

The Draft Horse Farmer

By Lem Montero

The 82-year-old farmer looked on as a young couple followed a pair of draft horses. The horses pulled a plow much older than the farmer himself and was similar to one used by his own father and grandfather. Tractors could plow several times faster than a team of horses, but Duane Westrate reaps a different type of harvest with horses.

Duane teaches draft horses classes at Tillers International, an international development organization in Scotts, MI that works with farmers in developing countries on improving crop yields. In many parts of the world, farmers can't afford tractors and instead rely on animals like horses, donkeys, and oxen to help on the farm. Duane helps keep the dying skill of farming with draft horses alive. The couple behind the team of Percheron horses sees him as a mentor who is helping them with their dream of using draft horses instead of tractors at their future winery.



Duane Westrate's love of horses is obvious. [PHOTOGRAPHS BY ELISE MUSUMECI / @CA.MUSU]

in Comstock, MI, where draft horses were always used. As a teenager, however, he looked forward to using modern farming techniques including using tractors. Years later, his family bought one and stopped using horses.

Duane took over the farm from his father, and eventually Duane's own sons took over the farm from him. Free of the day-to-day respon-

helped keep him young, he agreed and added, "It's important just to keep going. Even though you don't want to get up, get up anyway and keep going."

His fortitude and strength pushed him through difficult times that all farmers must face; drought, injuries, floods, failed crops, and other challenges. Each passing trial adds to a farmer's wisdom, he said,

college degrees.

"But the biggest challenge farmers face is financial," said Duane. "That's why the key to being happy is learning how to be content with less. It's important to be peaceful and content."

Not many farmers outside of the Plain Community (the Amish and Mennonites) use draft horses let alone teach others how to drive a team. Duane has taught the skill for more than thirty years at Tillers International including to many people who've gone on to use the skill in Central and South America, parts of Asia, and across Central Africa. For a retired celery farmer from West Michigan, Duane's quiet influence has reached countless farms around the world.

There may be farmers everywhere from Uruguay to Uganda who have been taught draft animal management by one of Duane's students, but he doesn't let it get to his head. The world is massive, but the world that makes him happy is only a few acres across with him in the middle of it. He may be 82, but his giant 2,000 lb. draft horses know he's the boss and everyone is okay with that arrangement. His students love him, which he appreciates, but no matter people or horses think of him, Duane is content.

Tillers International currently offers scholarships for all of their draft animal classes making it free for most young people interested in working with draft horses or oxen. To see a complete listing of the classes Duane teaches, please go to www.tillersinternational.org. The non-profit also accepts donations to support their school in the U.S. and efforts overseas with small-scale farmers.



Westrate has been working a hobby farm with horses for almost 40 years.

"Horses have always been my love," said Duane. "I love to be out in the field with just the horses and doing something valuable to yourself and to those around you."

Duane grew up on a celery farm

sibilities of the business, Duane was able to return to his true love, horses.

"I've been working a hobby farm with horses for almost 40 years," said Duane. When asked if that

making farmers extremely savvy. Most experienced farmers may not have a college education, but farmers have incredible amounts of real world knowledge worthy of the same respect given to advanced