Work Horses
In Oregon

Now that the horse as a work animal has almost disappeared, I, who have spent the greater part of my life working with them, wish to record for future generations some of the difficulties and some of the satisfactions derived from this association as well as other phases of their usefulness to man. There are today young people in our midst who have not seen a horse at work. One of the things which inspired me to do this was an incident which happened several years ago when some college students, wishing to help brighten our city, were helping clear an old barn site. One of them dragged an old heavy harness from a shed and asked, "What was this used for?" So, this record.

Horses first brought by Spanish settlers to their settlements in Mexico and Texas soon found freedom in the great plains of central United States. There they were readily adopted as a means of transportation and the chase by the natives who eventually became excellent horsemen. These animals were small and did not displace the heavier oxen as work animals.

In the great migrations over the Oregon Trail in the eighteen forties and fifties, oxen were the vastly favored motive power for the wagons of the migrants. They were not only heavier and thus could more easily overcome the expected steep grades of the long journey, but would outlast horses in total distance traveled in a season. Some started with horses and lighter equipment but found it necessary to secure fresh teams at trading posts along the way. These changes caused delay, but even then they arrived before the slower moving oxen.

West of the Cascade Range the heavier growth of trees and shrubs was a seriously limiting factor to the usefulness of the horse. Few if any of them were used by the natives in that


[205]
Lewis E. Judson with team John and Frank, foal Bess, in 1903. Wagon is loaded with oats ground for horsefeed. Author’s Col.
region. Vine maple was the prevailing growth, especially along the streams and draws. The horses could not penetrate these thickets, but white man with his axes and saws soon opened ways through the obstructions.

The horses that did arrive in the Willamette Valley were little more than Indian ponies; more fit as saddle animals than for clearing land or moving heavier wagons over the roadless terrain of this new country. Horseback was the accepted method of lighter travel in western Oregon just as it had been in most of the rest of our nation.

No home was complete without a hitching post or rail. Saddles were as necessary as cars became in later times. It was sidesaddles for the women. Small children were carried in the arms of their parents, or, if a little older, were seated behind them. Older children needed mounts of their own. If a visit was to be long, the horses would be placed in the barn. Barns were an expected part of all occupied homes. Schools and churches each had a shelter, usually open to the east, where horses could be stabled out of the weather. These were expected conveniences erected as a community enterprise. Neighborhood pride prompted these buildings in the days when the purchase of a $50 horse attracted more attention than the purchase of a $4,000 car does at the present.

Among the few stallions making their way into the valley was one ridden the entire distance by "Lute" Savage. The animal lacked lung power and was of a sour disposition. He was a one-man horse, exceedingly fast for a short distance. His reputation as a winner of races soon spread throughout the country, and in this new country where news from the outside world was so scarce, and where horseracing was one of the few diversions, "Old George," as he soon became known, was much in demand as a sire for future saddle animals. Many of his get were of the same disposition as their sire. Most of the horses could be handled but some of the mares were almost vicious toward their handlers.

As desirable unclaimed land became harder to find in western Oregon, a few men spread out into central and eastern Oregon wherever they could find places where water was available and grassland was plentiful. Returning to the valley they
purchased strings of mares, usually buying the less desirable animals—something that could be bought cheaply and could produce a foal. These mares were taken back to the new ranches, branded and turned loose on the range. When spring came a slightly larger stallion would be turned loose with them. After three or four years, animals known as Bunch Grass horses began to be available in western Oregon. Many of these animals found their way into the barns of the Portland and Salem streetcar companies where the constant jogging over the boards placed crosswise between the rails of the streetcar lines soon stiffened them to a point where they were no longer able to keep the cars rolling on time. These horses would then pass into possession of someone who desired a cheap animal, or in a few instances, they were “sold” to the railroad company. This was accomplished by turning them into a pasture where a railroad crossed a property line at a long angle with a cattleguard at the long point. Stock caught in the narrowing side of the track would become frightened at an approaching train and run onto the track at the cattleguard, only to be hit by the train. This practice came to an end when the railroad companies fenced their lines. A perfect trap of this kind existed in Salem where Hoyt Street joined with Pringle Road. At that time Pringle Road crossed the railroad and continued on north on the property line which is now Fourteenth Street. A cattleguard existed there and more than one animal was caught at this point by a north-bound train.

