

Spring Plowing in New England

—Elaine Juska Joseph

A tradition was born over 14 years ago, not after much consideration and careful planning, but by mistake. Perhaps it could be more accurately said, as a joke. It was on April Fool's Day, 1996, that Ron Gluck of Hampton, CT, told his friends with draft horses that he was going to hook up to an antique plow and turn over the sod of his two-acre vegetable garden. His plan was not to use a tractor, but his horses, and if there was anyone who would like to join him, they were welcome to do so.

Friends showed up with their plows, pulled not by tractors spitting fumes and drowning out the voices of spring birds, but with engines of the equine and bovine variety. What started out as a lark is now one of eastern Connecticut's draft horse and oxen community's favorite day of the year—the first Saturday in April at Ron Gluck's.

Ron Gluck is, with little doubt, a “keeper” of American agricultural history. The farm he shares with his wife Eunice, a veterinarian, has been in his wife's family since a king ruled the colonies. Eunice is of direct descent from the Mayflower, and their property was first “granted” to the family by the King of England in the mid 1600s. The farm, originally granted as 200 acres, is now comprised of 236 acres in Connecticut's “Quiet Corner,” so called because of the area's rural, agricultural nature. It is a pristine landscape of rolling hills and woodland, dotted with ancient oak trees and young cedars. Streams and stone walls, so stereotypical of the New England countryside, create boundaries to keep livestock in, and progress out. He maintains approximately seventy sheep, a large group of Australian shepherds, four Percherons, and one yoke of oxen. Ron has seen many beloved farm animals come and go over the years. Winters can be hard in New England, on people and animals alike. But Ron takes it all in stride. “I grew up on a dairy farm. My father and his father grew up on a dairy farm too. These things, growth and loss, are just a fact of life.”

Ron's two-acre “garden on the hill” sits across Route 6 from his ancient house and barnyard. The plot gets just the right amount of sunshine to convince his crop of vegetables



photos by Author

Diane Rockwell of Hope Valley, RI, is followed by Terry Joseph of Lisbon, CT, as she tries a hydraulic plow for the first time.

to grow, and yet, at the same time, it is so well situated that the soil never seems to completely dry out. With the exception of the absolute driest years, Ron rarely has to irrigate, but if he does, the water comes from a tributary which courses through his property called the “Little River.” Each spring, 20 spreader loads of manure cover his two-acre garden, sometimes by tractor, sometimes with horses. A combination of location, soil composition, rich manure fertilizer, and, perhaps, the blessings of family spirits, centuries old, combine to make this garden a success. Call it the “perfect place.”

What better way, then, to break ground and ready himself and his garden for the season than to invite teamsters and their horses and oxen to work the fields. “The very first pass with the plow is the most important,” says Ron, an absolute fan of the finer art of English plowing. “To make a perfect furrow, straight and true, is the best thing a farmer can do for himself and his crop the entire year. From the perfect furrow, comes a perfectly plowed field; from a perfectly plowed field comes a season of relative ease in harrowing, planting, and growing.” After that, comes harvesting. We reap what we sow, but we sow better on well-plowed ground.

Not that everyone who plows Ron's fields is an expert. As a matter of fact, many teamsters that show up each year have never even seen a sulky plow, let alone rode on one. April Fool's Day at Ron's has rightly received a reputation for, among other things, being a real nice place to learn. Brad Downs of Woodstock, CT, for instance, hooked his team of Percheron mare and gelding to a sulky plow for the first time here just a few years ago. The result was truly euphoric for Brad. “I can't tell you how much this has meant to me,” he says of his first experience at Ron's, with a perceptible waver in his voice. “This is what it's all about.” Armed with a renewed sense of confidence in himself, Brad went on to try his hand at competition plowing just a few weeks after his initial experience, and continues to compete to this day. Far

from being an expert plowman at this point, the act of plowing a field with his own team nonetheless continues to fill Brad with a sense of wonder.

Karl and Sue Lado of Voluntown, CT, have been bringing their Clydesdales to Ron's for over four years. Like many folks, they never even had their own plow before their first experience at Ron's, but took such a liking to plowing that Karl bought his own sulky plow. Karl, a retired naval officer, tackles the fields each time he works them with the determination of a navy SEAL. "If there's a job to do, I'll get it done," he says of the task.

Horsemen and women come from all over New England to be at Ron's on April Fool's, from as far north as Vermont and New Hampshire, west from New York, and east from Rhode Island. This year, Julie Kliever from Rhode Island brought her new team of grays to try her hand at plowing for the first time. Not having her own plow, she hooked the team up to one of Ron's walking plows. Friend Diane Rockwell gave Julie a helping hand, showing her the ropes. Judging by the effort Julie gave with her team, she is sure to be seen behind a plow again in the future.

Diane and Jim Rockwell and their son Jim Jr., of Hope Valley, RI, often come to Ron's with a team of Belgians. Diane, a very accomplished teamster in her own right, feels her skill with the plow is lacking, although she makes improvements each year. Her driving experience has won her many ribbons in the show ring, but without her own plow, and with little chance to work any fields at home, she welcomes the chance to practice each year at Ron's. With the same kind of determination Karl Lado shows, she walks behind her Belgians, feeling the same sense of wonder that Brad Downs experiences, watching the dirt roll over in the field.

Many teamsters and spectators show up each year, especially when the weather is beautiful. All in all, Ron estimates that there can be as many as two dozen teamsters in any given year, and over 100 spectators, including people on horseback. "Where else can people get the chance to work on a piece of property like this?" wonders Ron. "There are so few places like this left in New England where we can all get together, have a picnic, shoot the breeze, and plow the fields with horses and oxen, whether we have horses and oxen or not."

