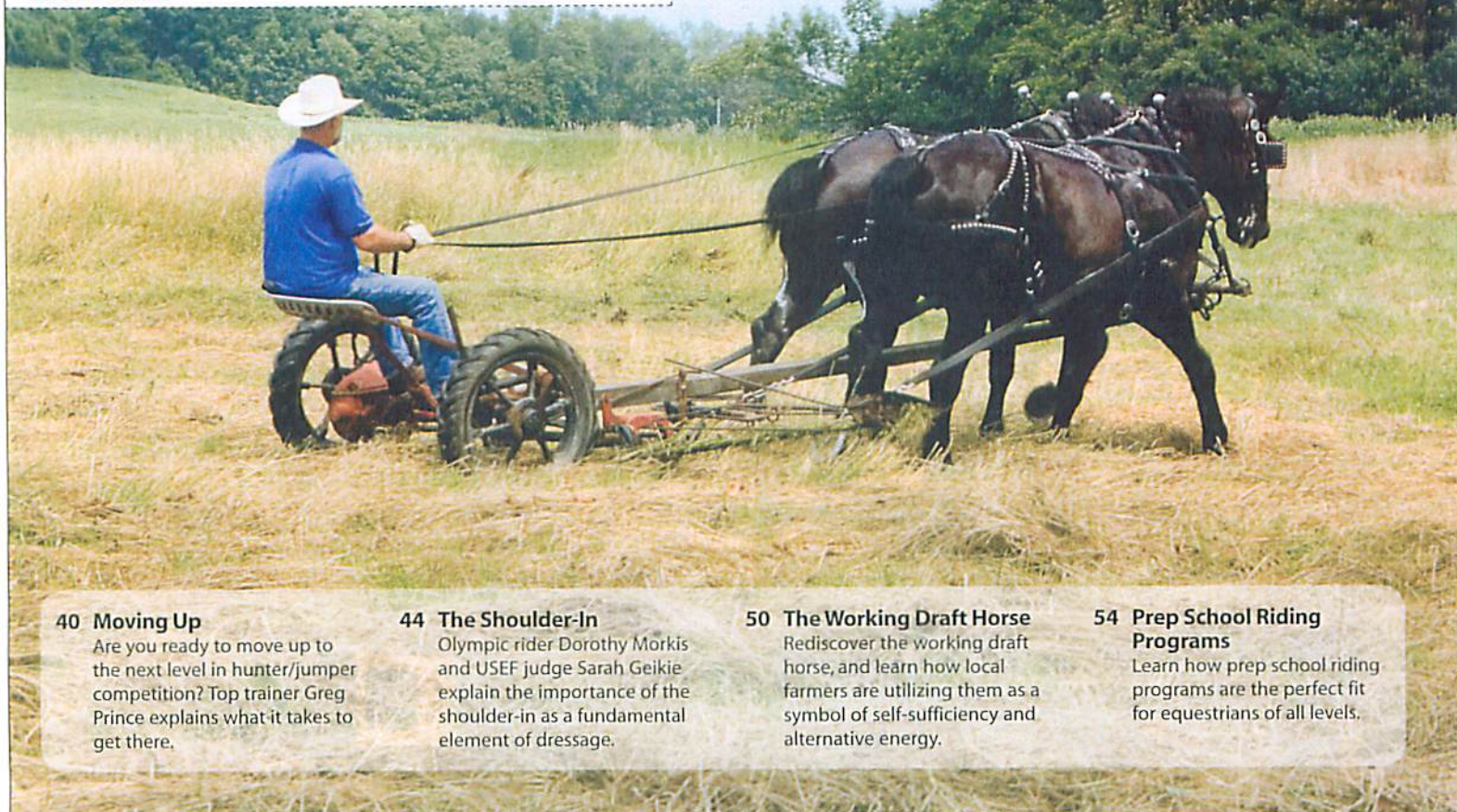


# HORSEMEN'S *YANKEE* PEDLAR

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# Draft Horses





# in America

## AN ALTERNATIVE POWER SOURCE

BY ELAINE KEELEY

One hundred years ago, horses were used to plow the fields, sow the seeds, harvest the crops, and take produce into town. Farmers were self-sufficient, if not downright stoically independent. Farming was a hard way of life, but so was most any other way of living.

**T**oday, we work hard at jobs unimagined 100 years ago, to pay for the food we buy at the grocery store. We give very little thought as to where it is grown, how much it costs to grow, what it takes to have it delivered to our home towns. We rarely question the contents of our food if it is processed, or the way in which it was raised and slaughtered. The same is true for what we feed our animals: what is pelleted grain comprised of? What does it cost, in money and time, to fertilize, cut and bale the hay our horses consume by the tons each year?

