

'Clydesdales hard to beat'

Local farmer's love affair with heavy horses

BY JENNIFER ENRIGHT

Jeff Nurse makes no secret of the fact that he prefers Clydesdales over any other draft horses. He considers them by far the easiest of the heavy horses to handle.

When he was growing up he got a thrill out of driving Percherons owned by his neighbour Tom Brownridge, the father of Ward Brownridge from Halton Hills. But his attachment to that breed didn't extend much beyond that; he prefers his dark bay Clydesdales with their full white feet. "I just like the temperament of the Clydesdales better than anything else. They're pretty hard to beat."

"I JUST LIKE THE TEMPERAMENT OF THE CLYDESDALES"

At his farm off Trafalgar Road he has five Clydesdales, and every year he shows them at Country Heritage Park's Heavy Horse Field Days event. Jeff explained that he enjoys taking the horses to Country Heritage Park where he's given the opportunity to teach people about these animals. Handlers talk to people about the horses and there are demonstrations showing horses pulling farm equipment. It's different from horse shows, where Clydesdales are competing in a large ring and the emphasis is on making the horses look good for the judges. He said the atmosphere at horse shows isn't always open and accessible. "People (at horse shows) are too busy and they won't take the time to talk to people and to explain things about horses."

Jeff said he decided to acquire Clydesdale horses about 15 years ago because he'd liked these large horses as a boy. He can remember how much he enjoyed helping his grandfather,

Richard Joseph Graham, known as R. J., take his Clydesdales to horse shows.

Many people of Scottish ancestry, such as Jeff's grandfather, showed a marked preference for these horses since they were developed as a breed in their ancestral homeland. As Grant MacEwan notes in his book, *Heavy Horses: An Illustrated History of the Draft Horse*, in pioneer days Scotland's best known exports to Canada included not only settlers and Scotch whiskey but also Clydesdale horses. But something else these Scottish immigrants exported was a fiercely held belief in their own native draft horses, the Clydesdales. Some newcomers to Canada, many of whom were Scots, took this preference to extremes. But their stubbornness was just as strongly matched by the competing loyalties of other immigrants with preferences for other heavy horses. In pioneer days, MacEwan notes that quite often there were blocks of Percheron supporters and Clydesdale supporters, and the two didn't always coexist easily. Occasionally, these loyalties divided rural communities. In some districts, he writes that "Clydesdale supporters sat defiantly at one end of the judging ring bleachers and Percheron supporters with the same serious scowls sat at the other." That poisoned atmosphere sometimes extended to other places as well; one rural church that MacEwan writes about had Percheron supporters sitting on the left side of the central pew and their Clydesdale counterparts on the other side.

Clydesdales developed as a breed in the 1700s in Scotland when Flemish horses were introduced to improve the native draft stock. The breed, which originated in the Clyde Valley area of Scotland, quickly assumed different tasks in its native homeland working as



Jeff Nurse says his Clydesdale, Glennie (pictured here), is a gentle creature that can be trusted, even among crowds of kids during special events. Each year, Jeff takes some of his Clydesdales to local fairs, such as those in Georgetown, Milton and Acton.

a farm animal as well as assisting in the coalfields of Lanarkshire (previously the Clydesdale area) and hauling heavy loads on the streets of Glasgow. But in much earlier days, during medieval times, the original heavy horses, went into battle, as they could handle the

HEAVY HORSES... "WERE ESSENTIALLY CREATURES WITHOUT AGGRESSIVE TENDENCIES"

weight of a knight and armour that sometimes weighed between 350 to 425 pounds. Milton Meltzer writes in *Hold Your Horses!* that the lighter Arabian horses didn't make good war horses. However, even heavy horses weren't exactly suited to the strife of battle, according to Donald Braider, author of *The Life, History and Magic of the Horse*. Heavy horses could be trained as fight-

ing machines, but they were essentially creatures "without aggressive tendencies," as Braider notes.

Sometimes, even today, these horses are forced to do things that might seem contrary to their true nature. At some show rings, Clydesdales are "hyped" up, as Jeff explains, to show off in front of the judges. And this is something he doesn't agree with.

Jeff prefers to capitalize on his horses' natural disposition as even-tempered animals. He's never had any desire to take on the training of animals that are less compliant by nature. "I've heard horror stories about horses rearing. But I've never had that happen."

While his cows are his business partners, his Clydesdales remain not only his business partners but also his friends. He draws a lot of satisfaction from these large horses, and he hopes to show six-horse hitches someday when he retires.

Old Farm Iron weekend

BY JENNIFER ENRIGHT

If you know Reg Cressman well, then you'll recognize that he has the makings of one fine storyteller. As general manager of Country Heritage Park, he deals with special events such as weddings and corporate launches, but there's also another aspect to the man: he can spin a yarn that brings to life the rural past.

Storytelling is part of what goes on at the Park each year, and Mr. Cressman and the volunteer interpreters at the park are adept at weaving stories.

There won't be any special demonstrations at the park on the weekend of August 14 and 15, but there will be a book of sorts complete with a theme. It isn't the kind of book you can open up. Just think of it as a book embodied in the park itself, with each chapter represented by one of the park's many historic buildings or public exhibits.

The title is the expression *Old Farm Iron*, and if you want to find out about

all the things that represents then you can walk from one building to another or one exhibit to the next to delve into its selected chapters. That's how you'll find your story and bring it to life.

"FIND YOUR STORY AND BRING IT TO LIFE"

The Old Farm Iron weekend will focus on the old iron metals employed by rural people from yesteryear and how they played a role in agricultural life. People will find out about all kinds of things associated with the metal at the park. You can see old irons used for ironing clothes, cast iron pots hanging on metal hangers, and a blacksmith's scrap heap complete with assorted pieces of iron. There will also be many tractors on display, all made of metal, that go by various names: the Rumely; the Happy Farmer; the Massey Harris

Pony; the Massey Harris Mustang, and a tractor known by the name Orchard. Reg says this last old tractor is unlike many at the park. "The Orchard tractor was used in orchards. It has special fenders under the wheels to lift the branches up."

For a newer version of farm iron you can check out the 1957 Volkswagen vehicle on site. Or if you prefer to see something else you might want to visit Lucas House to look at the old iron woodstove.

Don't worry if you don't know how to end your story. If you can't think of a suitable conclusion, visit the old schoolhouse where you can ring the iron school bell. That should help you complete the last page of your book.

For the Old Farm Iron event, the park will be open from 12 noon until 5 p.m. Daily admission is \$7 for adults, \$6 for seniors, and \$4 for children. There's also a family package available for \$20.

For more information on Country

Heritage Park, call 905-878-8151 or 1-888-307-3276 or visit the website at www.countryheritagepark.com.

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