

# salt



Bicentennial

# Maine



# HORSE PULLING



by Jeremy Jasper

*Interviewing and  
Transcribing by  
Jeremy Jasper, Fran  
Ober, and Jason  
Wheeler.*



*Every muscle strains. (Photo by Jeremy Jasper)*

*"Horse pulling got started over the years by one fella sayin', 'Well, I can pull more with my pair than you can pull.' Then they had their get-togethers. Then they began to get together at the fairs, where they'd have it for everybody.*

*"Course years ago, it used to be a thing, like a group of farmers or a group of workmen would have a get-together and pull. Like when my father was a kid, they used to walk their horses to the fair and sometimes they might put 'em on a train, take 'em to another fair that was far away, but now we got pickups, trailers, and trucks. We go all over the place. Today it's got professional."*





Photo by Jeremy Jasper

This is one of the things Dick Wallingford told us as we talked to him about the growing sport of horse pulling.

Dick, who lives in West Forks, Maine, has been involved with horse pulling ever since he can remember. He is a lumberjack of today, using machinery instead of horses.

#### Logging With Horses

"People today, the men today, they wanta work with a skidder and shut it off at 4:30, 5 o'clock at night, then go back in the morning, turn on the key and go. With the horses, why they have to take care of them, feed 'em and they're slower.

"Course they don't cost so much to run as a skidder.

They'd make more money by workin' more hours (using horses). We'd have less production, but we'd make more per cord. We just don't like to do it."

Dick told us that his father had a lot of horses over the years, working with them on the farm and in the woods. "At one time in my operation, I had 60 horses. That's before we had the machinery. Used to do everything by horses."

Dick has found the ultimate pair of horses. He has pulled these horses 37 times and has won a blue ribbon, what else but 37 times!

#### Rock and Dick

The two horses are Rock and Dick. They are half brothers, sired by the same

father. Rock is the older, more experienced — and more famous — horse. Dick told us about the time he went west where the horses were raised. "Last fall I went out to Indiana where they raised them.

"Talked to the fella that raised 'em. Rock, when he was first born, they had to hold him up for a week so he could stand up. Ayuh, his front ankles were double jointed. He'd go to stand up and fall right down. Had to hold him up so he could suck off his mother. Kinda hard to see it, seein' him now."

In spite of Rock's early problem with his ankles, he has turned into a very powerful horse, weighing in at 2,280 pounds. Dick weighs a ton. They have become the most feared team in the sport.

When I asked Dick how tall they were, he said, "Well, I never have measured them, but I'd say they're a little bit over 18 hands. They measure a horse by hands. Four inches is a hand, so four times 18, just a little over that.

When asked if it took long for horses to get used to each other, he said, "Nope, not these two. These two are naturals. This is the first horse with Rock that Rock has ever liked.

"They'll go crazy if you take one away from the other. You take like the little trailer there and you hitch one on one side and one on the other side, they'll break the lights on the trailer tryin' to get around on the other side.

"Course that's what makes 'em good, too. If they fight with one another, then they're not as good as if they like one another. Then they really work good together. They're timed together.

#### The Hard End

"Other horses that I've pulled with Rock over the years, I've had to tie Rock down. What I mean by that is we have an evener that we pull by. If it's even (one horse can pull as much as the other), you put each horse an equal distance from the center.

"If you tie one horse in, you can set him in towards the center. That gives him a shorter end so that he has to pull more of the load.

"Course Rock has always had the hard end. There isn't anything that will go even with him. With this horse (Dick), he'll go with him on an inch, which is very good for Rock.

When a horse has to carry the hard end, the more he has to carry, course the harder it is to do it.

"Now these other horses I've had, I've had him up to five inches. I've set Rock at five inches a lot of times. With most of the big horses, I've had 2½ to 3 inches. That's a lot.

"Even an inch — a lot of people say an inch is too much, but for Rock it don't make that much difference. He's strong. He does it easy."

#### Matching Rock

Dick Wallingford has had his famous Rock for six years now. He's pulled Rock several times single, but always in

Cumberland. "I've pulled each year at Cumberland. He's won every one.

