

Tools of Yesterday

One of the main reasons for museums is to keep alive our sense of the past and to gain an insight into the lives of our ancestors. The Colebrook Historical Museum has an extensive collection of farm and woodworking tools, some of which may be on display at any given time. The following are descriptions of some of the objects that you might see during a visit:

Ox yokes. The size of our yoke indicates that it was made for young oxen. It is constructed with a great deal of skill, indicated by its balance and surface texture. Yokes were worn on top of the neck, held in place by a U-shaped wooden bow. The iron ring, suspended by an iron staple, was located at the exact center and had a chain attached which was connected to the object being pulled.

Oxen can get better footing than a horse in mud or rough ground. In the early days, before decent roads existed, oxen were the draft animals of choice.

Litchfield County, with the large iron deposits in Salisbury and a corresponding large number of blacksmith shops and forges, produced iron objects such as the ring and staple seen on our yoke. There were various regional differences in the construction of yokes. In the 1820s, letters were exchanged between two North brothers, one in Colebrook, the other in western New York, in which the New York brother advises his Colebrook brother, who was a traveling salesman during the summer months, to bring out a supply of staples somewhat longer than what was used in Connecticut – an example of Yankee ingenuity at work. Other Yankee peddlers couldn't sell their staples out there because of the longer length used in western New York, and this small bit of information gave his brother an advantage over his competition.

Yokes are necessary with oxen as opposed to collars for horses because of the difference in their physical structure.

Horse shoes and oxen shoes. The earliest immigrants brought the art of shoeing work animals over the Atlantic. It was done by a blacksmith or sometimes by the farmer himself in rural areas such as ours, while in horse country specialization took place done by a farrier, who worked exclusively on horses. Farriers come out to the farm to make and apply shoes for horses, but such was not the case with oxen. Here the animal had to be driven to the blacksmith shop and placed in a special wooden frame where heavy slings were run under their bellies so that they could be hoisted off the ground while their shoes were being worked on. The reason for this is that a horse can easily stand on three legs, while a bovine must have all four feet planted on solid ground.

In the early years of the twentieth century, tractors began to replace working animals, and by mid-century one would be hard-pressed to find a team of horses or a yoke of oxen on our farms. Young people could then be found operating large pieces of heavy equipment on farms very competently, but nothing can replace the rapport children could have with farm animals. One of the last teams of Percherons in Colebrook belonged to the Godenzi Farm on the Old Colebrook Road. As was the case with farm young people, chores were assigned to all, and often were performed before school in the morning. The Godenzi team was the responsibility of the youngest girl, and it was truly a sight that you would never forget to see Norma, who barely came up to the knees of that team, leading them down the hill to the pond where she would water them, then return

them to the barn; literally thousands of pounds of horseflesh docilely obeying their miniscule handler – a site probably gone forever from this once farm community.

Stanchion. This device held a milk cow by her neck so that she would stand in place during milking and while she remained in the barn. This particular one is hand made except for the metal parts. It works this way: one side is hinged at the bottom with a catch at the top, which, when opened, allowed the cow to back out of her stall. All milk cows in a barn have their own stall and will enter only theirs. All herds of bovines have a social structure with an alpha matriarch, so when the herd enters the barn, the alpha leads the way followed by the next highest in rank, and so on until all are in their proper locations. If, by chance, a new addition to the herd is allowed to enter the barn with the rest, she will go to any open stall, which causes all sorts of problems, as the dispossessed cow will mill about causing gridlock for all those behind her. Grain is usually placed in each manger in front of the stanchion prior to letting the cows enter the barn, giving the farmer time to secure the device around her neck.

While the cows' movements are restricted, she still has the ability to lie down as well as stand up. Unlike horses, cows have to lie down to sleep, and the stanchion allows for this.

We don't have one for display, but there is another type of stanchion that is smaller than the one at the museum. This was placed on the neck of a cow that has picked up the bad habit of walking through strands of wire in the fences and thus escaping from the pasture as well as possibly injuring herself. It projects just enough above and below her neck to catch at least two strands of wire. She carries this device all the time she is in the pasture until the habit is broken and she is no longer at risk of escaping.

Whippletrees. There were regional pronunciation differences with this tool. Sometimes it is called a whiffletree or singletree. Around here you would have heard only the two latter variations. What we have at the museum is a set of doubletrees, used with a team of horses. Only one is used when using a single horse. The width kept the traces, which are the heavy leather straps connected to the horse's harness, in a straight line, enabling the horse to pull evenly. It also prevented the traces from rubbing on the horse's hind legs. If the horse was nervous or moving around a lot, care had to be taken that your animal did not back up enough to step over the whiffletree before it could be hitched to the wagon or piece of equipment that was going to be pulled. If this happened, it was not an easy task to straighten out the mess, with the horse becoming more unruly by the minute!

The traces were adjusted so as to be just long enough so that the horse's hind legs didn't touch, but no longer, otherwise the efficiency of the horsepower would be decreased.

Historic Bytes

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