

THE TRAINING AND CARE
of the
DRAFT HORSE

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Folk Studies

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I began this project with very little background knowledge on the subject other than what I had learned through the oral tradition. I believe that this is a true example of folklore because it is a body of knowledge that has been passed from generation to generation, never having been written down. If it ever was written down, it seems to have been discarded as unimportant, because I have been unable to find even one bit of written information pertaining to the training and care of draft horses. In its time this information was vital to almost any type of work, and as such became common knowledge. This may be the reason that there was very little, if any, written on the subject. But it is fast passing out of the oral tradition, and when this goes, so goes this knowledge, because this is the only place this information really exists.

I felt that my father was a good informant, since his was the last farm generation to grow up actually using this information. His knowledge represents the culmination of centuries of oral tradition. He was a child of the Depression, and during this period draft horses were essential to farm families. He has actually trained these horses himself, and actually used the methods he described to me, so I believe his information is valuable.

I asked him about the subject, and in several sessions, he gave me a fairly complete picture of the training and care of the draft horse. He suggested that I visit his old family farm and see the actual horse harness he had used. I had seen

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horses actually geared up in this harness when I was a child on this farm. But all of the horses are dead now, with the last one dying only about a month before I began my project. These horses were actually used for all of the farm work and were allowed to live out their lives in peace on the farm, because my grandfather couldn't bear to sell them, after they had "helped him in the depression" as he used to say.

I visited the farm, and after rooting through barns and corncribs finally found a few pieces of gear, showing bad wear and weather deterioration. I photographed these pieces, and the photos are included in this collection.

At a later session, my father drew some simple diagrams to try to explain how the gear worked on the horse, and where each piece was located. These diagrams, redrawn by me, are also included.

Also included in my collection is general information on the place of the horse on the farm, the origin of the draft horse, and the methods of obtaining a draft horse. All of this information came from my informant, and had been learned by him from oral tradition.

My father supplied one anecdote, which, as it is not nearly old enough to qualify as folklore, although it contains elements of folklore, I enclose here.

A hired man who worked for my father told him that when he was a boy, he was coming home with a horse pulling a sled full of wood, when the horse stopped and would go no further. After trying everything, he proceeded to build a fire under the horse. As soon as the fire became hot, the horse took a few steps forward, pulling the sled over the fire, and stopped.

The fire burned up the whole sled full of wood, and, as the little hired man said, "I got a whopping when I got home!" He took the expression "Build a fire under someone" literally!

It is my hope that this project will at least provide a record of basic information of the role the draft horse played in the American tradition.

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My informant was Lester Warren Bohannon of Route 1, Shelbyville, Ky, 40065, Shelby County. He is forty-five years old and was born on a farm at Elmburg, Kentucky in Shelby County. He comes from a typical farm, middle class, white American background. He has lived no more than two miles from his birthplace all his life, and has lived most of his life on the family farm. His travel has been only short vacation trips to surrounding states, other areas of the state, and to the southern states of Georgia, Florida, and Alabama. He is a farmer, and a substitute rural mail carrier. He graduated from Cropper High School, a small community high school. His family was of the Baptist denomination, and he has been a member of this group since early childhood, and is still attending the church he attended when he was a child. His community is definitely rural in character, but is not an isolated community, because it is near many large towns, such as Louisville, Lexington, Cincinnati, and Frankfort.

My information was gotten on several weekends that I was home, because my informant is my father. I asked him to tell me about the training and care of draft horses, as he had learned it. I had heard him mention very little of this information before. I got this information in my home. The setting was very relaxed. My father said he learned about work horses from first hand experience working with them, from what his father and older relatives and friends told him, and from his older brothers. When he was growing up, this knowledge was very important, because his family's

living was directly related to these horses.

My informant is a lively, talkative person who likes to swap tales and information. He is familiar with almost any kind of folk knowledge pertaining to farming.

Class "C" text

The process of training draft horses begins with the acquisition of a horse. My informant told me that draft horses were acquired three ways. One way was to breed, raise, and then train them. He said that most horses were acquired this way. Another way was to buy them at an auction. He said that in some place sales or auctions were held every Tuesday afternoon and many horses were bought and sold at these auctions. The third way to buy a horse was simply to hear of a horse for sale by way of the grapevine, and then to approach the owner with an offer. My informant said that most horses were sold after they had been broke, and that very few young colts were ever sold. In other words, most horses that were bought were mature and trained horses. The price for a draft horse might range from fifty to three hundred dollars, with the average price being around one hundred and fifty dollars. There was much wheeling and dealing and bargaining involved in the buying and selling of these draft horses. A highly touted horse might prove to be worthless after it was bought.

The training or "breaking" of horses has a language all its own and the horse harness is very much involved in this training. I will use the folk names for harness and techniques and try to explain by picture and diagram later the meanings of these.