In purchasing a work horse its many qualities and disposition had to be considered. The animals from Bunch Grass country were no exception. Being descendants of mares which were virtually rejects from the animals of western Oregon made it necessary to check not only dispositions but also their physical soundness. Some of the defects to be watched for in these horses
were the inability to draw a deep breath, to have full control of their legs, and weaknesses of the joints. An instance of bad disposition in an animal from the Bunch Grass brings to mind a neighbor who owned a good sound horse from there which he never turned out to graze without first buckling a short length of ox chain to the horse's foreleg in such a manner as to strike him on the other leg if he attempted to move faster than a walk. This enabled an intended victim of his evil disposition to escape without injury. On one occasion while hitched to a wagon with a teammate, a young man approached the team from the front. He stopped about ten feet from the team and raised his hand to point a finger. The next second the animal's teeth snapped about a foot short of the young man's nose. Another animal, a descendant from the same general Bunch Grass herd but sired by a western Oregon sire, would "crowd" when being worked with in her stall. She weighed over 1,500 pounds and with all that weight thrown against him a man could have the breath squeezed out of him. She was a good work animal with a vile disposition. These weaknesses and dispositions had a depressing effect on the sales value of Bunch Grass horses.

At least one strain of Indian ponies here in the Pacific Northwest deserves mention. The Appaloosa horses are a product of the Nez Perce Indians and took their name from the Palouse country of southeastern Washington. They are slightly heavier than most Indian horses. They are a very gentle and all around desirable animal for their class. A distinguishing characteristic which marks animals bearing a mixture of that blood exists as a patch on the rump usually near the right hip, where white or light hairs intermingle with the generally darker color of the animal.

Stallions of the recognized breeds of horses began to appear
Imported full-blooded Shires from England, at J. G. Edwards’ Hay Creek Ranch, in central Oregon. (OHS Collections.)

about 1880. For carriage and that type of use there were at least three well-known breeds, the French coach, the English hackney and an American strain generally known as Morgans. The Morgans carried plenty of size, an imposing appearance, plenty of life, and were not unduly nervous. The coach horse was similar in size and general qualities to the Morgan, but lacked the imposing appearance which the American bred animals carried. The English hackney was slightly lighter and was inclined to be more nervous.

The heavy horses that moved the great loads, whether it be in the city, on the farm, or in the woods, carried the blood of sires imported from the British Isles and that portion of continental Europe near the English Channel. The lighter of the four recognized breeds which reached this section of America were the Clydesdales from Scotland. The cooler climate of their native home endowed them with a heavier coat of hair than the other breeds. They made beautiful teams, carrying as they did, blazed faces and white feet.

The English draft horses known as Shires, like their Scottish contemporaries, were almost exclusively bay in color but somewhat lighter in shade. They lacked the white markings which were so attractive in the Scottish horses. They were somewhat heavier and stood up well for the heaviest trucking on the city
streets. However, with their white feet and blazed faces, the Clydesdales were far more glamorous for show-off purposes, while the Shires were the more reliable of the two breeds as work animals in the hands of varied drivers.

Of the two breeds of work horses from the mainland side of the English Channel to reach this section of our nation, the more numerous and earlier to arrive were the Percherons from northern France and nearby parts of Germany. They were generally gray in color. They gained a reputation for being a short-lived animal, as two or more of them died after being overfed during idle periods and then put to heavy work without a slow break-in. They proved to be more readily accepted as farm animals or in the woods than for service on the city streets. The other breed from Europe was the Belgians. They arrived too near the advent of the power age for full evaluation of their worth as draft animals. They were a mouse color and set lower to the ground than the other breeds mentioned. They were beautiful animals and very tractable.

