

5 minutes with. . . Dale Parsons on Headyokes

By Rob Collins

Ox drovers, by nature, seem to enjoy helping. They have rich experiences and don't mind sharing them. You just have to ask. That's the premise behind a series of interviews I'm collecting with new and veteran ox drovers. In a series of 5 minute conversations, I hope to glean a number of worthwhile insights into the craft of oxen training, yoking and driving.

At the 2014 Midwest Ox Drovers Association Gathering, I began to record a few such interviews. Dale Parsons, a heavy equipment operator and ox drover from southern Michigan, but originally from New Hampshire, was putting his headyoke away in the rain on Friday night after dinner when I "ambushed" him. In his usual, folksy way, Dale explained to me- a total novice at headyoking lore- how to fit and hitch a team with a headyoke.

The bulk of our interview appears below. Following his normal pattern, Mr. Parsons was quick to offer help and advice.

Dale Parsons: (When fitting a headyoke) first, you got to figure out how to measure for the horns, because they're both different sizes. They both fit different on the back.

RC: (motioning to the horn cutouts): Do you scoop this out with a gouge?

DP: Yeah, you scoop this out with a gouge because it's not supposed to hit the back of the horns just the top and the bottom, because in the back is where you'll crack the horn.

RC, taking hold of the pair of chains in the center of the yoke: And then how do you hitch here?

Dale: Seeing as how I have new cattle that aren't used to hitching, you pull the back chain through the front and hook to the back chain and the front chain is what pulls their heads down. Because unlike a neck yoke it's supposed to tip their heads forward so their noses run level to the ground. There is a stick they make that you can put in there but so far I haven't had to use it.

RC, motioning to the post on top of the yoke: And is this post here on top separate?

Dale: Yep. That's separate. It's just a piece of ash. It holds the end of the strap after they're strapped to the yoke.

RC: Is that historic? Did they use ash for that?

Dale: Yep, it seems to work good for that. It doesn't weather like some hardwoods. And the hemming irons, which is what these are, (pointing to the iron straps in the middle of the yoke) and you can use these numerous yokes. They just pop right off. I'll probably use them on the next yoke I make. And you can change your draft with them (motioning to slide them in or out.) You can make longer ones or you can move them side-to-side. I have these adjusted slightly to the right because my off steer has more power, so I give him more load.

(Turning the yoke over) and not all yokes come with strap notches, (grooves that run front-to-back just above the horn cut-outs) but I can't get the straps to stay on my nigh ox without the notches. You see, his horns come straight out and straight up. It's been a learning process.



Photo 1: Dale Parsons points out the ash strap posts on his headyoke.



Photo 2: Dale explains the carved notches custom fit for the horns of his animals.



Photo 3: Dale Parsons shows the hemming irons and chains he uses on the back side of his headyoke.



Photo 4: Dale Parsons at Tillers International with his 2 year-old Milking Shorthorns in a headyoke.