



Oxen in Gilford – Salanitro's Ox-K Farm

2009

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Little did I know when I recently made a visit to the Ox-K farm, located on Belknap Mt. Road on the western slope of Gunstock Mountain with the idea of writing an article about oxen for the history column of the Gilford Steamer, that I would come away so captivated by the farm and its oxen. Everything about the day seemed idyllic. The land, looking north to the White Mts. with Mt. Washington still in its winter covering of snow, slopes down and away from the house toward the barn, the holding pen, and beyond to the training ring. The warmth of a sunny April day, the beauty of the situation, and the pervading stillness created a wonderful sense of peace - and so began my seduction.

The Ox-K Farm is owned by Kathy and Ron Salanitro. They live here together with their four Brown Swiss oxen, 4-year olds Chip and Dale, Max and Jake and Lefty, a “retired” 17 year old Holstein. While Kathy has always been involved with



Image: Chip drinking rain water from the barn roof.

animals, it wasn't until 1985, when their 14-year-old son David who was working that summer for

Andy Howe on his dairy farm helped deliver a bull calf which he then purchased with his first paycheck that Kathy discovered oxen. Three days later another bull calf was delivered which David also purchased. A few years later, when David entered agricultural school, he took the two oxen with him. But by then Kathy was “hooked” and the Salanitros were well on their way to what has become a long-time commitment to raising, training and showing oxen. They are members of the New England Ox Teamsters Organization and the NH Farm Bureau.

So, what is an ox? Well, as stated, he starts out as a bull calf. Between 6 to 9 months the calf is castrated and is then a steer. When the steer is about 4 years old and trained, he has become an ox. Although the Salanitros have had Holsteins and Durhams, Kathy prefers Brown Swiss, because she believes they are more of a challenge. She says they have “minds of their own” and she likes this aspect of their character. A barn full of ribbons, which their teams have won at shows and fairs, attest to her success as a trainer. Although, the oxen are used when necessary for work on the farm, they are primarily show animals. According to Kathy, they are very pampered and don't know they are oxen. However, lest you think they can't hold their own, you only need to see them pull and maneuver to be convinced otherwise. Pete and Rusty, a pair of Durhams, did a masterful job in 1995 when they placed, under Kathy's direction, the new covered bridge into precise position over the Gunstock River. I recall the excitement of that



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day and the thrill it was to watch the skill of the Salanitros and their oxen. To see this and other pictures, visit www.oxkfarm.com, and then click on Discovery Center and Ox-K Images. The Salanitro family has done as many as 22 fairs in a season and has had oxen in every Old Home Day Parade, but one, since 1987. Kathy takes the oxen to a number of local events each year, such as the Living Nativity, held in front of the historical



Image: Kathy Salanitro with Chip and Max visiting Gilford Elementary School.

society's Meetinghouse each December. For the last 15 years, Kathy has been doing "Oxen in History", transporting a pair of oxen to local

schools, or teaching in the classroom at the farm when classes come for field trips. The farm

is listed with the Lakes Region Association at www.lakesregion.org, available for bus tours, family visits, school trips, etc.

New oxen are purchased as young as 1 day to 1 week old from a dairy farm. They are bottle fed for



8 weeks until they are ready for grain and hay. Training begins at two weeks and by seven weeks, they are ready for an appearance in the Old Home Day parade. By three months they are considered to be

fully trained, yoked, but without a halter. The average life span of an ox is about 16 years old. Pete and Rusty, who placed the covered bridge

over the Gunstock River, lived to age 18. They always buy two at a time and train them as a pair. Chip and Dale are 4 year old brothers, but Dale, who doesn't like to pull as much as Chip, is matched with Jake, while Max and Chip, both strong pullers, work together. Each ox has a definite personality of his own. Max is the alpha ox, first in command and known by the family as the "Guard Dog". Jake, considered the smartest, is second in command, while Chip or "Punkie", dubbed "Handsome" by the Vet students at Tufts, is third and Dale, "the goof" or "Surfer Dude" because of his adventure sliding on ice, is low man. This could change as they are continually working to assert their dominion, disturbing the peace of the farm in the process.

When Chip was 2 years old, he had a harrowing experience with an impacted, infected tooth that entailed countless trips and 5 operations from March through October at Tufts University Veterinary Hospital in North Grafton, Mass. This experience is an example of the commitment which the Salanitros have to their animals. From November to January they changed packing in his jaw weekly and soaked the hay and Grain to make it soft. It took about three hours, twice a day to feed him. During this time, he was separated from the herd. When the healing was complete, it took about three months of constant watching to fully integrate him back into the herd. Kathy, who is writing a series of children's books about the oxen's lives on the farm, will begin the series with the story of Chip, his tooth adventure and his escapades with his barn-mates.

Thompson-Ames Historical Society welcomes suggestions for articles and invites you to contact us at P.O. Box 7404, Gilford, NH 03247 or 527-9009 or e-mail at thomames@metrocast.net