

This is an interview with Walter Wilson about draft horses. It took place on November 6, 1978 at his residence in Mill Creek. The interviewer is Jerrold Gustafson.

JG: If you could, just tell what breed of horses you're familiar with, and describe them a little bit.

WW: My favorite breed is the Percheron. I have more Percherons than I do Belgians. The two little Belgian colts are more or less another enterprise instead of a draft horse enterprise. I bought 'em for my own investment. As far as the Percheron and the Belgian, there isn't too much difference in either one. I mean, it was just the difference in the Percheron was available when I got ready to buy a draft horse. If it woulda been a Belgian, it woulda been the same thing. 'Cause I know of nothing a Belgian can do that a Percheron can't do. And I don't know of anything that a Percheron can do that a Belgian can't do. The only thing is the Percheron is just a little faster. The old neighbor up here that knows a lot about horses said he read an article one time, and at the end of the day the Percheron had gone an extra mile. And he said back when they were farming with horses, that extra mile meant a lot in a week's time.

JG: Is there much difference in conformation between the two?

WW: I don't think so. The most popular breed is the Belgian, I believe, then the Percheron. And then you have the Clydesdale. The Clydesdale is more of a show animal, more of a parade animal. Kind of a city horse, I would call it. The Clydesdale people might not want to call it that. They're a beautiful animal. And then there are the Shire breeds. And there's the Suffolk breed. They're sort of rare here in the United States. Mainly, the Belgian and the Percheron are the two main breeds, right in this area anyway.

JG: How much do these horses weigh when they are good sized, let's say when they're, would five years old be a mature horse?

WW: I believe a mare grows till she's five, and a horse, a gelding, grows till he's seven. Or else it's the other way around. So, it all depends a lot on the horse. The stallion, the mother, the backing. I have a big team of geldings. They have done a fine job. They're weighing a ton. a piece. They're five years old. Then I have a five year old mare out here that is only weighing about fifteen, fifteen and a half. She just didn't have the big breeding behind her. Nice little mare, but I'm watching the bone, and watching the size stallion and all of her colts are going to make a lot bigger horse than what she is. That's the funny thing with the horse. It amazes me. You can take a good sized pony, and breed to a big draft horse, and they'll have no foaling problems to speak of. That's right. Friend of mine over here took his grand-daughter's riding horse and bred to about an eighteen hundred pound stallion. Nice colt. They're fine boned; you know you can't get 'em big as far as size. Never had a problem. It's just Mother Nature he says takes care of that. But if you watch the size, watch the bone, watch the character of the stallion, how he stands on his feet. Some of 'em stand flat, and some of 'em stand up, how straight their legs are. I watch that pretty close. I'm pretty selective with the stallion I use. But we're fortunate we've got one of the best right in our area. (JG: Percheron?) (affirms) So I feel very fortunate with that. In fact, we've had two good ones in our area.

JG: Could you contrast the weight of say, a Western or a riding horse with the draft horses? Kind of give an idea of just how big they are. What does the weight of a Western horse top out as?

WW: Oh, I would say fourteen hundred. I would say. That's a good sized horse. Good sized riding horse. I would say the average Belgian, Percheron is about eighteen hundred. I've seen the biggest team of horses I ever saw weigh twenty-six a piece. But they were so big you couldn't even use them. They were just show animals.

JG: What breed was that?

WW: They were cross-breed. A Belgian was on one side and I don't know what was on the other.

JG: Would they get mired down in muck soil around here...

WW: Oh, they were just doggies. They couldn't handle themselves properly. They're just like a four hundred and fifty, five hundred pound man compared to a hundred and eighty pound man.

JG: What are the commands that horses have to learn to go to work?

