

COULD HORSE FARMING BE THE BETTER WAY AFTER ALL?

—Gene Logsdon

*A*mish farmers like to tell a story about Henry Ford from back in the 1920s. Seems that Mr. Ford struck up a friendship with an Amish bishop in Indiana and by and by he made the bishop an offer. The Ford motor company would provide him with a new Model T every year for the rest of his life if he would only assure his Amish community that it was quite all right to buy and use Fordson tractors. Needless to say, the bishop politely declined. Needless to say, Mr. Ford, who despised farmwork according to his biographers, went right on with his campaign to discredit the draft horse and to promise economic salvation for all farmers who bought a Fordson.

Guess which one is still out there plowing.

I thought of that story when we were confronted recently by what was surely one of the most amazing scenes in American history: the scions of the mighty automotive industry on their knees in Washington, begging for alms. What made that scene particularly ironic was something else happening at the same time. While investment bankers and automotive billionaires begged for money, the news was all over the media about a little bank in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, that was having its best year ever. Hometown Heritage may be the only bank, certainly one of the few, with drive-by window service especially designed to accommodate horses and buggies. Some 95% of the bank's clients are Amish. According to the news, the banker, Bill O'Brien, said he had not lost a penny in 20 years serving them. They are careful with their money, he pointed out, pay their debts on time, do not use credit cards, and do not have auto loans. They might not need bank loans at all except for buying farmland, which has reached astronomical prices, especially in Lancaster County. The bank is doing a hundred million dollars' worth of business in farm loans every year. O'Brien knows his farmers personally, visits their farms, discusses their loans with husband and wife both—it takes both to make a successful farm business, he says. (True of any small business.) Furthermore, the bank does not bundle mortgages from Amish farms and homes to resell to the money-changers. Even if it wanted to, an obscure law prohibits bundling mortgages on homes not served by electric utilities. Amazing grace.

Hometown Heritage provides examples of how banking should be done and its customers provide examples of how people should manage their money, but for now I would like to



consider only one fact of the matter. These farmers are buying land that can cost them nine

or ten thousand dollars an acre

or more and paying for it with horse farming. And they don't accept government subsidies if they can avoid them. How can anyone consider this situation and not admit that farming based on draft animals for motive power just might be more profitable and more efficient than tractors by whatever definition of profit and efficiency one cares to use.

I've been reading a recent book, *Mule South to Tractor South* by George B. Ellensberg (University of Alabama Press, 2007), which discusses in minute detail and with admirable objectivity the debate that raged from the 1920s to the 1950s over the economic pros and cons of horse farming vs. tractor farming. You know something amazing? Not all the king's horses nor all the king's men ever settled that debate and it didn't really matter. Horse farming was shown to be more efficient in most cases (what does that word really mean anymore?), but even the champions of horses agreed that there was a rising kind of farmer who loved mechanical gadgets and loved the sense of power and ease that the piston engine seemed to promise, and this farmer was going to use tractors, hang the cost. Tractors allowed a farmer to cover more ground faster while spending more time doing what humans love to do: sit on their rear ends while moving rapidly across the terrain. The tractor won for about the same reason liquor wins. Alcohol causes untold problems and costs far more than milk, fruit juice or water, but never mind, the human race is going to drink it no matter what. Part of the irony of current cultural history is that now some farmers think salvation lies in persuading their tractors to drink the stuff too.

Mind you, I say all this not as an uncompromising defender of horses. (I like a little bourbon too.) I personally favor my Allis Chalmers WD, which is 60 years old. I suppose I've put \$5000 in repairs in it over the years, and it runs as well as when it was new. As far as I can figure, this working antique is more efficient for me than a team of horses. But that is not the point. I think draft animal agriculture needs to be

considered seriously again for reasons that go beyond the usual arithmetic.