In general the heavier horses were a vast improvement over the horses reaching the region west of the Cascade Range in earlier times. To those of us whose lives were so closely tied to the draft horse, their passing into the limbo of the past causes a vacancy in our lives not easy to dispel. The care of animals means long hours each day. There is, in spite of the confining nature of that business, a satisfying something which is hard to explain.

In the hands of a majority of men the draft horse was a thoroughly dependable animal. In other hands they were far less dependable. I happened to be among those who could get a favorable response to as great or a greater degree than the average in my efforts as a teamster. I wish here to record some of my experiences with animals which came under my care.

In the team which Father drove in my childhood, the mare carried considerable "Old George" blood. She herself was easy to handle but both of the mares among her four offspring were difficult. The one which it fell to my lot to drive was truly of a vicious nature. My first encounter with her was when I went to the pasture to catch her mother. I was putting the bridle on the old mare and while so engaged I felt something brushing
the seat of my pants. On looking down I realized that the two-year-old was standing there fanning the air with a hind foot in an attempt to kick me. We stood her in the back stall in the barn with a vacant stall next to her as a means of protecting the other horses from injury by her vicious heels. Of the hundreds of times that she tried in the years that I worked her, she never hit me once. I was always on the lookout.

What a relief it was after purchasing a somewhat larger mare at a farm sale, to have mares that didn’t have to be watched. This mare foaled three fillies and a colt. The first two of these were combined into a team weighing slightly over 1,200 pounds each. These were used while hauling a lot of wood up the hill out of the Croisan Canyon near the Sprague High School. One load of that wood which seemed heavier than the others gave the team difficulty. At one of the several stops for wind which had to be made on that hill, the team got right down and scratched rock for the fifth time before getting the load moving again. I would not have asked them to try it a sixth time. I would have unloaded.

The older of those two mares foaled by a different Clydesdale stallion and the colt was joined into a team with the colt from the older mare. The two colts were foaled within 24 hours of each other and weighed slightly over 1,400 pounds at maturity. They developed into the real pride of my experiences with draft horses. It was they who gained a reputation as the best pulling team in the "Red Hills." In strengthening the harness to hold them, the tugs were doubled back and heel chains added to give the needed length. Hame straps were bought by the half-dozen and hung up to cure to give added strength. The heaviest singletrees that implement houses had for sale were purchased. Doubletrees were of oak grub stock worked down to size and left to season. Pulling was not this team’s only merit; we worked so well together that I hardly needed lines to control them. When the wagon or implement was to be backed there was no biting at the neck yoke or their teammate’s neck as so many other teams did. This act often resulted in ramming the wagon or implement back out of control of the driver. I could hang the lines on a hame and talk to this team and that implement would be placed where it was
wanted. But the day came when this team was outdated. They were set aside in the midst of their usefulness by the truck and tractor. Although care and work with horses meant seven days a week of heavy work, there was a satisfying element to it which still stays by me in my 94th year.

A riding pony, Myrtle, which Mother rode to school during the winters of her last two years of school, was of no further use to her after she and father were married. She sold this pony to her brother, George McBee, who took her to his farm in the hills southwest of Dallas. Myrtle got away from her new owner and reappeared at her old home on the banks of the Willamette River south of Prospect Hill on the Marion County side. How she crossed the river is one of the mysteries we never solved.

Another feat of that animal while Mother still owned her was when Mother and two companions were riding and came upon workmen replacing a culvert over a small stream. The men had put one of the decking supports in place across the stream and trued it up with an adze. The other two horses went...
Belgians were among horses hauling pipes for Portland's Bull Run water system. First water arrived in city, 1895. (B. C. Towne photo, OHS Cols.)
through the creek, but when Mother tried to guide her mount through the water, she took the bit in her teeth and refused. Instead she walked across the inviting bridge support much to the merriment of the audience.