WW: Oh, 'course, giddyap and whoa. That's one of the main ones. Then gee and haw. Horse is very smart. My daughter's boyfriend was amazed here a week ago Sunday. He said "Will the leads back up?" I said "Sure they'll back up." So we pulled up with the wagon when we were out for a ride. We pulled in with the wagon. I took the lines in one hand and I said "Gee, Tim" and he took a right. And I said "Whoa" and I commanded him to back up. He backed up a few steps toward the door of the garage. I said "whoa and haw". They didn't go far enough and said it again. They went over 'bout where I wanted them and I stopped 'em. "Back", they backed up. With just the lines in one hand was a bit of extra work. I coulda backed that wagon right into that shed. And he was just amazed at how well they were trained.

JG: How do you go about training them to learn the commands? Is that a difficult process?

WW: They learn that with the horse that you're breaking them with. I've always had a pretty well-trained horse to break 'em with. I've never had to break a team of colts alone. You would have a problem there. Takes a lot of patience. If you tell the other horse "giddyap", he's gonna go. And the colts got to go or she'll get run over. And that's all there is to it. And it isn't long. I don't work 'em as much as I should. I took these colts to Nappanee, to this Amish friend of mine last spring and soon as I unhitched him, or took him out of the trailer I mean, he said "Well, just tie her to the trailer. We'll harness her and take her right to the field." So she went out with four more, there were five of 'em all together. And she didn't know how to pull. She'd never pulled. Never been in a harness before. So he picked up about five little rocks, and he wanted to put on a disc. So he sat on the disc and put the horses out front, picked up five little pebbles and laid them on that little rack where he was gonna stand. When we got her all hitched up and everything, she just stood there, she didn't know "giddyap" or "whoa" or anything. And he said "Take a cornstalk, tap her on the rump when I say "giddyap" and I tapped her with the cornstalk. Well, she lunged forward, but she didn't know to keep pulling. So every so often, he'd reach down and take one of these little pebbles, toss it out there and hit her on the rump, and she'd get up there,

ya know. It wasn't two hours till she was pulling her end. She was bracing right in there. So they pick it up fast.

JG: Would you say they have a pretty gentle disposition then? It doesn't sound like they act up too much when you get 'em in the harness.

WW: This particular horse, this little filly last spring did a beautiful job. He hitched the other one up, she kicked so hard she broke the single tree, she tore the harness up, portion of the harness, she kicked like wildfire. You take the harness off of her, she was just as tame as a kitten. She just had an awful time. But once he got her hitched up and he had her on the drag, I guess it was, with three other horses that was well broke, she had to go. She kicked just like a mule, both feet right out behind her, got herself out of the tubs, and finally he just got provoked and said "Let her go." So she kicked herself back in the tub then. Finally, he buffaloed her. Then she worked alright till the next morning, he hitched her up. The same thing. He 'bout gave up on her. I went down and talked to him, and I said "Well, don't get yourself hurt just on account of that horse. I'll just take her home and she's a registered mare. I'll take her home and use her for a brood mare before you get yourself hurt." And he said I'm gonna try one more thing. At noon, I'm gonna have my father-in-law hold her. And when she comes off with that first kick, I'm gonna have a good heavy two-by-four right there handy. I'll break her spirits. Then I think I can handle her." I wasn't there when he broke her spirits but I imagine he really went in on her. Before the summer was over, she was working fine.

JG: So, different horses have different personalities. Do they vary much? Do you get a high-spirited horse and a kind of a get-along dull horse?

WW: A lot of times, not too awful much. You get a dull horse, one that's a little slower than others. But very often you get a high-spirited horse. Those you have to watch. It's good to take the high-spirited horse and put with the slow horse. Then you usually got a pretty gentle team. Put two spirited horses together, I don't know, I've never had any like that. One of my big geldings is just as safe as can be, and the other one is just a little bit flighty. But I don't worry about it because Tim'll take care of himself and Tim'll have to. Usually, after they get worked down just a little bit, people just have 'em for a hobby. We don't work 'em every day. I want a team that I can go out and hitch up once a month or once a week and they drive off just like you've hitched 'em every day. And that's what I enjoy about the team that I have. But like I say, the one is just a little flightier than the other one but not enough to write home about.

JG: Are they intelligent?

