



John Gurtner is shown with the team of hogs that he drives in parades and shows throughout the Midwest.

## FARM COUPLE TRAINS HARNESSSED PORKERS TO DRIVE AS A TEAM

# These Hogs Think They're Horses

by Wally Schulz

When John Gurtner and his wife Talitha go for a ride in the country, they attract a lot of attention. After all, it isn't every day you see a team of hogs all harnessed and hitched up like a team of horses.

John, who has been a hog farmer near Fremont, Ind., all his life, admits that he always harbored a secret desire to train a pair of them to drive.

"One day about 8 years ago I put a rope around a pig's neck to see if I could get it to lead like a dog," explains John. "Talitha helped me and we carried on the training process behind the barn. We didn't want neighbors seeing us and laughing if we weren't successful. It took us about 3 days to train the hog just to lead. The next step was to put a bridle on it. We discovered that a small pony bit works great. We were puzzled as to what to do for a harness and then happened to think of our local Amish harness maker. It was the first request he'd ever had for a set of harnesses for a team of hogs."

While the harnesses were being made, John bought another hog about the same size as his "trainee" at a local country auction. It, too, proved intelligent and John soon taught it to lead and then to drive with the other hog as a team, pulling a small wagon.

To his surprise, the hog team lunged forward in the harness and "took off like old timers" the first time they were hitched up, pulling the 350 lb. wagon with ease. They soon learned to respond to voice commands of "get up" — "whoa" — "gee" (turn right) and "haw" (turn left).

"We took them for a drive down the front yard the first time, then headed down the road," John recalls. "The neighbors could scarcely believe their eyes."

The Gurtners hadn't been driving the hog team more than a couple of weeks when they were asked to drive it in a local parade. "We hesitated,

thinking the hogs might spook and we'd have a runaway hog team on our hands," John recalls. At the last minute, however, the Gurtners relented and decided to enter the parade, completely unaware of the fame and success that decision was destined to bring them.

When the parade was over, they were awarded the top prize and a huge trophy. They also received a number of offers to exhibit their hog team at other fairs and celebrations throughout Indiana. "We found ourselves in show business. One fair led to another and we have since traveled to parades, fairs, shows and celebrations in five different midwestern states since we entered that first parade with a hog team 8 years ago," says John.

Through the years, the Gurtners have trained about 20 different hogs to drive. If a hog's feet give out, or it refuses to pull the wagon anymore, it's shipped to market and a newly trained hog takes its place. The 20 trained hogs have represented all types — boars, gilts, barrows — a wide variety of breeds.

At one time, the Gurtners trained a pair of mini-pigs to drive as a team. "This breed, which weighs only about 75 lbs. when full grown, has a small amount of European wild hog blood in them. They're very intelligent. At maturity, they have a large and hard ridge or muscle on each side extending over the front part of the shoulder," explains John. "We paraded with them for about two years before they got balky and we quit driving them."

The Gurtners currently have two trained sheep which have been on the "show circuit" with their team this past summer. One is an African Barbado and the other a 4-horn English Jacobs. The sheep can be driven as a team, or either one can be hitched to drive with one of the trained hogs. Latest new addition to the act is a

# Finds Perfect Ear of Corn

You could spend a lifetime searching for a perfect ear of corn and never find one. But John Middlekoop, retired Packwood, Iowa, farmer and seed corn producer, found one in his 1979 crop. The perfect ear had 16 rows, perfectly straight, with no missing kernels.

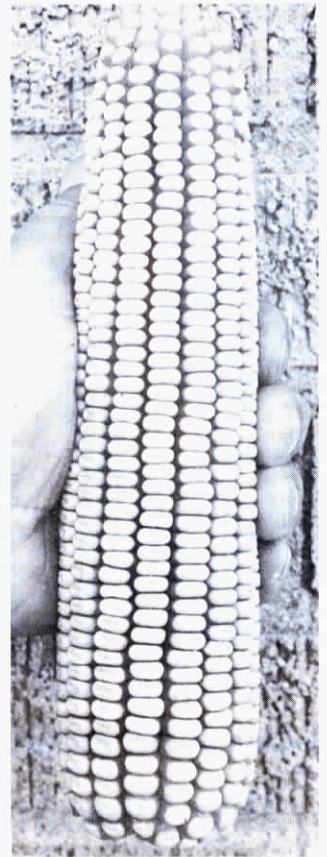
Middlekoop had been looking for a perfect ear all his adult life while he sorted corn in his business, and while judging corn at county fairs and the Iowa State Fair.

"There are a lot of ears that come close," he says, "but even the prize-winners are not perfect. The rows may be crooked, and there are usually kernels missing."

Middlekoop says the perfect ear has no value in breeding: "It would not keep on producing perfect offspring. It's perfect because all of the proper growing conditions just happened to come together at the same time."

Corn ears can have from 10 to 26 rows, says Middlekoop, but a 20-row ear is considered ideal for showing in competition.

Middlekoop has had some good offers to buy his perfect ear of corn, but says he will keep it. It will take an honored place among the 400 "nearly perfect" ears he has collected over the years.



John Middlekoop found this perfect ear of corn after searching for his entire adult life.



Mrs. Gurtner shows off a hog and sheep team which they sometimes drive in parades.

goose which the Gurtners have trained to pull a small wagon.

The Gurtners transport their sheep and hog teams to fairs and shows in the back of a van. Behind the van they pull a house trailer which is their home away from home while on the road. "The hogs are housebroken like a dog. They will not urinate in their bedding like common hogs," explains Talitha. She adds that, "We've made a lot of friends with our hog team all over the midwest. Many times we are asked to return the following year. It's always an exciting year, packed with thrills."

Now thanks to soaring gas prices, the Gurtners have had to boost the price they get for participating in fairs and shows. "We used to be able to entertain at a show or parade in the midwest for a couple hundred dollars. Now, because of the high cost of gas, we'd have to charge \$400 to upwards of \$700, depending on how many miles we have to drive," explains Talitha.

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