Today, with the price of fuel oil affecting literally every aspect of our lives, so many are asking the question: what will it take for us to survive? Can we grow our own food, heat our own homes, use something other than foreign oil to fuel our travels? For some, it is an impossible question to answer, a lifestyle as unfathomable to imagine as a world without sunshine. Yet there exists today a grass roots movement dotting the landscape with an alternative, albeit old fashioned, form of energy—true horse power.

Sitting down to dinner with teamsters Sam Rich and Wes Hopkins brings about a sudden awareness of what it really means to be a horse

farmer—that is, a farmer who farms with horses, not one that merely keeps them. “If I have to explain it to you, you just won’t understand it,” says Sam Rich of his reason for working the fields with his horses in place of a tractor. “What we do, 99.99% of the world’s population just doesn’t get. They would never understand why we do it, not in a million years.” The boisterous conversation around the table, seated with farmers of all ages, skill levels, and specialties (some would never dream of using horses to work their farms), must leave those dining at nearby tables either completely engrossed, or confused. Then there are those who, after hours of their stories and years of personal observation, can be easily persuaded that to be anything less than a horse farmer, is to be less than human.

For Wes Hopkins of Plainfield, Conn., his long-standing commitment to the working draft horse was influenced “by a single memory,” he says, “of my uncle and grandpa, working the fields, with ‘chunks,’ as drafts were called in those days,” says Wes. “They left such an impression on me; they were always using them. I just could not get over the vision of them.” Since 1957, Wes has used every excuse possible to farm with horses. With the decline of the working horse in America after WWII, using horse power instead of tractor power just seemed inappropriate. “You need a horse like I need two airplanes,” was his uncle’s favorite reply to Wes as he pined for a horse, but it was his uncle

who gave Wes his first harness for his first draft, a Percheron.

Now, fifty years later, Wes owns one Percheron and five Belgians. “I own Belgians to irk Perch owners.” Always the joker in the crowd, he gives a nod to Sam Rich, the Percheron farmer sitting two chairs down. Wes continues, “No, really, I have Belgians because there are more Belgians around than anything else. Plus, Belgians tend to be more even tempered, Perches more...” Sam pipes up in a deep voice, with a short but definitive reply which is his trademark, “A good horse is a good horse.”

In spite of the romantic notion and picturesque vision of teams of “gentle giants” working the fields, the reality of working with horses is often anything but romantic. It is a complex and potentially dangerous craft, and the decision to farm with horses instead of tractors should not be made blindly. “To be honest,” says Sam, an imposing man with large hands suited to working with large horses, “this business of farming with horses works better when the teamster knows more than his horses do.” Sam, who lives in Abington, Conn., on his family’s 127-acre dairy farm, We-Li-Kit Farm, regularly works 40 of those acres solely with his horses, all Percherons. “I like their heads, both physically and mentally,” he says of his preference in breeds. “Besides, my father always had Percherons. When I was a kid,” the 36-year-old continues, “I had oxen. I had oxen until the last one died in 1998. Oxen are better



**Peter Hagarty is shown tedding hay behind his mixed team of Suffolks and Belgians on his farm in Porter, Maine.**





Sam Rich plowing four-up on a sulky plow with a team of Percherons.



Wes Hopkins plowing with his circa 1925 Cambridge 12" bottom walking plow.

PHOTOS: CLAUDE KELLEY



A contemporary Amish made, 2-way hydraulic sulky plow with 14" bottoms, made by White Horse Machinery in Gap, Pa. The driver is Terry Joseph of Lisbon, Conn., with a team of draft crosses.

for farmyard work. They are slower, more surefooted than horses. They are less flighty than horses, and they don't need to be driven. "But," he says, "when my last ox died, my dad felt sorry for me and gave me a Percheron. I guess you can say from that moment on, I was bit by the horse bug."

This New Englander is becoming quite famous all over the continental United States for his skill at the walking plow, sulky plow, and

plowing with a multiple hitch. He was the 2007 National Plow Champion in the walking plow division, and brought home a second place ribbon in 2008. He is the only New Englander to have competed these last two years in Huber Heights, Ohio, against competitors from all over the midwest and Canada. He perfects his skill year after year by plowing the fields on his own farm, as well as farms and gardens in Connecticut and Massachusetts. Aside from plowing his fields, Sam harrows, plants corn, spreads manure, mows, teds and rakes hay, clips and weeds pastures, harvests oats and other grains, and logs with his horses. He feeds his horses solely on farm-raised feed. Although at a casual glance one may think that his reason for farming with his

horses is based on finances, he says time wise it can actually be costlier. Perhaps, then, his motivation comes from a long-standing, Yankee farmer tradition of self reliance—"If they are eating it, they are going to make it. The only thing I buy for my horses is salt blocks." Wes Hopkins, who also uses his horses for plowing, haying, and producing oats, concurs with this. "I don't think working with horses is necessarily financially beneficial,"

he says. "It is more costly for us to use horses than tractors. I just like doing it." Unlike some farmers, who may rely on horse power only during certain seasons, Sam works his horses year round. "I cut about 10,000 to 12,000 board feet and 20 cord of wood each year," he says. He uses some of the wood in his construction company, We-Li-Kit Builders, and uses the cord wood to heat the family's houses. He also does custom horse logging for other people. Adverse conditions, such as mud and rocks, can make it a tiresome process, however. So what is the benefit? Sam answers, "Horses think through what it is they are doing, and they tread lightly through the woods. It really is gratifying work."