William Taylor, an admirer of good horseflesh, retired after many years as a dairyman in the Salem airport vicinity, and purchased a home near our farm. He brought to his new home a fine looking horse which he drove on occasions. He bought a half-ton of some high quality cheat hay which I had grown across the road from his home. I had assured him that this type of hay would add life and vigor to his horse. A few days later he started for town and his horse was so full of vigor that he was afraid to drive. He soon sold his horse and rig and the hay got the blame.

A very satisfying memory in my years of retirement is the remembrance of the time when the two colts which became my much-prized pulling team were two years old. In late April I placed them and a yearling filly in a large pasture in the lowlands of Spring Valley in Polk County where there would be plenty of feed. I inquired about them, but did not see them until after the heavy rains of the following fall. When I went after them, my brother-in-law went along to help catch them. I knew that no help would be needed but did not object to the company. When we reached a clearing in the pasture other horses were there but none of my three were in sight. I called in a loud voice, "Come Mike." He came from behind some nearby bushes and circled around me. Then Prince came splashing through the water on the ground; then the yearling, Biddy, came on a full run from much farther away. I went up to each, put halters on them and led them home. Soon the two horses were receiving their first lessons in harness. The fact that those animals which had not seen me or heard my voice in over six months should so quickly answer my call is a fond memory.

One of the many incidents which helped to establish the reputation of Prince and Mike as the best pulling team in the Red Hills occurred during the grain harvest of 1920. A move of approximately a half-mile was to be made. In the middle of that move was a steep pitch which we feared was too much for one team to pull. The crew was asked to choose a team to
help pull the threshing equipment and the designated team was put in the lead position. When the separator was on the steepest part of that rise, the lead team stopped. All were quietly given time to recover their wind. When the signal was given to pull again, the leading team failed to tighten a tug, barely keeping their doubletrees from under the feet of the wheel team until the machine had been moved half its length. Although later that season other steep grades were encountered no help was asked.

Being a firm believer in a Supreme Being and a hereafter, I seldom asked a team to try what I knew would be a hard pull without silently breathing to the Almighty a prayer that I might be guided into doing that which would induce the team to make the necessary effort. They did not fail me.

With the passing of the draft and light rig horses into the limbo of the past, vast changes came to our cities, villages and farms. Blacksmith shops where horses received their shoes and horse-drawn equipment was repaired have given way to the auto repair shop. Livery stables where horses could be sheltered for the day or a horse and light rig rented have been replaced by the service station. The family garage, more often than not, has succeeded the barn where hay for the year was stored in a loft over the main floor.

As great as were the changes wrought in the towns by the replacement of the horse as a motive power, the changes on the farms were vastly greater. The acreage which a farmer or farm family was able to cultivate successfully was doubled or more on the grain farms. With the retirement of work animals on many farms, other livestock were also eliminated. Relieved of the necessity of fences to restrain the wanderings of livestock, farm owners were quick to remove them. Without the fences the old fencerows, where native shrubs strove to regain their lost lands, are gradually disappearing.

The shade tree left in some places for the convenience of cattle and horses is no longer needed. The great barns where mountains of loose hay had to be stored in a second floor loft are a thing of the past. The machine shed has increased in size and importance.

On row crop farms, the acreage handled has not been so
greatly increased, but the production per acre on both types has been substantially increased. This is the result of an ability to work the soil so much faster when the weather is favorable.

No longer the "Plowman homewards plods his weary way," but rides home on his tractor, shuts off the motor and prepares to clean up for his evening meal, knowing that a great share of his time need not be spent in caring for livestock. Chickens which were a part of every farmstead no longer provoke the kitchen gardener or disturb the wife's flower beds. The cock no longer disturbs the household with his strident tones at the first peep of the coming day.

All that can be recorded is to remind future generations of a few of the past ways of life; a few of the trials and triumphs of past times and generations.