

# Johnny always planted with horses

Johnny Newton clung to check-rowed corn as he did to horse planters long after other farmers changed. They changed, he said, because they were lazy and couldn't plant straight rows anyway.

By JERRY WEBB  
University of Delaware

NEWARK, Del. — Two big black horses stepped briskly out of the darkened hallway of the barn and into the crisp sunshine of a warm Spring day. Their harness jingled and creaked as they were led down the lane toward the freshly tilled earth that spread northward from the gate.

Two small boys and an old man assembled silently under a locust tree to watch the ritual that was about to take place — the oak tree leaves had achieved their proper size; it was now time for Johnny Newton to plant corn.

Although the neighbors scoffed and some suggested he was a little strange, Johnny always planted corn with horses — long after tractors were used for most other jobs around the farm. Whether it was his love of horses or fear of breaking completely with the past that saved those old nags from the glue factory wasn't clear.

Technology had obviously passed them by, and yet there they were, two big black Percherons standing on either side of a corn planter tongue waiting impatiently to go to work.

To say Johnny Newton loved horses would have been a gross exaggeration on that warm Spring day. For although they were well cared for, fat and sleek and properly shod, the language abuse he heaped on them was dreadful. Words never before heard and long-remembered by small boys were used as the rough little teamster made ready for the job at hand.

Moving to hook up neck yokes and traces, he laid out the plan for the day to the horses. How they were going to plant that field with no fooling around into straight rows that could be followed by a half-awake farmhand on a tractor-driven cultivator.

Although Johnny explained his position very carefully and in the strongest possible language, he never really trusted those old nags. Through long association, he had learned that those fat and sassy hay burners would do everything but run away during the first few minutes in the field.

So the crafty old farmer made a few practice runs. No

seed, no fertilizer, and no check wire, just planter, horses and Johnny back and forth across that long field. Each horse did his best to forget everything he had learned during 15 years of productive farm work while the tough-talking little man yelled and cursed and slapped their rumps with the loose ends of the lines.

A half hour of this training program was enough to bring Prince and Fred back to the reality that they were draft horses pulling a corn planter in the north 30 instead of wild beasts engaged in a chariot race.

Puffing and sweating, horses and driver paused at the end of the field for a breather. While the team stood silently, Johnny filled the planter hoppers pausing only long enough in his swearing to drink water from an old wooden keg hidden under a wet tow sack in the weeds along the fence row.

The moment of truth had once again arrived for this locally famous trio. The time when seeds shoved into the ground would eventually describe the path followed by those headstrong old horses. Johnny's reputation of planting the straightest corn rows of any farmer in that part of the county was on the line.

Today's farmer may not see straight corn rows as any big deal. But back then they were important. Not only were they the hallmark of a good farmer, but they were necessary to subsequent cultivation. Without weed control chemicals, corn had to be cultivated several times. Farmers check-rowed their corn in equa-distant hills that permitted cultivating both the length and width of a field.

Johnny Newton clung to check-rowed corn as he did to horse planters long after other farmers changed. They changed, he said, because they were lazy and couldn't plant straight rows anyway. At that time there wasn't much evidence to show that more plants per acre with drilled planting was any better than check-rowing. And there was no doubt that corn that could be cultivated both ways had fewer weeds. Not only did the plants produce bigger, better ears, but the fields looked better and that was important.

This system of planting required a check wire — a wire

that stretched the length of the field and was held in position by a metal stake at each end. Every so many inches along the wire was a knot. When attached to the planter, those knots tripped a device that caused the planter to drop seeds in evenly spaced hills.

With a loud and final warning, Johnny attached the check wire to the planter and started the serious business of planting corn. As expected, those worrisome old nags did their job perfectly. Displaying an unexplained sense of direction and with little more attention from their mentor, they followed an almost invisible trail in the soft ground made by the planter on its previous pass. That trail left by an arm of the planter that swung down on either side stayed right under the tongue, thus assuring straight, evenly spaced corn rows.

A few days later, corn planting was done. The old horses went back to pasture to wait another year for meaningful work, and their leader went on to other chores.

Johnny Newton never did plant corn with a tractor. Age and an old war injury caught up with him a few years later, ending an annual ritual — more than a ritual, it was an event, something people gathered to watch.



Robert Peary is credited with being the first person to reach the North Pole, arriving there in April, 1909.

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