Peter Hagarty and his wife, Martha Tracy, farm 135 acres in Porter, Maine. Of the 135 acres, 35 of it are used for pasture and hay—100 acres is woodland. "We use our four draft horses, two Belgians and two Suffolk Punch, for saw log harvesting in the winter, and for haying in the summer," says Peter. When asked why he uses Belgians and Suffolks, his answer was in no way breed-specific: "I just like a good horse, one that will stand, listen to me, and give me a smile every once in a while."

In the not-so-distant past, horse-drawn equipment in good working condition was hard to find and even more difficult to repair. Now, thanks in part to robust Amish communities and a desire by non-Amish to use horses, a 21st century horse farmer can find just about anything he needs to make an honest living behind a team. Peter uses a forecart powered by a 38 hp Deutch Diesel engine during haying season.

"This unit powers our 7-foot New Holland haybine and Gyro tedder. We rake with a pin wheel and bale with a New Holland baler as well. In the winter, we log with small wagons, scoots and logging forecarts."

Peter says he works his horses 4-5 days a week during the winter, and nearly every day of the week during hay season. "There are intrinsically no disadvantages for me to using horses," he says. "I just sometimes choose not to take advantage of them. I often feel trapped by self-imposed constraints like time and weather. When I am centered, however, it becomes clear that working with horses is exactly that—working with them. The end result takes a back seat."

For some, however, the end result is the catalyst for using horse power in place of fossil fuels. In Marathon, New York, a town centered in lush farmland just 30 miles east of Ithaca, Donn Hewes and Maryrose Livingston run their Northland Sheep Dairy as organically as possible. They produce sheep milk, artisanal cheeses, grass fed lamb, mutton, beef and rabbit, and honey from their own hives that they sell locally. All their animals are 100% grass fed, all the time—no grain or by-products are used. Donn and Maryrose implement "low stress" management techniques to help reduce health problems in their herds, and they "work hard to make the farm operate with minimal outside inputs." This includes horse and mule power whenever possible. "I use horses and mules for haymaking," says Donn. "They rake and ted hay. I use them four abreast to bale hay and pull a wagon behind the baler to stack bales



as we make them." In order to provide the healthiest and most natural diet for the farm's sheep herds, Donn uses farm-produced fertilizer and compost, which he spreads on his pastures with a horse-drawn manure spreader, nearly 80 loads a year. "They also do a little plowing, discing, and cultivating," says Donn of his teams. "We are just starting to work on a horse-powered market garden," he adds, the produce of which will be sold at the Ithaca Farmer's Market.


Donn uses a PTO (power take off) cart for much of the horse-drawn work he does. "I had it built for me by a local Amish welding shop. I developed my own four-horse neck yoke that lets all the animals hold the load on a hill." He also rebuilds horse drawn mowers, using them for clipping their 80 acres of pasture.

Donn's teams plow snow in the winter, and they skid firewood as well. To the outsider, however, perhaps one of the most unique jobs he has performed with his teams is harvesting ice from local water sources. "Last year was our first ice harvest, and as such it was more of an experiment than an actual plan to use the ice. We learned that harvesting ice was relatively easy and fun—so now we have to work on a more permanent ice house

and uses for the ice."

Although Donn does use a tractor, mostly for its front loader, he tries hard to use his horses and mules as much as possible, particularly in the fields. Working them an average of five days a week, Donn says that the horses and mules become an economically good choice of power "because we believe in the scale of our farm—horses and mules work for it. Also, if you love working with them the way I do, it makes the math a little easier!"

In the light of the current economy, is horse farming a way to cut costs, a means of self-sufficiency? Or does farming with horses give the farmer something intangible, something that can't be substituted with a trip to the store? Sam Rich explains, "I farm with my horses as a means of stress management. But I also work with them because I am competitive. People say to me, 'You can't do that with horses,' and I do it anyway. It's just the way I am. I would work with horses no matter what."

The benefit to working with horses in the 21st century, Wes Hopkins concludes, "is that it feels good to know the horses are there. I guess you could say that I am trying to get back to that one moment in time, when everything was perfect." 



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