

Oxen team raised, trained by York Countian

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Remember the legends of the mighty woodsman, Paul Bunyan, and his blue ox, Babe?

York County has its own Paul, who's one up on Bunyan. This Manchester R2 young man has not one, but two, powerful oxen.

It was at the Woodsmen's Carnival, held annually at the Potter County town of Cherry Springs, that young Paul Hoover spied a pair of oxen for the very first time. Paul and his dad, Glenn, agreed that training a pair of cattle pullers would be both fun and a challenge.

In the Summer of 1974, they took the first step toward developing a team, with the purchase of a pair of "just weeks old" Holstein bull calves from a Towanda area dairyman.

Most of that first year was devoted to raising and taming Bill and Buck. The following Summer, training began in earnest for the boy and the steers, all three novices at this oxen business.

"When I first started their training," recalls Paul, "I could find no one who knew a thing about oxen. So we read lots of books about them. Now, almost everywhere we go, people come up to us and say, 'Oh yes, I remember my father having a pair when I was a kid!'"

One initial problem was finding a yoke, the piece of equipment that "ties" the two into a team. It's not the kind of thing you run down to the local machinery dealer and haul home cash-and-carry.

Again, the Hoovers turned to the books, looked at numerous pictures, turned on their imagination, and built their own. It bothers Paul, though, that he's still never put a yoke together that suits him just right. The one presently in use is

fashioned from oak, with bent hickory saplings that attach the heavy wood around the animals' necks.

Now, once you have a pair of oxen trained, just what do you do with them in this age of four-wheel-drive, diesel-fueled agriculture?

First, you load them up and haul the pair to the site of the original inspiration, the Woodsmen's Carnival. An appearance at the popular northern Pennsylvania festival was the first public "coming-out" of Bill and Buck.

The trio has also attended the Grangers old-fashioned exhibit at Williams Grove Park and made some appearances in York area parades. The remembrance of one Halloween parade march through the nearby town of Manchester sends the entire Hoover family into gales of laughter.

Hooked behind Bill and Buck that night was a small covered wagon carrying Paul's younger brother. Also on the wagon were two buckets, one for shelled corn that was thrown along the parade route, and one for "clean-up purposes" behind the team.

Suddenly, one exuberant youngster dashed from the sidewalk crowd to snatch a handful of corn. You guessed it: he grabbed into the wrong bucket and, needless to say, came up with a fistful of something other than yellow grain.

From some contacts with the few other oxen teams in surrounding states, Paul has picked up various pointers. One Maryland team owner taught him to put chains on the animals' horns in place of halters. Different parts of the country, he adds, observe various local customs on the placement of the chain.

"It's a sin to use a halter on oxen," grins Paul. So, like all well-trained teams, Bill and Buck readily respond to

voice commands and the occasional gentle touch of a lead stick. The two respond to the same commands used on horse teams; "Gee" for right, "Haw" for left and "Git Up!" for let's move along, fellas'.

Teams of oxen are almost unknown in Pennsylvania and the surrounding states. Paul is acquainted with only one other pair in the state, a team of Ayrshires from the Canton area. However, there is a report of a team recently brought into Lancaster County.

In the New England states, though, especially Maine, oxen pulling competition is on a par with the locally popular tractor pulling events.

"Raising and training oxen teams is a major 4-H project up there, like dairy or beef is around here," explains Paul. "Each fair has competition with ribbons and cash prizes. They have built long livestock pulling barns, or housing stables, for the many teams that enter each fair."

Pulling weights are constructed from a flat piece of iron, loaded with cement slabs. Points are awarded on distance and a time limit. Teams are entered into a category on their body weight, with class breaks every two hundred pounds.

And, according to Paul, oxen pulling is a sport unto itself. The cattle teams are never put into competition against horse teams.

Gentle as puppies, as Paul puts it, his beloved Bill and Buck now each weigh in at the 2100-pound level. The two have never been separated and are as attached to each other as Paul is to them.

"It would be impossible to ever separate them," he acknowledges. "They'd be lost without each other."

A massive, ripple-muscle pair, Buck and Bill eat mostly what the farm steers

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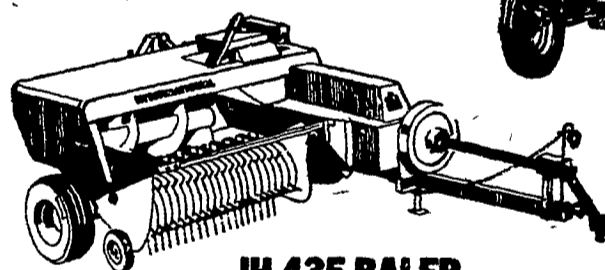


For Paul Hoover, his beloved oxen, Bill, on the left, and Buck, have been a dream come true. He raised the animals, caring for them since he purchased them as young calves.

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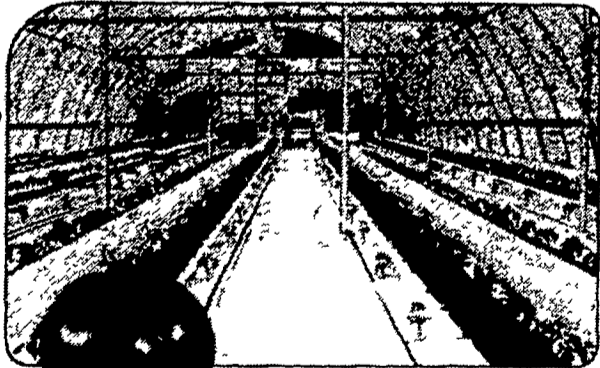
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