

Horse-plowing digs up old times

By NICK GALLO
Of the Emerald

Pegasus they ain't. But to ten teamsters of horse-drawn plows in Junction City Sunday, they were veritable Man-O-Wars surging through the crisp air of an Indian summer afternoon.

The occasion was the First Annual Horse Ploughing Contest sponsored jointly by Oregon State Draft Horse Association and the Junction City Historical Society.

In a half-contest, half-parade, teamsters from Oregon demonstrated the fading art of farming with horse plows to an estimated crowd of 200.

Strapped to a rustic walking plow, chawin' tobacco in place, Willard Lee of Estacada steals a page out of yesteryear. And yet wistful nostalgia aside, Lee proves that teamsters "work their showhorses and show their workhorses."

Lee is a logger. Since 1946 he has used the massive Percherons and Belgians, which weigh up to a ton apiece, in the woods.

But this contest, which will award sacks of feed and grain donated by local merchants for first, second and third prizes, is not being conducted on the steep hill-sides of the Cascades. The field in Junction City is too dry; the soil won't roll right. The plow can't dig in properly.

Six categories will be used in deciding a winner. The best teamster will be the one who can lay furrows together cleanly, keep a straight line and plow a consistent depth of six inches, among other skills.

How many acres can a team of draft horses plow in a day?

Anywhere from two to three and one-half acres, says Ray Drongesen of Junction City.

Drongesen, who had a heart attack 10 years ago, calls horse plowing his rehabilitation. Some rehabilitation. Last year his team hit a bucket and Drongesen broke his leg. A month later he had heart surgery.

"It's a hobby with me," he says.

"but with four or five head of horses and a 160-170 acre farm a young guy with some ambition could make a go of it."

Drongesen adds that there is a world of difference between the seat of a plow and that of a tractor.

"I can cut hay with a horse plow all day long and I'm not nearly as tired as after listening to tractors. You can talk to horses," he says, "but with tractors you just have to fight it."

A moment later, the left horse in Drongesen's team stirs, moving backward against the harness. Drongesen fires off a swift kick to the rear of the horse.

"You got to educate 'em," he winks.

While most of these teamsters are nearing retirement, Drongesen denies that his generation of teamsters will be the last.

"Look at this crowd here," he says. "There's a lot of young people here. It's the ecology bit."

However, it is not an easy task to learn horse-plowing. And machinery involved is often unavailable. Plows can go for between \$75 and \$100.

While Drongesen readies for his turn, a man walks up and tells him that he had recently inherited a horse plow, which he had traded for a brass coffee pot. The other trader had wanted to use a wheel for an antique table. Drongesen looks like he has to be restrained as his eyes pop out at the desecration.

"This is all just a hobby," says an amused but obviously pleased 83-year-old Glen Hurd who has come to watch the plowing event. "There's no family farms left that amount to anything anymore," he says. "The farms just all got too big."

With that, he fingers the handle of one of the 14-inch plows as a team of Belgian mares with two children atop and a teamster seated behind, turn in perfect rhythm.

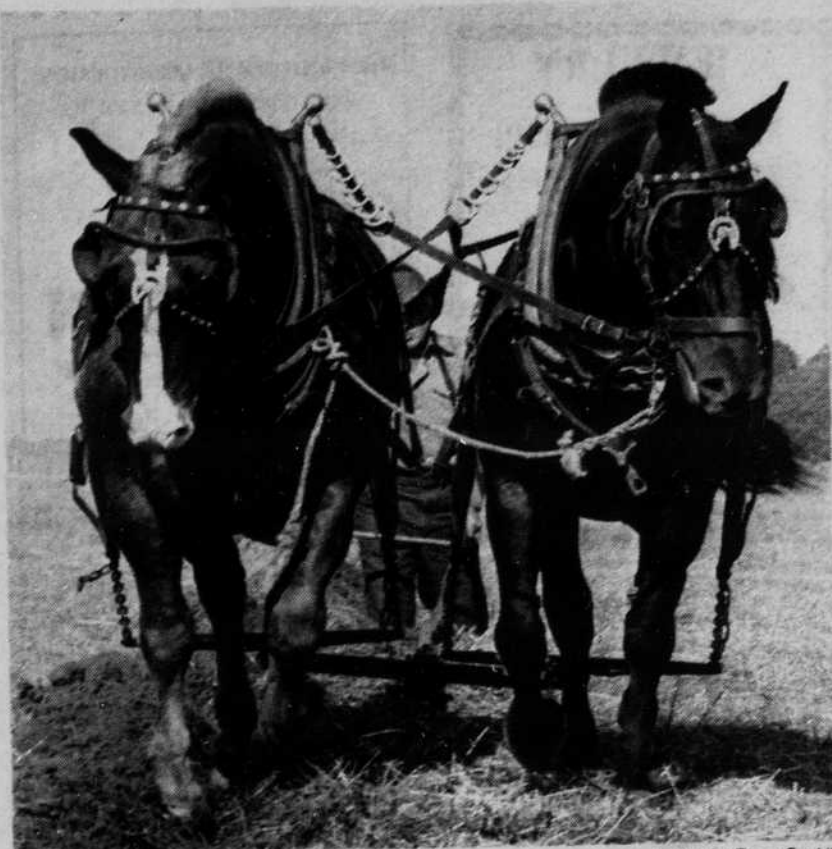


Photo by Perry Gaskill

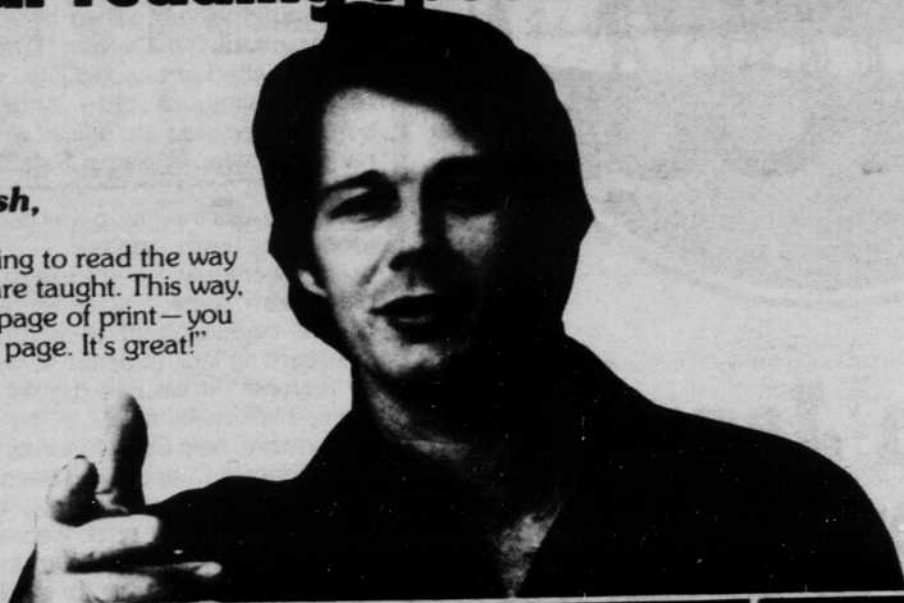
It was a long hard row to till for these two horses at the plowing contest this weekend. The event was half-contest and half-parade as locals proved that teamsters "worked their showhorses and show their workhorses."

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