A horse was "broken" when he reached the age of two years old. His training began by getting used to human handling and

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touching. If the horse was raised on a family farm, or a farm with few animals, this was no problem, because he had probably been surrounded by humans from his birth. If not, he was gradually gentled by continued touching, leading with a halter on, and gentle care. My informant emphasized the importance of gentle treatment of a young colt, because if the trainer was not gentle, the horse would become "spooky" and would be of no use to anyone.

The first actual step of training was getting the horse used to a bridle. The bridle would be gently put on and left for a time. When the horse was used to this, he would be lead around, and would gradually become used to being lead, and learn to respond to the person leading him. After the horse was good at leading, the gear would be put on him. This gear consisted of a collar, which was put on first, which was put around the horses neck, and which buckled on top. Then a set of britching was put on the horse. This consisted of a back band of leather and two haymes on each side of the horses neck. Attached to the haymes were trace chains which ran back by the side of the horse and hooked to the single tree, which was a long iron or wooden bar to which the farm machinery was hooked.

The horse was then lead around with his gear on, again having very gentle handling. Then an older, well broken horse was hooked together with the young horse, with the two horses making a team. The bit of the young horse was tied to the hayme of the lead horse with a lead rope. A set of check lines was then put on them. These guide the horse, and will be shown in a diagram. The two horses are then either walked

around together or hooked to a wagon. They are just walked until the young horse can walk quietly without prancing. The horse learns direction by a simple process. The driver will holler "Gee" and pull on the right line to go right, and holler "Haw" and pull on the left line to go left. He says "Whoa" and pulls on both lines to stop. This is repeated again and again. The presence of the older horse, who automatically does the right thing, is the main training method. This process is repeated until the young horse can work without being scittish. A well trained horse will walk a little to the right or left if he is out of line plowing, only by hearing the driver say "Gee" or "Haw".

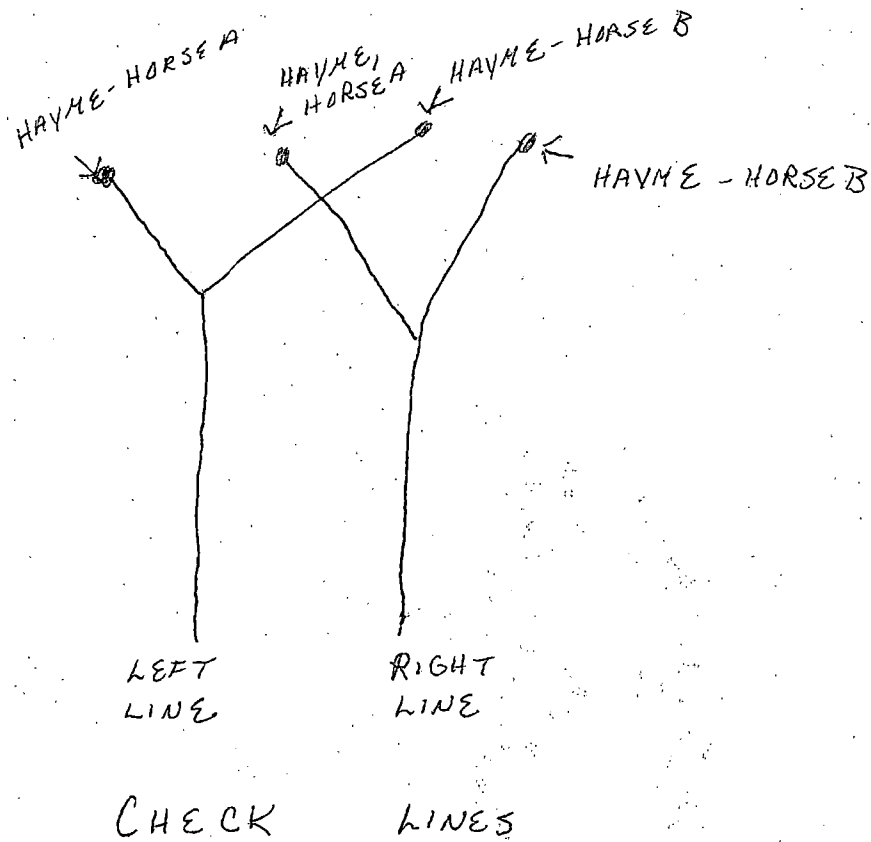
Although this training process was usually successful, the farmer had some failures. Some horses seemed to be lazy, and would not pull their share, straining just enough to keep the lines tight, but allowing the other horse to pull the weight of the load. Other horses would practically run all the way down a row of a field, wearing themselves out, but never slowing down. But the most useless horse of all was the outlaw. This was a horse that couldn't be broken. They were viscious, and would bite and kick. About the only purpose these horses served was use as a stud horse, and even then their use was limited, because people were afraid their bad temperament would be passed on. My informant said that he has seen such outlaw horses.

