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IN 1927

THE

WHITE TOPS

SEPTEMBER 26-30, 1975

CIRCUSIANS  
ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA

MAY 27\*28\*29\*30

1975

CONVENTION  
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FATHER EDWARD SULLIVAN TENT



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# Hoofmarks Through The Pages Of History: Early Traces Of The Circus Hitch

By C. H. Amidon  
Sketches By Author

As the early American mud show developed in the first half of the 19th century, a need for long-string hitches became evident.

The first traveling circuses, sidewalled on the village green, soon realized the need for a tent. Even the original round tops, 50 to 75 feet in diameter, added the bulk and weight of additional canvas and poles. The advent of portable seating brought still heavier loads to be moved over poor roads in all sorts of weather.



C. H. Amidon

Baggage wagons increased in length and weight, causing the circus owner to adopt the four- and six-horse hitches of the contemporary freight haulers.

During the decade of the 1840s, ornate parade wagons appeared. To present these band chariots in appropriate style, long-string parade hitches were assembled. Parade wagons then grew more massive and particularly higher, finally resulting in the telescoping tableau of the 1870s. Parade hitches reached the 40-horse category as early as the 1850s, and then returned periodically over the years.

#### 'Double In Leather'

Through the combined era of the wagon show and the railroad circus, the draft horse continued to "double in leather" as a traction engine and as a parade feature.

Circus development peaked at about the same time as the American horse population. During the horse-drawn age, the man on the street could appreciate a matched team of fine draft horses and the driving skill necessary to control a long hitch.

Early circuses relied on a single long hitch on a richly ornamented wagon as a parade feature sufficient to advertise the show. Later parades on the larger circuses included many long-string teams, but featuring perhaps a 12-, 16- or 24-horse team on the big bandwagon.

#### Horseflesh Appreciated

This proliferation of horseflesh was appreciated in much the same way as today's public might regard a fine fleet of trucks. The average person had little reason to think of these matched teams as the culmination of a long evolution in the use of horses. To see the circus hitch in proper perspective, it may be worthwhile to briefly follow those hoofmarks through the pages of history.

Man, once he had evolved from nomad hunter to farmer, looked first to oxen as draft animals. The first yoke was a length of timber lashed to the horns, equally important as a means of restraint and as a draft bar. At some later date, the cross beam was shaped to the animal's shoulder and secured by neck bows. The familiar yoke worked well for draft animals of the cattle family, and is still widely used in underdeveloped areas.

Man first thought of the wild ass and horse as a draft animal, before he considered the possibility of riding astride. The familiar concept of the yoke seemed the correct approach. A yoke was placed across the withers, which were rather wedge-shaped and offered no convenient hump like that of the bovine breed. The yoke was secured by a neck band directly across the windpipe.

#### Restraint By Choking

This primitive arrangement offered restraint by its direct choking effect. Variations of this harnessing concept persisted until Roman days. Gradually, the neck band became a breast strap and belly band, and a martingale strap was added for further security. It is unique, however, that even the term *neck yoke* persists to this day for the lateral spacer bar at the lead end of a coach or wagon

pole.

Harness developed with man's understanding of animal anatomy. It may be interesting to think of the draft horse, first, as a traction engine. His head and neck, extending forward from his barrel-like body, help to bring his center of gravity forward to a point behind his shoulders. The neck has a teardrop cross section which is framed by the similar section of the scapulae, forming an ideal seat for a collar. The shoulder structure remains relatively immobile, even though the neck and upper legs have considerable freedom.

With the collar as a cushion against the scapula on each side, the hames act as a means of distributing the pull of the traces over the full shoulder area. By a happy coincidence, the usual angle of the traces passes almost exactly through the horse's center of gravity. Thus, the animal can exert maximum effort while remaining in optimum balance. The collar can be "piped" or relieved where it crosses the windpipe, to prevent any choking effect. The rest of the body harness, except for the breechband, is a device to keep the collar and traces in proper position.