One of the great amenities to Ron's April Fool's Plow

Day is the spectacular food. Ron gets a fire going near a few picnic tables under an ancient and sprawling oak, and friends keep it hot from morning till night. Everything from venison to bratwurst, steamed clams to chowder, and the obligatory hamburgers and hot dogs, have been offered up to teamsters and spectators alike over the years. In the past, the fire itself has been a welcome gathering place to warm hands chilled by April's unpredictable winds, and a comforting place to talk about horses, oxen, plows, and life in general. 2010, however, was warm, sunny, and spectacular, so the talking took place anywhere there was more than one person standing.

Although a large group of untrained, inexperienced teamsters and four times the onlookers may seem like a counter-productive way to plow this garden, the many teamsters who have regularly showed up in years past were there to make corrections, and straighten any questionable furrows. Famous for the blue harnesses his gray horses wear while winning ribbons at all the regional and national plow matches, Sam Rich of Abington, CT, concentrates each year on refining his undeniable skill and craftsmanship with both the walking plow and sulky plow at Ron's. Terry Joseph of Lisbon, CT, who has been participating for ten years or more, can be counted on for bringing a multitude of



Julie Kliever drives her team of Percherons while Diane Rockwell works the plow.

plows—single-horse walking plows to team walking plows, to sulky plows—for everyone to use. He has also been known to bring a number of experienced teams, so that beginners can try plowing for the first time with horses that can be trusted, or for plowing with multiple hitches.

Each year a friend or two of Ron's can be counted on to show up with a team of oxen. Or, more accurately, with working steer. "Most people don't know," says Ron, "that before an ox turns four, he's not an ox, but a working steer." Even more so than horses, the art of working oxen is quickly going by the wayside. In years past, Ron has seen many youngsters come up to his garden to practice with their young working steers in order to get ready for the summer's agricultural fairs. Recently, however, fewer and fewer children show up with oxen, most likely because of conflicts of schedule. Nevertheless, Ron can't help feeling that it may be a sign of the times. So few children get to experience farming the way past generations did. This fact is more problematic than may be obvious. This is our heritage, and

our country's history. "Agriculture is the single most important industry to this country, and more and more people are just taking it for granted. People with little or no experience in agriculture are being allowed to pass laws that could be catastrophic to farmer and city person alike," laments Ron. "What happens to us when government regulations keep us from growing our crops and raising our livestock? What happens to city people when fresh food becomes scarce?" Education by experience is an invaluable tool, which is why Ron welcomes so many spectators each year.

Wes Hopkins of Plainfield, CT, has known Ron most of his life. He has also been turning over the sod in Ron's garden since that first day in 1996, and shares Ron's concerns about the plight of our agricultural heritage. Not surprisingly, Wes shares Ron's enthusiasm for walking plows versus sulky plows as well. "Anyone who can drive a team, can 'plow' with a sulky plow," Wes says. "It takes real skill, and a certain amount of intelligence, however, to really be able to say that you know what you are doing." The walking plow by its very nature, in his opinion, forces that issue, and becomes a higher form of art, so to speak. Ask any experienced plowman, and he'll tell you that plowing is more than just a job to do—it is a perfect, soul-gratifying craft.

The garden itself, long after the teams have departed, nourishes not only Ron and his wife, but also many friends, townspeople, and elderly citizens. Although a farm stand is set up for passersby to purchase vegetables and flowers, and still more is sold to local establishments, Ron is quick to generously give away much of his crop to the elderly in his community, as a way of helping those that have helped to make the community what it is. He is happy to let friends come by and pick what they need. "If you come up here and

participate in the harvesting, taking only what you need and not more than that, I am happy to let you have it," says Ron. What he is not fond of, however, is the over-picking of crops to be given to people who are quite capable of working and

helping themselves, but don't. Although it may sound contradictory at first, it really is a very simple philosophy, and harks back to the fact that too many of our citizens are taking the fundamentals for granted. A lot of sweat, time, hard work, and loving care goes into this crop each year, and crops just like it all across America.

Food isn't a given—it is

earned. And, aside from its ability to nourish us physically, good food nourishes us socially and spiritually as well, especially when the individual has a hand in bringing it to the table.


"My father-in-law came up to the garden years ago to watch me plow with an old early American plow, one of the oldest in my collection," says Ron. "My team was walking real slow, real easy, and I let go of the handles. I just walked right alongside the plow, which didn't falter, didn't roll over, but just continued to roll the soil over perfectly. I said, 'Would you look at that, Mr. Fuller, which is what I always called my wife's father.' Although he wouldn't say so, a sense of wonder could be heard in Ron's voice as he told his story. "My father-in-law just smiled at me and said, matter-of-factly, 'Yup, you've got help there, you know.' It was as if someone else, unseen, was handling that plow. I'll never forget it!"

Along with the practice and experience of plowing, the great food, friendly company, and a beautiful day, it is unlikely that Ron's visiting teamsters will ever forget that they, too, have promised their own spirits to this remarkable land.

Elaine Juska Joseph is a freelance writer and professional horsewoman in Lisbon, CT. She owns a horse-drawn livery service, Cedar Knoll Farm, which consists of seven Percherons, many fine carriages, and countless horse-drawn farming implements.



Karl Lado of Voluntown, CT, plowing with his team of Clydesdales.



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