

OF OXBELLS AND CHRISTMAS

BY TERRY TODD

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Preface: In an unpublished memory piece written in 1976, Terry first wrote about his fascination with draft animals, a fascination that ultimately led us to buy our own team of draft horses and to learn to use them on our farm in Nova Scotia. "Twelve years ago," he wrote, "I went to the Pennsylvania State Fair in Harrisburg and I saw (paid attention to, actually) my first draft horses. There must have been twenty teams or so entered in a pulling contest and I was so taken by their power, their great grace, their willingness to do what was required, and to me what was their beauty, that the memory of that night is still clear in my mind. How fine it would be, I thought, to own and work such animals. I was 26 years old then and to the best of my knowledge, I'd never seen an animal hitched to work."

During our time in Nova Scotia, we had many opportunities to see horses and oxen hitched to work (and to work them ourselves) as we lived in Lunenburg County along the South Shore of Nova Scotia and its small farms were so rocky that horses and oxen were preferred over tractors for many farm tasks. Most of our neighbors also lived as we did, heating their homes with wood, not electricity; cooking on wood stoves much of the time; raising gardens and putting up vegetables for the winter; and raising and butchering their own animals for meat. The Gates family described in Terry's article were close neighbors and good friends and they taught us a lot about living from, and being good stewards of, the land. Writing "Of Oxbells and Christmas," was one of Terry's favorite Sports Illustrated assignments. It allowed him to pay homage to a way of life that was vanishing in North America; it allowed him to spend time with large, powerful animals; and it allowed him to honor men like Harold Gates, who had the ability to control huge beasts with a quiet word and the smallest of gestures. Terry understood that Harold's was a special kind of strength. ~ Jan Todd



Lunenburg County is a handsome piece of real estate on the rocky south shore of Nova Scotia. Settled primarily by Germans in the 1750s, the county enjoys its greatest fame as the birthplace and home of the undefeated schooner Bluenose, but it also deserves to be known for two other reasons that intertwine like the spiky branches of a holly wreath. One is that Lunenburg County's combination of soil and climate has made it the center of the Christmas-tree industry in northeastern North America. In its damp dells the steeple-shaped balsam fir—the *ne plus ultra* of Yuletide decorations in Canada and on the East Coast of the U.S.—is a hardy native, springing up unrelentingly no matter how many times an area is cut over.

The other reason to celebrate Lunenburg County has to do with the fact that when the original settlers landed along the south shore, they brought with them a tradition: the castration of young bulls and the use of the

resulting oxen in yoked pairs as draught animals. And a useful tradition it was, in the heavily forested, boulder-strewn places the settlers shaped into homesteads. That it thrives can be seen any July when more than a hundred beautifully groomed oxtteams glisten fatly in the sunlight as they parade at the Lunenburg County Fair. All those well-broke oxen in the fair are a clear indication that there are hundreds more in the surrounding area whose owners chose not to go to the trouble of exhibiting them. It's likely that there are more working oxen in and near Lunenburg County than in all of the rest of Canada.

In the summer of 1870, John Gaetz drove an oxtteam from Riverport, near the mouth of Lunenburg County's Lahave River, to New Germany, 40 miles upstream, then turned right and headed farther inland to reach the Stanburne road. He'd bought the old Goudey place there—225 acres, with a house that was even then the oldest in the community—and he was bringing his



In 1976 we purchased our first draft horses, a well-trained team who were half Belgian and half Percheron. We named the mare Cindy, and the gelding Don, in honor of Don and Cindy Reinhoudt, the famous powerlifters.

family and possessions with him in a wagon. The house had, and still has, 36-inch-wide baseboards of pine that were cut on the place, and many of the doors in the house are simply single pieces of old heartwood pine.

John Gaetz was known as a good ox teamster—and there were many such in those days. The oxen he drove up to Stanburne were probably not the first to graze that hilly farm, but they are the first still well remembered. The senior rememberer now is his grandson, Sumner Gates, the old name Gaetz having been abandoned generations ago as being too “Dutchy.” “Them oxen of my grandfather’s was the first around here we know about for sure,” Gates recalls, “but there’s been many a one to follow.” And Sumner has seen most of them himself, having lived on the farm for 92 years. “Since we came here the place has never been without the sight of oxen and the sound of ox bells,” is the way he likes to put it, speaking quietly from his couch by the wood cookstove, tobacco smoke lifting straight as a sunray from the bowl of his pipe. “Ox teams don’t just happen, you know. You’ve got to get the creeturs when they’re small, and mate them well for size, and lead them by their halters with ropes. And then you’ve got to put the head yoke onto ‘em. That’s when the fun begins.”