#### Centuries To Develop

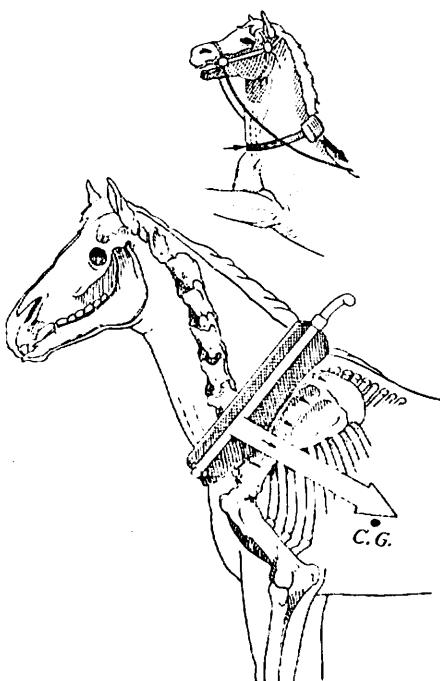
Although these basic concepts may seem reasonable and simple to us today, they took centuries to develop.

Probably the first use of the horse as a draft animal was on the light chariots of the Babylonians. Two horses, neck-yoked to such a vehicle, were not particularly hampered by the off-center loading at the level of their withers. Cyrus of Persia about 500 B.C. briefly tried eight horses abreast on his war chariots, but found this show of horsepower impractical. As a secondary effort, he attempted the same hitch for pulling large archery towers onto the battlefield. Not only was the pole team off balance, but the simplified hitch on the outer horses did not effectively use their energy.

The real need for multiple hitches awaited the larger wagon, which in turn required improved roads. The Romans contributed the roads. From Scandinavia came the concept of the articulated four-wheel wagon of "reach pole" design. During Medieval times, in spite of deterioration of the Roman roads, the basic elements of modern harness appeared, such as collar, traces and eveners.

#### Back To Pack Horses

In England, after the Roman departure in 426 A.D., transportation reverted to pack horses and the roads fell into disrepair. Then English law entered the picture. The Highway Act of 1500 A.D.



Collar, hames and traces relative to horse's skeletal structure and center of gravity compared with ancient yoke across withers and neck band across windpipe.

finally brought improved roads and the proper setting for wagon transport. About 1600, there is a specific reference to a freight outfit, consisting of a heavy wagon hauled by four horses, with four spare horses awaiting their turn in harness. The driver rode a saddle horse, directing the draft teams by voice and whip.

Jealous packhorse drivers fought the wagoners, as would happen in America at a later time. Scrubby little packhorses, about 13 hands high, caused little road damage. Laws were passed to minimize rutting by freight wagons, the approach being to force the use of wide tires. Wagons became extremely heavy, which was possible in the comparatively flat English countryside.

An Act of 1745 limited a draft team to four horses unless the wagon wheels were at least eight inches wide. The 1770 Act allowed any number of draft animals, providing the wheels were at least 15 inches wide. Wheels were constructed of wood, with iron tires. English cartwheels were massive in proportion, and heavily dished for rigidity. The axle was bowed so that the bottom spoke would be vertical.

#### Conical Wheels

When unreasonable width was superimposed onto accepted practices, the result was a conical wheel. Tires could not be forged in one piece, so several separate tires had to be mounted side by side, each conforming to the taper of the wheel. Ruth Manning-Sanders' book *The English Circus* includes a contemporary sketch of the heavy Wombwell menagerie wagons, dated 1820-1830 and showing such a wheel.

