

***I Remember* - reminiscing of life in Berlin**

Draft horses: by Walter Bickford - March 13, 2005

I like useful animals. I always considered myself lucky to have been born early enough to experience the tail-end of the horse-powered era. (Always wished I was born 150 years earlier.) My earliest recollection of draft horses in Berlin was of Johnny Niedzial mowing the side hill below River Road opposite and a little ways down from the Tyler farm. The field belonged to the 1790 Farm. I don't know why John was mowing it. Maybe Mr. Arthur thought it too steep for a tractor. Anyway, my father was driving us to view our new home at what is now 243 Pleasant Street, in a 33 Plymouth. He must have known John, because he stopped to talk to him. It must have been about 1946 or 47. I was four or five at the time, and, for some reason, that picture of John and his team mowing that side hill has always stuck in my mind.

Several farms in Berlin still had draft horses in the late 40s. John Neidzial had Belgians, I think. Dan Tyler had a couple of Percherons (Joe and Blue) and a Belgian mare (Kitty). Amos Wheeler had a team. Joe Roseberry preferred draft mules (Jack and Jerry). He was a mule skinner in the woods of Ontario. I always thought they looked a little ominous. Now I prefer mules to horses. Mr. Speilvogel, who lived in the old Berlin House where the Mikelks now live, had a team that he used to plow the sidewalks.

Between the ages of ten and fourteen and impressionable, I pretty much grew up under the tutelage of Danny Tyler. It was a big thrill for me to sit on whatever horse he was using to plant or cultivate corn in the fields down around the South Berlin rotary. Danny had a degree in anthropology from Princeton. I swear he could smell Indian artifacts. He would say "whoa" and walk over a row or two and pick up an arrowhead. He always said that the high field just straight across the rotary near where North Brook empties into the Assabet River was a popular Indian campsite, or, possibly, a permanent village, because there were/are so many arrowheads there. Pretty soon I was walking behind a cultivator with the reins around my neck and loving it.

I used to like to spread manure with a team. One time Joe Terreo was loading the manure spreader with Dan's little John Deere. I was driving Kitty and Blue and the filled spreader across the road to spread cow s___ on the above mentioned Indian village, and, for some reason I looked back. Well, the tractor was upside down and Joe was pinned under it. Smoke was rising from the tractor. I leapt off the spreader and ran like hell back. Gas was leaking onto the hot manifold and burst into flames. I tried, but couldn't push the tractor enough to free Joe. His leg was pinned under the steering wheel. He was screaming in pain. I ran for some water. Fortunately, some guy driving by stopped and managed to free Joe, thus surely saving his life. (This has nothing to do with horses, but it popped into my mind, so I thought I'd throw it in.)

I had no fear of those one-ton horses and, as a result, could handle them quite well. I loved working with them. One time I got up about 6:30 AM, walked down across Bill Wheeler's fields to Danny's. I was barefoot; hardly ever wore shoes in the summer. I went to the back pasture, got a rope a round Joe's neck, led him down and tied him to the iron ring attached to the barn. I had to stand on a forty-quart

milk jug to buckle the collar. What was a real trick, was balancing on the dammed jug while wrestling a 100 pounds of gangly hames and harness up over the collar and properly draping it around Joe. (I weighed about 90 pounds at that time.) More than once I ended up on my back buried in harness cussing a blue streak. Anyway, I hooked Joe up to the express wagon and backed it against the retaining wall. I then pulled, pushed, jiggled and cursed a cultivator onto the wagon and drove it up to the Harriman Farm on Whitney Street in Northborough.

If you drive to Northborough via Whitney Street, just before you get to the bridge over the railroad, there is a large industrial building on the right. Well, that was a large empty field (I'd guess about 4 acres) planted in corn. I unloaded – rather threw – the cultivator off the wagon and hitched Joe to it. It must have been about 8:00 AM when we (Joe and I; kids think of animals as buddies) began to cultivate. Late in the morning Dan showed up in his 42 Ford pickup with a jelly sandwich for me. He complemented me pretty well. That made me feel grown up, so I kept at it, barefoot, all afternoon. I noticed Danny turning around in the barnyard once, so I know he checked on me. No way was he going to see me resting. We (Joe and I) finished late in the afternoon. Dan couldn't believe a kid would stick to a job like that all day. A few days later, I overheard him bragging to Cassy (Cassaropolis had a small dairy farm on Bridge Street in Marlborough.) about my cultivating feat. After that, I couldn't work hard enough to help Dan. That might have been what resulted in me thinking to this day, that grueling physical work is a pleasure. (Maybe I'm nuts.)

I had many memorable experiences with draft horses. Here are three more: One time, Dick Tervo (Maybe it was Dave Forbes?) and I were riding Joe back to the farm from someplace. I was mounted behind Dick. Just a little way down River Road from where the rotary now is, there was a road sign on the left. Well, as we road by I reached out and slapped it hard, knowing that Joe would jump and give Dick a little scare. Well Joe jumped all right – about four feet straight up. By the time Dick (again, either he or Dave) and I began our decent, Joe had hit the ground in a full gallop. I landed on the tar on my butt and elbows with Dick right on top of me. Now remember, this was at least a seven or eight foot fall. I thought my elbows were shattered. Dick had a few choice words for me, but I matched him in vulgarity and volume aimed at poor Joe. The air turned blue. Man, that was a hard lesson!

Another horse story: One time Dan lent Joe to a farmer in Shrewsbury near where route 140 meets route 9. The Shrewsbury farmer picked Joe up in a trailer. But when it came time, Dan to let me ride him home, bareback. As I came up the lights in Shrewsbury center on route 140 headed north, a car ran over a piece of metal. Joe jumped sideways into a parked car. I almost ended up on the roof. Joe dented the car a little, but I didn't wait for the owner to show up and apologize. I stayed on the back roads through Shrewsbury and Northborough and arrived at the farm about four hours later. I slid off of Joe and my legs froze in an inverted U. The pain was excruciating. I hobbled around for half an hour before I thought I would ever again walk normal.

My last horse story involves old Blue. He was a gentle, well-trained old horse, and I worked him a lot. But he got so old he could hardly get up once he lay down. He began to stink too. So Dan called Mickey Linkewicz. Mickey lived at the end of Allen Road and raised mink. Anyone with a sick or old horse would call Mickey. I

was about eleven and was determined that I could face life in the raw. So I led old Blue up to the back pasture where I knew Mickey was going to butcher him for mink food. I handed the reins to Mickey and backed away. I sat on the stonewall boundary between Danny's and Bill Wheeler's determined to watch. Well, as Mickey raised the pistol to Blue's temple, I had to turn away. I was certain I would perish at the bang. But I didn't. There was a loud crack of the pistol and a ka-thud. I turned, and old Blue was down. Mickey cut his throat to bleed him. Five minutes later I was pulling hide to help skin Blue.