The head yoke to which Gates refers is different from the more common bow yokes seen in U.S. museums or in history books. “Bow yokes fit around the shoulders of the oxen sort of like a horse collar,” Gates explains. “But the German-style head yokes we use up here are all hand carved from yellow birch to fit the head and horns of each ox in a team. And with a young team you have to

carve a new one every year till they’re six years old.”

As Gates talks, shortly before last Christmas, surrounded by the woven smells of mincemeat pie and baking bread, he often glances out the window and seems to be listening for something. And then he hears it. The heavy, unmistakable ringing in the December air of the ox bells on the straps around the necks of Bright and Lion, at more than 2,000 pounds apiece the largest oxen in the county, as they ease up the ice-slick hill from the barn toward the farmhouse. They’re led, as they always are these days, by the voice and whip of Sumner’s son, Harold, the fourth Gates oxman to work the family farm. “Haugh, Lion! Haugh! Hup!” he cries as the huge beasts heave themselves forward into Sumner’s view.

“My Jesus, but they’re some lovely,” he says, as his old eyes follow them through the wavy, lightly frosted windowpane, the vantage point from which he observes what he can these days of the goings-on at the farm. “I don’t get out and around now like I always did before,” he observes, without rancor. “I usually just stay handy home here since my feet went religious on me.”

“Religious?” a visitor asks.

“Oh yes, I was always quite a step dancer, you know. I even stepped on stage in Boston during the first war, but then here a few years ago my feet went religious and wouldn’t dance for me. But by then Harold, although he can’t step dance a lick, was a better teamster than I was, and I knew the farm was in good hands.”

The hands in question are indeed capable—large, square and hard as wooden mallets—and they’re attached to an equally capable body. Harold may be 63 years old, but at six feet and 195 pounds he still moves with the controlled power of a young Prussian soldier. Years of expo-



Bridgewater, Nova Scotia, the largest town in Lunenburg County, holds an annual summer fair where, in the 1970s, it was not unusual to see as many as 100 ox teams entered in the ox pull and conformation contests. These teams are waiting to participate in the pulling contest. Note the head yokes.



Terry's strength was a useful commodity in rural Nova Scotia. Here he assists Harold Gates—the subject of the *Sports Illustrated* article—tie one of oxen's rear feet to a stanchion so Harold can change its shoes. Like horses, oxen wear metal shoes to protect their hooves, although theirs have two parts because of their split hoof.

sure to the sun and wind have burnished his face to the deep red-brown of mahogany, and his movements around the farm have the surety of well-learned recitations.

The farm is of the same type and size it was when Gaetz first arrived. “We do a little of everything here,” Harold says, “and it keeps us some busy. We have the animals, of course—the old and the young yoke of oxen, the chickens, the pigs, the beef cattle, the milk cow and Champ, my big Percheron. The money comes from selling off a big, well-broke oxtteam as I bring my young ones along. In fact, I may sell Bright and Lion soon [in fact, they were sold five weeks ago, to be replaced by a pair of 2-year-olds also named Bright and Lion, as have been all the family's oxen since John Gaetz arrived in Nova Scotia]. They're the heaviest team I've ever had. The off ox, Lion, girts over nine feet, which means he weighs well over a ton. Of course, we sell a few beef cattle and pigs every year—they we don't eat. And we raise extra turnips and potatoes to sell, and other vegetables, too, by times, but our main money crop comes from our woodlots.”

Thirty of the Gates's acres are cleared, and the rest are covered by a mixture of hardwoods, including several varieties of poplar, birch, oak, ash and maple, and softwoods, including assorted hemlocks, pines, spruces and firs. “We always cut in a cycle here,” Harold explains, “so we never take more than the land can grow. We've got more wood on the place now than there was when the family came. I sell a big junk of pulpwood every year, and

some firewood and saw timber, and the odd lot of fence stakes every now and again. But our big cash crop for years has been our Christmas trees.”

Forty acres of the Gates farm is set aside for a Christmas-tree lot, all of it now in balsam fir. The lot was created by felling the tall trees from those 40 acres for pulp or firewood so the young native fir could sprout and grow unshaded; it is maintained by cutting back the young trees and brush of other varieties so they won't crowd out or misshape the firs.

“I go into the woods in April, before the new growth starts, to do my trimming and shaping for the coming Christmas season,” Harold says, “and I work there until I have to begin my later spring chores on the farm. I cut the brush back with shears and an ax, and I do most of my shaping with a long knife I made out of an old crosscut saw blade. I use it like them Indians use machetes—I cut downward and out from the center o'er the whole tree to make the branches even. Most are even by their nature, but I help 'em along a bit.