WW: Very much so. When you can talk to a horse, I don't know if they understand what you're saying or it's the tone of your voice. It must be the tone of the, well, not necessarily if they know giddyap and whoa and gee and haw. I want to tell you a story. I bought a mare a few years ago from an Amish man, Amish speak German or Dutch. We couldn't get this mare loaded in the trailer. She would not go in. Finally he said "Let me take the rope. Maybe I can get her in." And he began to jabber to her in this language and she went in. So that's what makes me think that a horse knows what you're telling him. They are smart! I can step out of my barn door, the horse could be clear to the other end of the field. I don't come off with a whistle or anything. I just

"C'mon Dolly" or something like that and they'll come right up to ya then. Couple weeks ago they got out one morning, bright 'n early. They knocked a gate down out there. They was out behind the silo in a little lot. The older one doesn't have a halter on; I leave the halter in the barn. The other ones I leave the halter on, so I thought "Well, How'm I gonna get 'em in? If I drive 'em out this way, they'll come out by the road and it's hard telling where they'll go." And I couldn't of taken 'em the other way because I got electric fence that a way. And they're used to it. If I would take the electric fence down entirely they still would not cross in that area. They won't go across it. So that was out. "So what am I goin' to do? Well, I'll just catch one of 'em younger ones with a halter and I'll start leading her and the rest of 'em will follow." Well, I couldn't catch one of them young ones. They'd just run away from me, feeling foxy 'cause they'd gotten out. So finally I just turned around and I walked to the house and I started talkin to 'em "C'mon Dolly, C'mon Ted, c'mon Tim." They followed me right around the buildings, right down the horse barn lane.

JG: Is there a kind of a bond that develops between you and the horses? You sound like you have a pretty friendly feeling toward them.

WW: Yeah, next to my wife and daughters, then the horses. I think more than anything, a dog will do the same thing. They'll respond to your command. And usually they want to do what's right.

JG: Do they seem to enjoy the attentions of humans? Do they seek out to be petted?

WW: Oh yeah, but I think any animal like that, oh, your wild animals would be a different story, your dogs and cats and things like that, the more attention you give 'em, the more lovin' you get back. I think that's the way it is with the horses. I enjoy 'em so I give 'em a lot of attention, in turn, they give it back to me.

JG: I guess I'd like to talk now about the care and feeding of the horses. If you could start by saying what the most common foods are, and say, the amount. What do you feed 'em?

WW: Well, you feed 'em lots of oats. Oats is a good bone-builder for anything. There's a pair of colts I have, they're getting mostly oats right now, a little bit of corn. See, oats'll make 'em grow, corn puts on the fat. The big geldings, I want them fat. I want them in beautiful shape. Well, they're out in the public more. So I feed them more corn than I do oats. The pregnant mares, they get quite a bit of oats, little bit of corn. I watch the flesh on the pregnant mares. I don't want 'em rolling fat. Might make a foaling problem. I don't want my colts rolling fat. I want them just to grow. Then you don't feed an excellent quality hay. A horse does requite a lot of protein, so therefore, more of a grassy hay. I spose again it's in your digestion. Right now I'm feeding them very poor quality brougham grass. They don't particularly care for it but they'd rather have a second cutting alfalfa or something like that but they're still getting a little bit of grass. I thought I'd feed this poor barley hay now and this winter when they're locked in all the time, give 'em a better quality hay. As the mares grow into the spring, just before they foal, why, I give them a better quality hay.

JG: How much do you give them, say, in a day?

WW: Oh, that's pretty hard to say a day. I usually pick bales and give them all of it they want of the hay.

JG: How 'bout the grain?

WW: They get perhaps too much grain. Five pounds a day I imagine. More than that. There's five pounds to the feeding. I got a little dipper there. The big ones I give three dippers, slightly more than two. Then the colts get about a gallon apiece of oats, twice a day with a little bit of grain. I like to feed all the hay they want.

JG: Do they have water to their own amount whatever they .....