"Now Dick there, I've had him since last fall. He's pulled separately out west ever since he was five years old, and I've been watching him all these years.

"I always wanted him but really didn't think I could afford to get him. In the meantime, I bought three other different horses tryin' to mate Rock, and it wouldn't do. They couldn't hold Rock.

"Finally last year I bought this horse, they called him Sam horse. The fella that had this horse, I bought at the agreement that if he wouldn't



Two of Dick's smaller horses. (Photo by Mark Emerson)





*Currying and brushing Rock.*

do, I could take him back and trade him in on this Dick horse. He was a real good fella and honest to his word."

#### *Working with Dick*

So Dick Wallingford went out west to get the horse Dick. "When I left there, he (the owner) was 62, and when I left there he cried. He had to go see Dick and pat him. He said this was the best horse he ever owned over the years.

"Course I like him. He's a good horse. He's not the gentlest horse, though. Rock is. You can do anything with him. But Dick, he's ... the more you work around him, the better he is.

"He's a horse you wouldn't want to go out and abuse, cause he would fight. But he's — the better you use him, the more you work around him, the better he is to be around.

"The worst time for him is in the winter. If you don't use him and you're not working around him and cleaning him off every day, why then he's fussy."

#### *Choosing Horses*

We asked Dick about choosing his horses. Did he play it by hunch or what? "Well, each one has their own mark, you know," he said. "But really they don't mean much.

"What Means A Lot Is What they got in their head. Unless you've seen them in action, particularly just a green colt that's never been pulled or anything, it's hard to tell."

When do you start pulling a horse, we wanted to know. "Well, sometimes at four years, but normally we start them at five. If you start them too young, you might spoil them.

"You know you don't train them to it. You can train them to be a lot better, but you can't take a horse that don't wanta pull and make him. He'll buck on you at some time if he's not a real puller.

"This was bred right into him. He's just a natural. If you don't get a good one, a natural one, why you can fool 'em sometime, and get him to pull, but they're not as good as one that's natural.

"Course these pulling horses, it takes a lot of courage. They're actually born. You don't make 'em pulling horses. They're born."

#### *Food, Shoes, Harnesses*

If you take a look at Dick's giant horses, the first thing you're likely to say is, "Boy, I bet you spend half your money just feeding them!" From what Dick told us, you'd be right. We asked if they eat a lot and he said, "Oh yah! Course feed is higher, too. Used to be you buy a bag of oats for three, four dollars. Now it's a little over \$8. A pair of horses like these can go through a hundred pound bag in two days and a half to three days. For hay I used to buy a bail of hay for fifty cents. Now it's a dollar and a half.

"Other things that are costly are your shoes, your shoein', your harnesses. Used to figure a collar would cost you a dollar an inch. What I mean by that is, if it was 24 inches long, it would cost you \$24. If it was 25 inches long, cost you \$25. Then it got to a stage where they would cost you a dollar an inch plus \$3.

"And now Rock, he takes a 30 inch collar. A 30 inch collar today would cost you about \$170. They don't last that long either. Well, this year Rock hasn't gone through one yet, but usually he'll go through one in a year. He goes so hard in them they just split on him. Not the quality they used to be."

The harnesses include the hames which go on the collar

of the horse and then go to the evener and finally to the load. Years ago they had only wooden hames but these were very weak so they had holes drilled in them and iron reinforcements placed in but this was very poor also. Later there were some iron hames made. These were not very strong because they were hollow, not solid.

Dick now manufactures his own hames. He told us how he got started, "I came upon the idea about 12 years ago to try some aluminum for hames. I first cut some out of 3/4 inch plate but they did not look too good. I then made a pattern out of wood and had some cast in aluminum alloy."

"I make them now in four different sizes and from straight ones to big bowed ones so they will fit different horses. I have them made in the Lewiston Brass Works in Lewiston, Maine and sell them all over the U.S. and Canada. Most of the pulling matches today have 75% of my hames used on the pulling horses."

