



YOUNG JOHN SIMONSSON posed as a cowboy on a "bucking horse" statue to show one of his favorite pastimes.

Couple raises mules, horses

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After John and Connie Simonsson married in 1988, they bought a team of big sorrel draft mules to drive a wagon at parades, family reunions and wedding parties, and that began a passion for the couple for raising mules and horses.

"We had them for several years," Mr. Simonsson recalled. "They were gentle creatures until we sold them. When they were being loaded onto the trailer to go to their new home, one of them gave me a good kick. I guess she must not have wanted to leave Kansas."

"Connie decided to buy two mules, and for someone who had only lived in town, she just took to it 'like a fish takes to water.'"

"We also started raising Belgian horses and showed one blue-roan stallion at the Denver Stock Show. We sold most of our colts at the draft horse sale in St. Joseph, Mo., or from our ranch. After raising Belgians for several years, we started raising Percheron horses. One year, we purchased a Percheron mare who foaled the next spring. It was love at first sight when we saw the Spotted Draft filly."

Caring for these animals is just another chapter in a life that John has known and loved since childhood. He was reared on a farm on the Decatur-Sheridan county line northeast of Selden and his father, John Simonsson, Sr. and uncle, Carl Simonsson, had been raising and trading horses and mules since they were old enough to start on their own in 1917.

Mr. Simonsson said that his father was born Jan. 17, 1897, on a farm north of Helvey, in Jefferson County, Neb. His parents had come from Sandared, Sweden, in Krunabers County, and they had eight other children, including Edgar Simonsson, who also lived in Oberlin later.

"My dad said that the Simonssons were the only Swedish family in a German community, and the other kids made fun of his blond hair."



SPOTTED DRAFT COLTS run and play in the pasture at the farm of John and Connie Simonsson. The couple has 11 colts, 12 mares, a stallion, four yearlings and four 2-year-olds.

— Herald staff photos by Steve Haynes

After completing the eighth grade, he went to work for neighboring farmers to help support the large family."

In 1917, John Sr. and Carl bought 160 acres of land in Decatur County, and since there was no house on the property, they lived in the haymow of the barn for two years before moving a house onto the land.

The brothers developed a fine herd of registered Hereford cattle during the 1920s. One fall while John was helping shuck corn for Claus Anderson in the Lund area, he met a pretty young school teacher, Belle Cathcart, who was boarding there.

"When they were introduced and he stood, my mother thought that he was never going to stop," John Jr. said. "My father was 6 foot, 2 inches tall and she was only 5 foot 1. They were married on June 27, 1923, at the Baptist minister's parsonage in Oberlin."

Besides John Jr., the couple had two daughters, June Belle (Marcy) and Carlyne Joy (Mahaffy).

"I guess I started riding a shetland pony when I was 4 or 5," Mr. Simon-

sson said. "I always helped herd the cattle and also rode double bareback with Carlyne on our pony, Beauty, to round up the milk cows and bring them home in the evenings."

"When I was about 12, Dad said that I was big enough to drive the mules on the hay rake. When I got on the rake seat, Dad brought a rope and was going to tie me to the seat. I jumped off and ran."

"I told him that if I wasn't big enough to drive them without being tied on, I wasn't going to do it at all. I drove the team during alfalfa season for several years after that."

After the Simonsson brothers moved to Kansas, they started raising horses and mules. Most were sent by rail from Selden to Lancaster County, Pa., where a large draft horse and mule auction supplied, among others, the many Amish farmers. In 1948, John said, they had 400 head of mules on hand at one time. That year, he said that his folks bought the George Mann farm south of Selden and the family moved there.

In 1952, the Simonsson Brothers sold 100 mules to a man who

exported them to Spain.

"Mules will follow a horse," John said, "so I led them with my little brown pony and Dad and Uncle Carl followed them. We drove them to Selden and right down main street to the stockyards. They were loaded on stock cars on the train and sent to the Gulf of Mexico, where they were loaded on barges for Spain."

"Those were the last mules loaded at the Selden stockyards."

Many have said that young John is certainly a "chip off the old block," as horses, mules and cattle have always been an important part of his life.

He said that a special memory for him was when he was 8, he got to start going with his father and uncle to Wichita when they sold a lot of colts at a mule auction.

"This was a great thrill for me," he said, "as I was allowed to be out in the stockyards and help the black men match up the teams of mules. In the spring of 1948, 125 mule colts were born on our farm."

Today, he and Connie have 11 Spotted Draft colts running and playing in their pasture.

"It is almost unheard of to get 11 foals out of 12 mares," he said. "We get them captured, along with the mares, to halter break them at just a day or two old. It is easier to do this while they are smaller."

"We also like to introduce them to the human race, so they aren't afraid. They are then broke again in the fall when we wean them. We register all of the fillies with the Spotted Draft Horse Association, and all of the males that we are going to leave as stallions."

"At this time we keep most of the filly colts to use as brood mares, and take the others to the draft horse sale in Maryville, Mo."

"We mostly consider it a hobby that just got out of hand. Luckily, we raise our own hay. If not, we wouldn't keep as many of them as we do. At the present time, we have 12 mares, the stallion, 11 colts, four yearlings, and four 2-year-olds."



JOHN AND CONNIE SIMONSSON paused for a break while working with their Spotted Draft horses on their farm northeast of Oberlin. She is the former Connie Rehm, daughter of Amy and the late Harold Rehm.