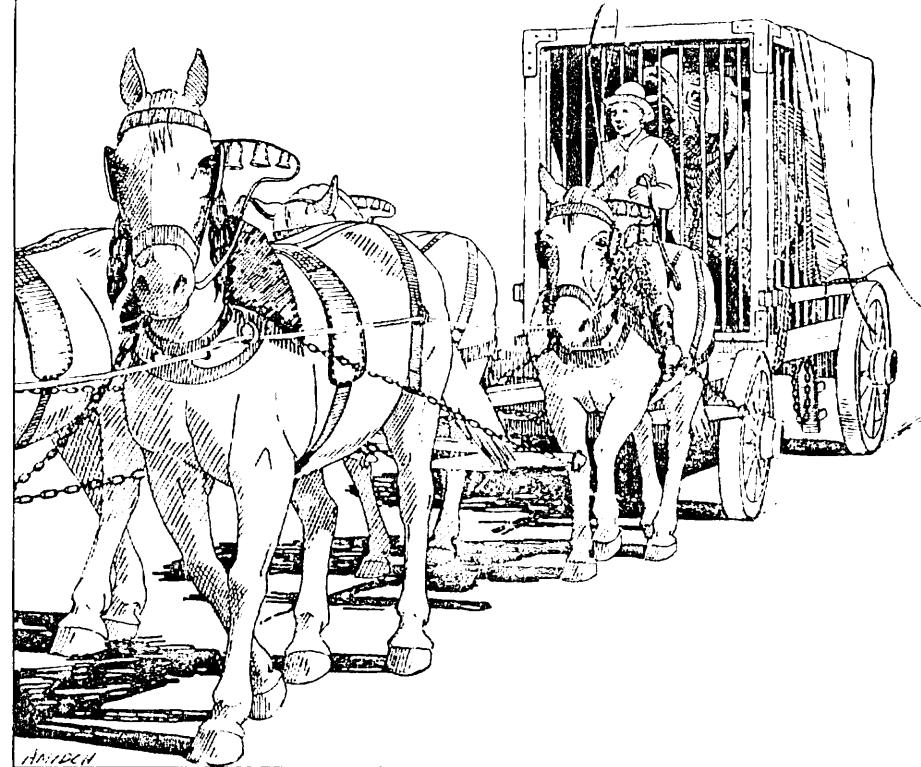
Later mention is made of a six-horse freight hitch in England, of which the leaders were driven *artillery style* by a postillion on the near horse.

Coaching also was on the increase. A mention of the *cock horse* not only recalls a familiar nursery rhyme, but perhaps documents the first hook-rope team. The term derived from an old Dutch word *GHACK*, which means *foolish*. This meant that a draft horse was foolish to carry a rider as well as pull a load. The cock horse was stationed at the foot of a hill along the stage route. He was equipped with a singletree and a dozen feet of heavy rope so that he might be hitched to assist the regular team on the hill.

#### Hoofprints In America

Picking up the hoofprints in America, let us first consider New England, a primary territory of the early overland circus. As a frontier country, its transport lagged that of England. The horseback era persisted until after 1650, and then pack trains carried the freight over primitive roads. The first freighters in this area were farm wagons covered by a tarpaulin. After 1700, the freight business expanded even more rapidly than the coach lines.

However, coach driving involved four or six horses, with the added hazard of speed. English coaching manuals were consulted, and the English system adapted to the rigors of the New World. Stones in the roadway were a constant problem, causing the coach pole to snap



Typical Conestoga team pulling rhino cage of Zoological Institute (based on 1834-35 poster at American Antiquarian Society, reproduced on page 27 of Durant's *Pictorial History of the American Circus*).

laterally and the collars to chafe the horses. New England coachmen loosened the lateral restraints, to allow the pole some free motion. English teams were hitched more tightly, similar to show teams of the present day.

The English coachman held all lines in his left hand, using his right for the whip and for adjusting the lines. New England drivers adopted a two-handed technique, actually driving each pair of horses more nearly as an individual team.

#### Driving Prowess

Stage drivers, constantly in the public eye, had good opportunity to display their driving prowess. Local farm lads and drivers skilled in handling a pair of horses admired the expertise of the stage drivers. Perhaps such admiration persuaded some to *hire out* with the traveling circuses of the day.

