Hauling hay not just for fun

By APOLINAR PAUL BECERRA

Hauling hay is a good part-time job for extra money and a good way to stay in shape, but hauling hay for fun? Kidding, right?

George H. Lewis III, a long time resident of Ft. Bend County, suggested to his employees four years ago that they join him in a new contest at the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo.

"I found out about the Hay Hauling Contest at the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo in January 1979 from some friends who work with the show," Lewis said.

During the late spring and summer, Lewis hauls hay with three or four men he hires who are off from school. He had been hauling hay for a number of years when he found out about this new form of competition.

"I was really excited when I first heard about it," Lewis said.

The Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo is held during February and March of each year. This didn't give Lewis that much time to get a team together for the big day.

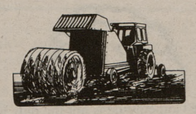
A participating team consists of three men. The team must, in a pick-up truck not bigger than a half-ton, back up to a stack of 42 bales of hay and quickly load and stack them into the back of the truck. They then must drive through an obstacle course that consists of a cattle guard, a wire gap or gate and a number of pylons. Upon completion of the obstacle course the team returns to the starting point and unloads the hay.

Although the competition is not easy, the winning time the first year of the contest was under five minutes.

Lewis talked to his employees about teaming up but only one would join him. Eventually, however, he was able to recruit a team. The team would consist of Lewis as captain and truck driver, Paul Becerra as stacker and Richard Engling as loader.

Lewis said the team now needed a name, but what could they call three men who haul hay for fun?

During the summer, he practiced with the men in the field until late in the evening. One morning, frustrated with the hours Lewis kept hauling hay, his wife suggested the name "Midnight Haulers," now the official name of the team.



The big day came the Sunday before the start of the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo. Lewis and his crew got to the large parking lot of the Astrodome, where the contest would be held, and waited, a bit excited and scared.

More than 25 teams showed up for the first annual Hay Hauling Contest at the Houston event.

The Midnight Haulers was the 23rd team to compete, which was to their advantage, Lewis said, because it gave them the chance to watch the strategies of other teams.

The Midnight Haulers did well considering they were in their first competition.

"I couldn't believe it when we were announced as the second place winners," Lewis said. "It's not first place, so we didn't get a trophy, but we placed."

He decided to start practicing the team early for the next year's contest with the hay in a friend's barn. They pulled 42 bales out of the barn and stacked them on the ground. Then they loaded the heavy bales on a truck over and over again until they were working with perfect rhythm.

After a couple of months, Lewis decided to start a contest at the Ft. Bend County Fair in October. His efforts were rewarded with a hay hauling contest on the Saturday during the fair.

The contest was publicized in local newspapers and on radio stations around the county. More than 10 teams showed.

Since the Midnight Haulers was the only team to compete before, it was allowed to run first so the other teams could get a chance to see how a course was run.

The Midnight Haulers felt pre-competition jitters, but the feeling wasn't at all like it was in Houston.

"It's hard to explain; we were nervous in Houston, but all of a sudden we were in front of people that we knew and were scared as heck," Lewis said.

"When the whistle went off, we sort of just sat there on the tail-gate of the truck for a second then we jumped to work," he said.

Once the last team was through the course and the flag was dropped, they knew they had not placed second this time but had taken first place for a trophy and $90 in prize money.

Since that first contest four years ago, the Midnight Haulers have won every year at the Ft. Bend County Fair.

"We are still trying to win at the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo; that is something I can't wait for," Lewis said.

Steer symposium slated in new animal pavillion

By ANN RAMSBOTTOM

Show steers are big business. Thousands of dollars and many hours are spent purchasing, feeding, fitting and hauling show animals each year. But the show ring is constantly and unjustly criticized, said Dr. Doug Wythe, associate professor of animal science at Texas A&M University.

A steer production and evaluation symposium, designed to provide information on the improvement of steers and steer shows will be held May 20 and 22 at Texas A&M.

The animal science department, in conjunction with the Texas Agricultural Extension Service and the Texas Agricultural Experiment Station, will sponsor the program which will be held in the new animal science pavillion.

The symposium will be aimed at 4-H and FFA'ers as well as beef cattle breeders and feeders and those involved with beef cattle breed associations and show steers.

"Cost and performance of steers managed for show will be compared to that of steers in a typical feedlot situation," John Maurer, beef center manager, said.

"We'll look at the variations in performance as well s the cost differences under the two systems," he said.

"We'll have data available presenting all the facts and let those in attendance observe the live steers and the carcasses and they can draw their own conclusions," Wythe said. Wythe, chairman of the symposium, explained that the purpose of the symposium is not to make any conclusions on the merits of the different breeds.