“Late in the fall I begin to cut and stack the trees beside my woods road. That would be the first week of November, and I'd not think it's a good day unless I cut and drag and stack 200 trees. Some men always cut with a chain saw, but I often still use an ax with a good sharp edge onto it. The sap from the cut fir smells fresh without all that gasoline and oil to get in the way, and it's so quiet without a saw that the woods are more interesting. Just the other day I was in the tree lot, cutting, when I heard an eagle cry, and when I looked up, I saw him dive on a rabbit. And by God if he didn't miss the rabbit on the first rush but catch him by half flying and half running along the ground. I've never seen the beat of it, and if I'd been using a power saw I'd have missed the whole thing.”

After Harold has piled several hundred trees beside his narrow woods road, he'll go to the barn, take the yoke down from its peg, strap it to the heads of the oxen, lead them from the barn, hitch them to either a rubber-tired wooden wagon or, if there's snow on the ground, a double-runner sled and drive them out to bring the trees up nearer the house where they can be picked up by the local wholesaler.

Dale Joudrey has run Scotia Best Xmas Tree Ltd. in Elmwood with the help of her two sons since her husband died in 1981. “We don't go over 30 miles or so away from Elmwood to buy,” she says, “and there we're only one of the wholesalers. We hope to ship almost 50,000 trees this year of the 750,000 that come from Lunenburg

County. Our peak time to ship comes from American Thanksgiving till about the 10th of December.

“Our best trees are what we call single ties. They’re perfect, and we don’t tie them with another tree. The ones we do tie, we bale with between two and eight trees, depending on size. We tie them by hand, and the taller they are the fewer we put in a bale. Once we’re hard at it in the fall, we’ll have 28 to 30 people working for us, grading and stacking and baling and loading the trucks that carry the trees down south. Some of the other shippers will go really far south, as far as Atlanta. And the demand’s growing, so I guess as long as them fellows in the States have Christmas we’ll send ‘em down our trees.”

All of which suits Harold just fine, because trees provide him with a reliable, renewable cash crop as well as a good reason to use his beloved oxen out in those quiet, sweet-smelling woods. And to a man like Harold, oxen give greater pleasure than he could ever derive from work with a machine. No doubt only someone who has raised a calf and carefully mated it, then cared for and trained it over a period of years so that it would grow from a spindly, mewling baby into half of a two-ton extension of his teamster can understand what Harold feels. And no doubt only someone who walks every day of his life on the same paths his father, grandfather and great-grandfather walked, following behind them in the dailiness of a small farm’s patterns, using in the living woods cries learned from men long dead to control the power of the yoked team, can understand what it means to find a good way to live and then, by God, hew to it.

“The young men from the agricultural college say doing work with our cattle isn’t efficient,” Sumner says with some heat. “Not efficient! Able to break the land, sow the seed, cultivate the corn and oats, mow the hay, haul it to the barn and so feed themselves and us besides, fertilize the soil while they’re doing it and even reproduce. And yet they’re not efficient. Well, you can’t eat your tractor when it breaks down, and you can’t put old crankcase oil on your turnips. And why work away to make the money to buy \$100,000 worth of equipment so you can farm quicker, when if you didn’t work away you’d have enough time so you wouldn’t have to work as quick?” As he says this, Sumner leans his spare body



Bright and Lion wait patiently as Harold Gates throws Christmas trees high in the air while loading the sled for the first part of the trees’ journey to the south.

slowly against the back of the couch, smiles and says, “But I’m just an old man and probably don’t understand.”

One thing that’s not hard to understand, sitting around the wood stove after a belt-stretching meal of food grown almost entirely on the place and prepared by Sumner’s wife, Hazel, and daughter, Minnie, watching the lights flickering in the emerald triangle of balsam fir in the front room and listening to a group of neighbors who’ve brought their guitars, spoons, harmonicas and voices to share them on a Christmas evening, is that underlying the festivities is a constant bass note of plenty. It resonates from the potato, apple and carrot bins and stacked heads of cabbage in the basement, from the fresh milk, eggs and churned butter in the kitchen, from the nearby woodshed fairly groaning with dried stovewood for the cold nights to come, from the hay piled high in the watertight barn, from the smokehouse hung full of sausage and ham, from the cud-chewing ruminations of old Bright and Lion.

On the Gates farm Christmas is a holiday as it remains in our oldest dreams, and even the young evergreens down the hill grow slowly toward the day when they will play their part in the season’s amplitude.