Another group of teamsters constantly in the public eye during our Revolution and the following decades consisted of the Conestoga drivers. Nowhere is the story of the Conestoga better told than in the book *Conestoga Wagon*, by Shumway, Durell and Frey, from which the following information comes. Conestoga wagon design is based on European prototypes with which the Pennsylvania Germans were familiar. These wagons originally carried produce from the Conestoga Valley area into Philadelphia. The German farmers also bred a type of horse which, although never stabilized as a breed, became known as the Conestoga horse.

With the extension of roads from Baltimore and Philadelphia westward to Ohio, the Conestoga outfits became the freighters of the day, and larger road wagons developed from the original farm

design. The heavy Conestoga freighters occupied the same time slot (1800-1850) as the developing American mud show; yet I can recall no reference which specifically ties one to the other.

#### Great Indian Rhino

The American Antiquarian Society has in its collection an 1835 woodcut poster of the Zoological Institute. The central illustration shows the Institute's Great Indian rhino in what appears to be a stout shipping cage mounted on a heavy dray and drawn by a six-horse Conestoga team.

Clearly detailed are the wide leather traces and straps, the large leather housings over the collars and sets of bells on the hames. The heavy draft chain is attached to the wagon pole. The driver is astride the near wheeler, his whip over his shoulder, holding the single jerk line to the near leader. Therefore, if the illustration is accurate and not a stock cut, at least one Conestoga team tramped under the "Flatfoot" corporate banner.

Conestoga harness, the best examples of which may be seen at the Shelburne Museum in Vermont, is similar in many ways to typical circus harness of a later time. It is simpler to point out the differences.

A heavy forged chain called the fifth chain was used in place of body poles to carry the lead bars of the leaders and swing team. All leather members were much wider than on later harness. Bridles with integral blinders were cut from a single piece of leather. A single jerk line extended along the near side of the team to the near leader. There it split into two lines, attached to both sides of the bridle.

#### Turn Signals

The left line was the shorter, so that a

steady pull signaled a left turn. A series of sharp jerks also tightened the left line but it simultaneously caused a series of tugs on the right side of the bridle, signaling a right turn.

The other five horses had a bearing rein attached to both sides of the bridle and looped over the hames for moderate

restraint. A wooden *jockey stick* from the near leader's collar to the off leader's bridle kept the lead team together.

Vocal commands were also used. It is said that drivers sometimes demonstrated vocal control by lying prone in the direction of travel and *talking* the team over their body.

Although the jerk line team did not follow the circus trail, this hitch was widely used for mule teams in the West. On a sharp curve in mountainous country, the three pairs ahead of the wheelers were trained to step over the chain and pull toward the outside of the curve. The famous 20-mule borax teams were hitched and worked in this fashion.

Because long-string draft hitches were used by circuses for about a century, there was time for considerable trial-and-error development in the harness and rigging. Based on the nearly standard baggage harness which finally evolved, we can speculate as to how it happened.

#### A Summer Occupation

First, circus business was primarily a summer occupation, although the season often started or ended in unseasonable weather. Generally, however, the wide leather expanses and the heavy housings of the freight teams were undesirable. Improved harness hardware allowed further weight reduction. Railroad operation later dictated the loading of draft horses fully harnessed, and this was a further reason for minimum weight.

Harness design was simplified for the specific needs of the circus. On the other hand, special requirements such as hook-rope required rigging which was versatile and easy to change.

Individual body poles were more serviceable than the forged chain of Conestoga days, but the pole chains and trace chains survived.

In the handling of lines and the control of individual teams, the New England stage driver's method stood the test of time. So did the loose lateral restraints, although stones in the road were no longer the prime reason. When the team was standing, as during loading or unloading, most of the rigging sagged to the ground, taking that much weight off the horses.

#### Only For Parade

Latter-day circus teams donned their studded housings and plumes only for parade. The bearskin housings, colored feathers, plumes and bells which the Conestoga teamster added from pure pride had disappeared from the working teams.