WW: With the exception of the colts. I water them twice a day. They're still in the barn. Then they have a free choice of salt and mineral. That keeps their bowels working properly, and their kidneys working properly. It just more or less helps to balance their system, I think, to have a good mineral and salt.

JG: How 'bout other types of care, say of the coats, and the teeth too. What is involved in watching those areas?

WW: About once a year you give the horses a shot for lockjaw and different sleeping sickness. In this area we have a lot of mosquitoes and they give 'em that. The mosquito will come and he'll sting one infected animal and he'll soon pass it on to another. We've got to have 'em vaccinated against this. With the exception of lactating mares, there is a wormer out now that you can worm a pregnant mare, but I still don't rely on it. I don't worm a pregnant mare. You worm 'em once a year. Then their teeth, I have a man come and file their teeth so they don't rub the side of their mouth.

JG: Do they get deposits on their teeth?

WW: No, their teeth grow with sharp edges on them. It rubs the side of their mouth. At the same time, if their hooves are not growing properly, then you have those trimmed. Either you haul 'em up to him, or he comes down and you trim 'em. Lots of times, the colts, you watch their legs. Lot of times the way their hooves grow is how their legs shape for straightness. If they're a little bit crooked leg in the beginning you can trim the inside more than the outside or vice versa. That'll help straighten their legs.

JG: Who is it that trims your horses' feet? Would it be August Herbst by any chance?

WW: Augie, and Bob Mrozinski. Whichever one comes.

JG: The care of the coat.

WW: Oh yes. I don't know whether it's just a farmer's pride or what. But I would say, in the course of a year's time, I don't harness the horses two times 'cause I'll train 'em first. I think it's more or less just a farmer's pride that he wants that horse to be clean and shiny before that

harness is on him. In the winter time, as I have a chance, I like to brush 'em down, oh, two or three times a week. 'Bout everyday in the spring time when they're losing their winter coat. It gets it off better, then they don't go rubbing on the fences I'm building.

JG: Do they put on a real nice thick winter coat then?

WW: Yeah, they're laying it on real well right now. I noticed one, my little registered filly is black. By her being out in the summer sun, she turned more of a reddish, more of a bellyish color. And I've been so busy, I haven't been paying much attention to her. The other day I looked at her and thought "Boy, she's a beautiful color." See, she was laying on this winter coat and it hadn't been out in the sun to get bleached. She was a beautiful black. She had changed from that brownish color back to black in two, three weeks time. That's another thing. The colder the barn, the harder coat they'll put on. Now, when I bought these geldings last spring they came out of a warm barn. When I was trimming off the winter hair, they didn't have near the winter hair that mine did coming out of a colder barn. I'll bet they lay it on this winter though. That's something the good Lord has given 'em, that we just take it for granted, you know. The heavier coat.

JG: What kind of winter care do they need? Do they stay in the barn or do they go outside?

W: I try and let them out unless it's storming bad. I let them out at least two hours a day, every day.

JG: Do they like to go outside?

WW: (affirms) They go out and roll in the snow. After you've left 'em in the night before, practically every one of 'em rolls every morning. I was so frightened years ago when I was, pregnant mares you know, turn out. They just go out and roll back and forth, two or three times every morning. I thought "My land! They'll get that colt all twisted up!" But they didn't.

JG: Why do they roll in the snow like that?

WW: Scratch their back. In the springtime when they're shedding they'll lay there and scratch their back, and when they get up there's just a white place. They lost that much hair while they've been lying there. But they'll go out and lay down in the snow and they'll get up and the snow will just be packed on 'em a lot. And they'll shake themselves in such a matter and it's gone. Looks beautiful.

JG: What are the common diseases and sicknesses of the horses and how would you go about treating some of those?

