

# DEPENDING ON HORSES

By L.E. Buchholz

The writer of this article farms near Lehr, North Dakota. He tells about the importance of horses for the Dakota pioneers.

## W HEN

WINTER CAME AND A BLANKET OF SNOW COVERED THE GROUND, the use of sleds was put into common practice. Teams hitched to different driving and hauling sleds began to make their

rounds, leading to school, town and church, as well as to friends and neighbors. All sleds always left a good trail behind them, and some of the destinations had barns.

It was a must for people to know how to bundle up to be comfortable so as to avoid freezing (which was very possible). Those teamsters also knew how to blanket and cover the horses in use.

All sleds had, and for that matter still have, one thing in common. They could easily freeze to the ground they were stationed on. If the mistake was made of hitching them up without first freeing them, the grave possibility could end up

with the horses being crippled, the harness broken, or the sled wrecked!

It was very simple to free them before hitching.

The question may be asked if it were possible to get stuck, or bogged down, with horses?

Yes.

To break a really difficult trail, four or even six horses would be hitch-tied and then line-driven back and forth until a path was broken. Several empty runs would then be made before an attempt was made to haul a load in and out. At times, the lives of people and stock were at stake here.

After a prolonged cold, snow, or storm spell, and under a clear moonlit sky, if at supper time a dog began to bark, it was almost certain that company was coming.

We would light a lantern and wait on the porch. Talk could be heard floating above the distant snow. Horses would flare their nostrils, and sled runners would creek on the icy tracks.

When the team pulled up and called to a halt, hearty greetings would be exchanged. Steam from the perspiring horses sprayed skyward, and the horses would try to dislodge the icicles formed on their nostrils.

Help was offered to get the women and little ones into the house first. Then the men unhitched and stabled the horses.

Our town road was along the south side of the railroad tracks. About 60 years ago, while my parents were driving along, a snow plow chugged down the road, facing them and throwing snow up into the wind. It tossed a huge drift into the air, blocking everyone's vi-



Whether we went on trips to the neighbors, or to the closest frozen pond to go ice skating, the horse-drawn sleighs were the means of transportation.

sion. When the fog and snow blindness cleared, the sled box was filled to overflowing.

After my folks finally managed to get to town, they pulled near a grain elevator, borrowed a shovel, and dug themselves out. So you can see that all was not sure and carefree then. (Ever take a shovel along, say, lately?)

**A**t one time in late spring, when melting was in progress, we were driving around a bend on a hillside that went over a lake. We had a close call as we and the horses could have drowned.

Picture our fear when one of the horses fell through and went under, barely managing to climb out! But just about then, the sled also fell in, filling up with ice water!

All of that was over with suddenly, but the fright and danger of it was over with maybe never.

**B**eing overtaken by blizzards was common. We had an experience when I was a child which could have proven fatal.

The air was filled with blinding snow. The cold and storm were both intense.

Dad said we should stop in an attempt to clear our faces, and eyes, and maybe get our bearings as to our location.

All I could see was the white ankles of the horses.

In desperation, we gradually figured out we were on a railroad plank crossing, a mile from home.

We had just started to drive on again when a snowplow train thundered past, totally unaware of us! Had we started out only seconds earlier, we would have been hit. All that would have been left of us would have been hard-to-assemble pieces!

**T**owards the end of winter, snow-packed roads were the result of a long winter's use. They were packed so hard that the other snow always melted first. Those road tracks remained to the very last.

The sleds pulled easy on such icy paths, and horses learned to stay solid so as not to stumble into the softer sides.

There were always some runaways occurring each season. That was dangerous. But with

## **Dependable Horses** (continued)

runaways or not, there were frequent spills and tipped-over sleds.

Once in a while during the dead of winter, people driving or hauling would walk along side the sled to warm up when line-driving the team. Some would stop at our

farm and be asked in to warm up.

Ever see people take their shoes off, pull a chair up to the oven door, and stick their feet in to warm frozen toes?

During those times, Mother served many a cup of steaming hot coffee, with fry sausage and warm homemade bread and butter.

It was quite possible to arrive at a country church, where the fire

had been out for a week, only to learn that there would be no service this Sunday either! The church was colder than a polar bear's den!

Same was true of a country school. You could arrive alone, with the fire out, hang around a

while, and then go back home.

All I could add to this is colder than all outdoors.

One party once said he was so frozen out that the only way it would be possible for him to warm up again would be to take a mouth full of water—and then sit on the stove lid until the water came to a boil!

In those years, it was not uncommon for most people to have finger, toe, or face frostbites.

I still cannot see how it would have been possible to drive or haul without the use of sleds, pulled by dependable horses, during those long, cold winters. □