Circus teamsters were nevertheless a proud and capable breed, inheriting many of the traits of their earlier counterparts. The mechanization of the circus and the departure of these men from the circus lot is like an echo of an earlier day, when the railroad and canal forced the freight wagon into oblivion.

Out of sight, however, need not mean out of mind. No memory of my youth exceeds that of the circus teams pulling the heavy wagons over the granite block street to the New England Fairground. There, each wagon rumbled over the protective planking across the trotting

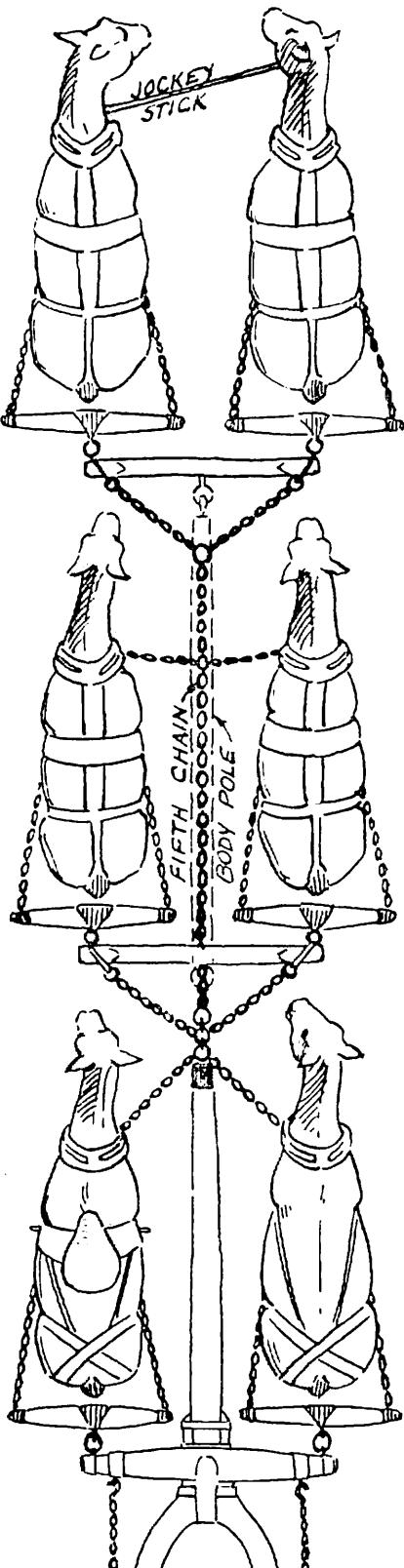


Diagram of Conestoga hitch, showing "fifth chain" instead of body pole used on later circus hitch.

track, to be directed into place by the boss hostler. That had to be circus at its best.

*Editor's note:* For those interested in more details on this subject, here is a bibliography of outstanding material.

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"Wait for the Big One—Providence, 1975"

#### Kelly And Dover Tents Hold Annual Combined Picnic

Beautiful City Park in Hagerstown, Md., was the site on Aug. 18 of the Annual Combined Picnic of the Emmett Kelly Tent No. 41 of Hagerstown and the Robert Dover Tent No. 112 of Harrisburg, Pa. Picnic Chairman Joe Kittell arranged a program of events that had something doing every minute. There were games, presentations, Kelly Tent memorabilia and the host Kelly Tent's dinner fare that featured fried chicken.

Heading the more than 40 that attended were National President J. Allen Duffield of Camp Hill, Pa., a member of both Tents, and his wife Louise; Dover Tent President Al Franckle and his wife; Kelly Tent President Bill Mumma and his wife; Pennsylvania State Chairman Mary Burnum Bush Hauck, and her counterpart, Maryland State Chairman Jim Harshman.

South Pavilion, close by a scenic park lake with majestic swans and wild fowl, should have been a quiet, serene setting for the get-together but it reverberated with the happy Fans' shouts and laughter throughout the afternoon.

—Jim Harshman



Step Out to Providence in 1975!