WW: Well, about the biggest thing a person has to worry about in horses is the foundering, over-eating. And there just isn't much you can do about that once a horse founders. He's just about ruined. It causes his joints to swell and to stiffen. Then in time his toes will turn up. He's just about ruined when this happens. There's a sleeping sickness that is bad for horses. I don't really know enough about it to know what it does, but it's most deadly. Then there's a disease, erysipelas, they call it. Then there's mastorea. The mastorea is in one sense like the mastitis to a

cow maybe. Different in our routine, the horse's routine. Like, you haven't worked him in the winter time, then you go out and you work it hard for a few days, then it comes in and stands in the barn. It gets more or less a kidney disease. They urinate a lot but not very much at any one time. Often, I should say. That's about it. Oh there's the usual stomachache, and things like that.

JG: Colds? Do they get colds?

WW: Yes, they get pneumonia with the weather change. Fortunately, I try to keep mine warm enough, well enough fed, it'll shake off a lot of that. That's the main thing. 'Course you always got the lockjaw and getting hurt, rusty nails, and barbed wire. Horses kinda set, they'll get to running and won't regard a fence or a gate and they'll run right into it, try and jump over it or something like that. Gets himself cornered and can't get stopped. You get a lot of cuts and bruises.

JG: Do you treat that like you treat yourself if you got a cut? Wash it out?

WW: Yes, try to.

JG: It seems an animal as intelligent as the horse, I wonder why they would keep eating without realizing what they're doing to themselves. Is it just gluttony?

WW: I don't believe it happens then. I believe it happens after they've gotten to the water. I believe.

JG: They have to have the water after they've eaten so much?

WW: As I was a kid, I remember a beautiful team of Dapples, that during the night they had gotten the grainery door open, and had gotten into the oats bin. I remember the man telling my father if he coulda kept 'em away from the water, if he'd a known it in time, he coulda kept 'em away from the water, he coulda saved the horse. But he, at the time, had put their legs in gunny sacks and packed that with fresh cow manure to try and draw the soreness out.

JG: I don't understand how that would work; the heat generated by the manure?

W: I spose. I don't know. I can picture those horses standing there in the barn with those big gunny sacks tied around them and full of cow manure. Then I remember the man telling my father if he could've gotten to 'em before they got to the water, he would've saved 'em. But they never amounted to anything if I remember correctly. They did survive, but never to do a good day's work. They were beautiful. They were just as pretty as Ted and Tim.

JG: The Amish people, a lot of them still use the horses. They are probably very excellent horse-traders, I would imagine, or just horsemen in general, because of their familiarity with them using them every day. Is that true?

WW: Well, a lot of them are. But since they use them for their livelihood and horses are so expensive, there's a lot of poor horsemen too in the Amish people. They work 'em so hard, they

don't take care of 'em properly. You take our horses to send 'em down there, and they work 'em like they do their horses, they'd kill 'em in a week's time. Ours is fat. The Amish doesn't have a fat horse. The team of mares that I sold last spring that I traded for these big geldings, I was back yesterday and looked at 'em, and they're healthy, they're in nice shape, but my wife, she wished we had 'em back home. They don't look like they did when we had 'em. They just aren't that fat. They work 'em. 'Cause they're out. Well, they've got to in order to get their work done.

JG: The Amish that use the horses, they use them for everything on the farm, right?

WW: Yes, they plow and drag, and plant. The man's using them to pick corn right now. But see, an average team will cost five thousand today.

JG: Are those show animals or working horses?

W: No, those are work animals. There's one Amish friend of mine just bought, she's going to be the foundation mare for him. He gave forty-eight hundred and fifty dollars for her. It's four years old. On the other hand, I was just thinking today, we'll spend five thousand dollars for a plow. But this man bought a plow the other day, paid seventy-five dollars for it. That'll make his living, just as easy as the five thousand dollar plow will make us a living, cause we don't have nearly the turnover to pay for the twenty-five thousand dollar tractor and the five thousand dollar plow.

JG: Your farm doesn't have to be as big then.

WW: They can make a living, raise a family on eighty acres.

JG: Is that a typical size?

WW: For them. Between eighty and a hundred and twenty acres. They can make a good living. We'd starve to death on eighty acres today. We'd have to have other work.