A study which is now being done at the University will also be discussed at the symposium. The study is being done on 45 steers representing all major breeds and several crosses have been donated by breeders from throughout the state.

The symposium will include a discussion on evaluating slaughter steers. Classes will be set up like a typical show so participants can evaluate, compare and discuss the merits of the different steers.

"This will be the first year for the steer symposium," Wythe said. "Since there's a continual demand for this sort of thing, we hope to put on an educational symposium every two years."

Precise application needed for success

By BRENDA C. DAVIDSON

The age of computerized irrigation is dawning, spurred on by the looming water shortage on the Texas horizon.

Texas is facing a serious water shortage in the near future, says Dr. Don Reddell, professor of agricultural engineering at Texas A&M University. A system of aquifers — underground reservoirs of water — supply the majority of water used for irrigation in Texas. These aquifers are being depleted at an alarming rate with relatively little recharge.

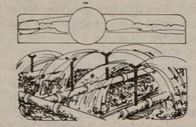
"Texas is sitting on a time bomb with the present depletion rate of this water," Reddell emphasized.

The heavy agricultural production on the High Plains of Texas is responsible for most of this deficit. With relatively few rivers and less than 20 inches of annual rainfall, High Plains agriculture is dependent upon underground water reservoirs for crop production.

"Irrigation must slow down in that area," Reddell warned. "The key is to improve our water use efficiency."

The majority of irrigation on the High Plains falls into two categories -- sprinkler irrigation or furrow irrigation.

Sprinkler irrigation uses water more efficiently than furrow irrigation. Water is distributed more evenly over the crop, at a faster rate, and with less man power than a furrow irrigation system.



However, several major problems with conventional sprinkler systems tarnish its advantages. A high level of energy is required to pump the water through the system. The energy crunch, which sent fuel costs skyrocketing in recent years, has signifigantly increased the operating expenses for Panhandle farmers to pump the water.

The low rate of water intake by the soil is another major problem with sprinkler irrigation, Reddell said. Since water must be applied at a faster rate through high pressure sprinkler irrigation systems, a large percentage of the water is lost through run-off at the end of the row, he said. It doesn't have time to soak into the ground.

The LEPA irrigation system — Low Energy-Precision Application — was developed by Dr. William Lyle, agricultural engineer in charge of irrigation research at Halfway for the Texas Agricultural Experiment Station.

The LEPA system uses a series of drop-tubes suspended from a line of pipe. Water flows through the pipe at a relatively low pressure, falls down the drop-tubes, and trickles out of nozzles inches above the ground.

A series of small dams in each furrow catch the water, thus eliminating run-off at the end of the field.

The LEPA system uses an astonishing 90 to 95 percent of the water. It achieves this at relatively low pressure, therefore decreasing fuel expense required for pumping. Run-off problems are solved with the series of mini-dams which hold the water until it can soak into the ground.

However, many Panhandle farmers still use furrow irrigation because of the expense involved in installing a sprinkler system, Reddell said. A sprinkler system costs between $60,000 to $70,000.

"These systems are highly inefficient," Reddell explained. "When you apply water in a furrow system, it is not uncommon to have some water running out of one furrow and water barely reaching halfway down another furrow.. We would like for it to be applied as uniformly as possible."

Each furrow will soak up water at different rates. The same furrow will even vary in levels of water uptake at different times during the season, compounding the problem further.

Reddell, in cooperation with Dr. Stephen Searcy, assistant professor of agricultural engineering at Texas A&M University developed an automatic irrigation system to increase the efficiency of existing furrow irrigation systems.

Fertilizer expense is major factor in backyard gardening

By SUSAN FLORENCE

With rising costs, today's homeowners are trying to produce their own food by planting fall and spring gardens.

However, fertilizer for a garden can inflate the cost of each vegetable as high as grocery store prices, according to Elizabeth Stone, a Bryan Garden Center Specialist.

Several factors are involved in determining which fertilizer is the best buy. These factors are analysis, form, organic matter and price, Stone said.

Fertilizers are often grouped into three categories based on the relative amounts of nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium they contain.

Other ingredients may be present which make the volume of fertilizers larger and make it appear to be a better bargain. These "filler materials" may be useful as soil amendments but cannot be considered a good buy when purchased for the price of a fertilizer, she said.

Powdered fetilizers should be distinctly less expensive than granular forms. If a substantial difference in price does not exist, the granular form is a better buy, Stone said.

Whether a fertilizer is organically derived may be an important consideration if you are committed to the exclusive use of organic materials. If an organic fertilizer is selected, you should prepare to pay a higher price for the same quantity of nutrients, she said.

"Manure is one of the best fertilizers to use on home gardens," said John Larsen, extension horticulturalist for Texas A&M University System.

"Compost manures are the best and there is nothing wrong with using manures for use on vegetable gardens."