Getting back to the horseshoes, we found Dick doesn't do his own shoeing. He told us he got hurt in a snowmobile accident and hadn't been able to do it. "We have a man come that does the shoeing. It's quite a job. If you don't do it regularly, it can

really get to you when you're shoeing a pair of horses.

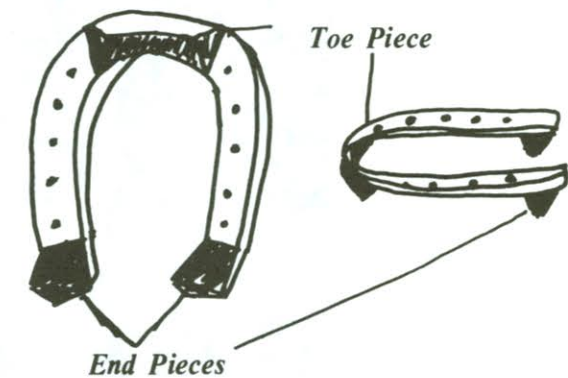
"A man not used to it, it gets him in the back and in the legs and everything. It's a hard job. If you're used to it, and your muscles are built up to it, it's not too bad. Not too many people can shoe a horse though."

"After the horseshoes are bought they have to be calked, Dick explained. "Now this is when we roll the heel up so they have a calking on the back. This is for more traction. And then we put a calking on the front of it. We always used to have a regular tote box that could make a shoe. Now you can't buy that anymore, so people have been using a number of different things. Some are using spring lead material."

What Dick is talking about is the way he puts claws on the toe and heel of the shoes. When he buys the shoe, it comes flat with no type of traction.

So what he does is take a type of metal and weld a small piece on the toe. This is about two inches long. Then he welds two smaller spikes on the ends of the shoe. This gives the horses more traction. (It's sort of like a football shoe).

We asked Dick how much a pair of shoes would cost and he told us, "Let's say you were



*Calked horse shoes. Sketch by J. Jasper*





*Talking it over before the pulling match.*

*Photo below: On their way to a win, pulling weights of 15 to 30 thousand pounds. (Photos this page by Jeremy Jasper)*

going to buy it now calked up, it would probably cost you \$16, and they usually charge you 10, 12 dollars to put the shoe on. That's for the smaller ones. This is before it's made up. That's the way we buy 'em. See the holes in here aren't opened up. You have to open up these holes. Then you have to bend this down around." He said they don't break off very often.

#### **Winning Stakes**

Since Dick and his horses have won so many blue ribbons, we were curious about how much money he gets out of this. We asked him and he



said, "Well, the biggest I've ever won was \$350 and that was in Skowhegan. Scarborough was \$300, Bangor was \$300, Union was \$275, and Fryburg is \$275."

(It occurred to us that those stakes wouldn't feed Rock and Dick very long!)

He has been all over the place with this team. He's been as far north as Quebec City and as far south as Connecticut. Since he had been up to Quebec, we asked if he had participated in the Nova Scotia rodeo at the end of the summer.

"Yes, I won that two years in a row, but that was a few years ago when I had the smaller horses. That's limited

to the 30 hundred pounds. All my horses weigh over 30 hundred, so I couldn't compete. But I got the horses that won two years in a row here with me. One of them was hurt a couple years ago and I haven't pulled him since."

There is one contest that Dick considers to be the top one in the sport and that's the Roundup Pull. He told us that it was held in New Hampshire last year and in Massachusetts the year before.

#### **Another Blue Ribbon**

But the contest that Dick likes the most takes place at Fryburg Fair. "Here in the state, the biggest one is the Fryburg Fair. Last year Fryburg had 160 head of

horses. They were here from Maine, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Connecticut, New York, Ohio, Michigan and New Brunswick, Canada. Those were the states involved."

As a matter of fact, our last interview with Dick was at the Fryburg Fair. Dick was going to participate in the Grand Championship there. As we sat there and talked to him, he jumped up and said, "Well, you know you folks gotta excuse me, so I can go get them (Rock and Dick) ready. "Sure," we said. "It will be fun to watch them."

And fun it was. Dick left Fryburg with a blue ribbon in his hand.