

# The heavy cost of showing horses

It's a family affair. For Gord and Lois Lewis of Uxbridge, entries in Markham Fair's heavy horse shows and other country exhibitions extend through five generations, including Gord's grandfather, his father, two sons, two daughters and six grandchildren.

"It's an activity that's held us all together," says the 85-year-old who, although no longer actively engaged in the hobby, was certain to be watching proceedings from a ringside seat Saturday.

While Gord appreciates the qualities of all heavy horse breeds including Belgians and Percherons, his favoured choice is and always has been Clydesdales.

"That's what my father raised down on the farm," he said. "He also showed his prize-winning steeds at Agincourt fair."

Gord remembers the very first time he entered a heavy horse class.

"I was 10 years old at the time and living on McCowan Road across from the present Markham Fair site. My dad arranged for Markham driver Gordon Lunau to transport a mare and a colt to the old Markham fairgrounds then located on the south side of Hwy. No. 7, east of Hwy. 48.

"It was like yesterday," he says. "The mare won a championship."

For the proud participant, receiving a bright blue ribbon undoubtedly eased the pain of walking the horse and colt home, a distance of more than five miles.

Later, when a little older, he would drive a heavy horse team down Markham's Main Street in a processional fair parade. That, too, was a satisfying occasion.

During the past 75 years, Gord has entered every possible heavy horse class at the fair, including four and six-horse hitches, singles and teams. Last month, he was convinced to temporarily come out of retirement and show a colt at Sunderland Fair.



## Roaming Around

with Jim Thomas

The Lewis family room displays dozens of ribbons, plaques and trophies.

For a time, Gord served on Markham Fair's heavy horse committee but discovered dual commitments to both show and management responsibilities difficult. Shannon Hughes, his granddaughter, is a committee member, along with Blair Purcell, Joyce Lapp, Don Miller, Danny Bound, Brad Grant, Sarah Harper and Sarah Mount.

In addition to Markham and Sunderland, the Lewis family's tours of duty have included fairs in Port Perry, Rocton, Woodbridge and Ayr.

One summer, they made 26 appearances, including a show in Detroit. He also drove a team in the 65-and-over class at the Chicago world's fair.

At a fair in Carp, near Ottawa, there were 25 six-horse hitches with 150 entries in the ring at one time.

"It was a sight I'll never forget," Gord said.

It's a hobby, but at what cost.

The price for a single show class Clydesdale can range from \$15,000 to \$25,000, he said. "If it's not a show horse, it's worth nothing," he said. However, the investment doesn't end there. To harness a six-horse hitch can run as high as \$24,000 with a single-seat wagon for driver and assis-

tant costing between \$20,000 and \$80,000. Labour costs to shoe a horse can total \$85, excluding the price of four shoes.

"It's become a moneyed man's game," Gord said.

Fortunately for Gord and son Steve, home acreage plus rented lands produce sufficient hay for all horses. They purchase additional grain.

Have show entries increased?

The numbers are down, but the quality is up," says Gord. "Good horses attract large crowds," he said.

Why the interest and enthusiasm?

"It's fun," says daughter Darlene. While rivalry between competitors can be keen, it's never so intense as to surpass feelings of friendliness and co-operation, she notes.

"They're all great people," she said. "We work together."

Gord recalls travelling to the west coast and meeting friends with the same common interest all along the way.

But there's more to showmanship than parading a horse in front of groups of qualified judges - much more, Darlene says. First, the animal must be bathed, then have its mane rolled, its tail braided and its feet combed (feathered). Much of the work is done minutes before a show begins.

With respect to injury through accidents, Gord says the risk is low. In his many years holding the reins, he's only witnessed two run-aways, one of these at Toronto's Royal Winter Fair. None at Markham.

Are any Lewis Clydesdales for sale?

"All of them," Gord said.

"All but one," interjects Darlene. Princess, her favourite, is priceless.

*Jim Thomas is a Stouffville resident who has written for area newspapers for more than 60 years.*

# Community on edge waiting for answers

The shock has been replaced by the guilt.

One week ago today, downtown Stouffville looked like it had captured another role in a movie or TV series.

Cameras rolled under bright lights. Police officers directed traffic. Pedestrians were shooed off - "You're in my shot" - sidewalks they walk daily by big-city media personnel.

But this was too real.

The news stunned. The heads of six cats had been found scattered across east-side Stouffville late last summer, police announced.

Some of the heads were placed in front of a daycare centre and nearby home on Montreal Street and across the street from Summitview Public School, right on Main Street.

You were appalled, naturally.

How about our mourning neighbours who lost their pets? These weren't just "cats". They were members of their Stouffville families, as every pet owner knows.

Twelve York Regional Police officers were all over the east end Sunday, knocking on some 1,000 doors as they looked for more tips.

You had already called the cops more than 250 times, offering up some "good, good" leads, police said as they thanked the community.

Residents walking their dogs in the early-morning rain were shocked to see a search-and-rescue vehicle, the officers and six police cars in the Summitview parking lot, until they



## Off The Top

with Jim Mason

were told it was part of the cats investigation.

The guilt had set in. Residents recalled seeing dead cats, suspicious looking people and garbage bags along Tenth Line and other streets this summer.

The posters with the cute photographs of missing cats haunted them.

As of yesterday, the case remained unsolved.

Cat owners keep their best friends indoors and under watch.

Their neighbours speculated about what kind of a sicko was still out there in our town.

What could they do next? They referenced statistics that show serial killers often start out by killing animals, reeling off the names of some of the most notorious in criminal history.

Are our children safe?

The guilt had been replaced by fear.

*Jim Mason is editor of The Sun-Tribune. Follow him on Twitter @stouffeditor*

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