What is important first of all, it seems to me, is that true efficiency results in the satisfaction of the farmer doing the work. Farmers I talk to these days seem mostly a sad and worrisome lot, even the richer ones. They are scared to death of their total dependence on the government. I grew up in horse farming—had a runaway when I was 11 so I know the good and bad of it firsthand. Then in my twenties, by the oddest circumstances, I happened to work for a couple of years for a farmer in Minnesota, Ed Hesse, who was the best economics teacher I ever had. He still farmed with horses then (1950s), grudgingly adding a beat-up old tractor to plow his hilly land. He was a fairly wealthy man. He was far from Amish. He farmed with horses because he made money that way. I learned from him how to make farming pay and it wasn't pretty. For example, he liked to buy what he called "three-titters" (one quarter of the udder gone bad from mastitis) because he could buy them cheap and they gave about as much milk out of three quarters as most cows gave out of four. Not pretty maybe, but it was a whole lot prettier than the sight of American workers lining up at the unemployment office today. From Ed, I relearned how to harness a team, how to run a grain thresher, how to shock corn and oats.

I'm sorry but I enjoyed all that hard work. There was a lot of companionship in farming then, and sort of like in sports, we would try to see who could outwork the other, all the time joking and telling stories. Seems like there was always something funny happening. I did not particularly like horses, especially the old blind mare I had to hitch with a good horse sometimes (another example of the boss saving money) until she literally walked off a steep creek bank while grazing and had to be put away. I could talk to a horse. I could not talk to a tractor although I often tried. And the fancier the tractors became technologically in ensuing years, the less I could talk to them. I had to shell out money for a trained mechanic who knew their language. Wayne Dinsmore, the famous champion of horse farming during the years of debate, is quoted in the previously mentioned book, admitting that "...a large proportion of farmers and farm boys are just too lazy... to get up and groom four or six good horses..." Well, Wayne, in your time it might not have been apparent yet, but the same kind of farmer who was too lazy to groom his horses was also too lazy to maintain his tractors, and the subsequent cost in repairs was much higher than buying a currycomb.

I can testify absolutely that it is just as satisfying to do farmwork with horses as with tractors, or just as dissatisfying, depending on your outlook. The physical work is about the same, and mentally, horses are less worrisome (they always start in the morning) except during a runaway. I treasure one distinct memory. I was 22 years old. I was driving a team of horses pulling an empty wagon to the barn at the end of a heavy day of threshing oats. The sun was setting. All was peaceful and lovely. I was tired and sweaty, but all of a sudden I was filled with a great contentment. If someone had asked me at that moment, I would unhesitatingly have said that I wanted to live


the rest of my life that way.

I wouldn't trade that moment for any ride on any \$300,000 tractor today, even with the air conditioner rendering the cab completely comfortable, even with the console radio playing my favorite songs, even with the monitors and blinking lights telling me that the world of the motor was in perfect harmony.

Most successful farmers of the horse era liked farming with horses and cried when the trucks hauled their teams away to be turned into fertilizer. I have quoted my neighbor Raymond Rall many times, saying in the late 1940s: "You know, Gene, with tractor farming, I am spending up the money that I made farming with horses." Farmers sold their horses not because they feared that horses couldn't compete with tractors in everyday farming. They feared that if they didn't switch to tractors, the farmers who did switch would take all the land away, even if they went broke doing it.

Secondly, it seems to me that efficiency and profit in farming should be concerned about securing some semblance of satisfaction and stability for the society that depends on farming too. Tractor farming can only proceed if the number of full-time farmers declines and the number of full-time consumers increases. That has led to a rather discontented society, as far as I can see. People seem more restless and paranoid. They fear even the wonderful array of food that agribusiness provides. It isn't even cheap anymore. More people than ever are opting to grow their own. And Horse Progress Days, begun just a few years ago, grows in popularity.

And that brings up another interesting phenomenon making itself felt. As human society becomes more and more enmeshed in its mechanical and electronic gadgetry, people are turning in record numbers to animal pets for solace. Apparently there is some essential need in the human psyche for that ancient relationship between humans and animals. The loving connection (sometimes overdone it seems to me) is extending itself beyond cats and dogs to all kinds of animals, especially horses. The economists don't look in this direction when they add and subtract their technological efficiency numbers. They should start. It just may happen one of these days that young farmers will lose their acquired attraction for tractors and find solace in horses again, especially if it is economically advantageous. It sure looks to me that this is already happening.

Agribusiness has not yet had to ask Washington for a bailout. That is because with farm subsidies, Washington bails out agriculture every year. Tell me, please, if one looks at all the data with total objectivity, how are tractors more efficient than draft horses? 

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