Draft horses represented a farmer's income and livelihood, so they were usually cared for well. But even well cared for horses

sometimes developed diseases, and farmers had special treatments for these diseases. One of the most common of these was foundering. This was a gastric disturbance, and was sometimes brought on by eating or drinking too much, but could be caused by almost anything. This disease made the horse swollen and stiff. There was really no cure, but my informant said that some people claimed that if you bathed the horses's legs in hot salt water it would help them. Another disease was called Sweeney. This was a bruised muscle in the shoulder caused by improper collar fitting. The treatment was to lance it, drain it, and put antiseptic on the wound. Colic was a disease caused by eating dusty feed, frozen feed, or spoiled feed. The horse would wheeze and cough. This disease could cause death and was usually treated by a veterinarian. Ringbones were caused by too hard pulling. They were almost the same as a sprained ankle in a human. The horse never got over this condition. The Thumps was caused by letting the horse get too hot and then cooling off too quickly. The horse was treated by covering with a blanket and walking. To prevent this, a horse would be cooled off gradually.

The draft horse in general was a large, rough-looking breed of horse. It was used mostly on farms to pull machinery, and for transportation, although a lighter type horse was preferred for transportation. The draft horse was also used in the city for pulling heavy loads, for delivery trucks, and other work. The common type of draft horse was a mixed breed, composed of strains of the Clydesdale, Morgan, the Indian or Spaniard horse, and many others. But it eventually became a fairly standard breed of horse. Their size ranged from one thousand to three

thousand pounds, but generally averaged one thousand, six hundred pounds. The draft horse had enormous feet with feathers or feathery hair surrounding the feet. They were extremely tall. Although of such a large size and having such great strength, these animals seemed to have an unusually gentle nature. Many farm families trusted their children of four and five years old to ride alone on these horses. The outlaw horses were few. These draft horses came to be almost a member of the family, and were usually given common human names such as Bill, Jack, Joe, Betty, etc. They were almost always given such names, but some times were named simple names like Whitey, Blackey, King, etc. The draft horse was very important to the farmer and laborer alike, because their living often depended on them. After the tractor was invented, their usefulness declined, but most farmers allowed the draft horses to live out peaceful lives on their farms, possibly because of the gratitude they had for the draft horse.

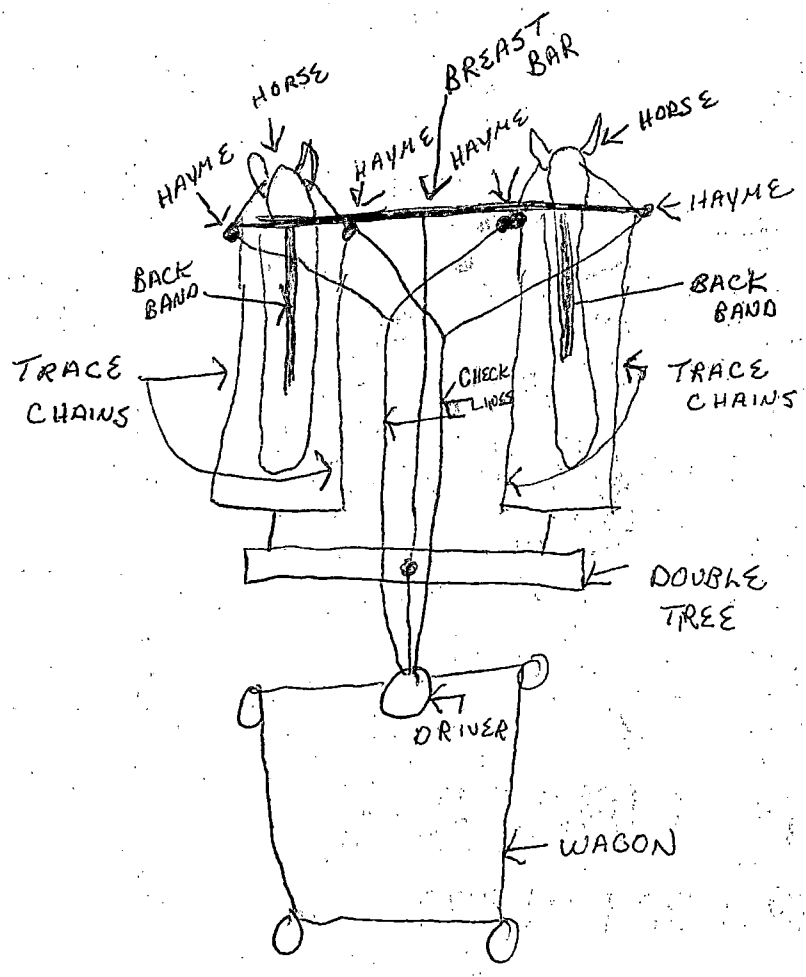


WHEN RIGHT LINE IS PULLED, RIGHT SIDE OF BOTH HORSES IS PULLED.

WHEN LEFT LINE IS PULLED, LEFT SIDE OF BOTH HORSES IS PULLED.

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HORSE "GEAR"

Information on Collector

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Birthplace: Shelbyville, Ky.
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