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## Lessons from the Draft Horse Industry in East Texas

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PREVIOUS  
ARTICLE



ISSUE  
CONTENTS



NEXT  
ARTICLE



## Lessons from the Draft Horse Industry in East Texas

### Abstract

The purpose of the study reported here was to determine and understand the variables responsible for the revival of the draft horse industry in East Texas. The draft horse industry can provide viable employment for rural entrepreneurs. The authors suggest universities and Extension rethink their traditional roles of supporting and providing resources for rural entrepreneurs engaged in agricultural enterprises that utilize relic technologies.

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## Introduction

Among its various strategic objectives, Agricultural Extension seeks to understand, enable, and help sustain rural entrepreneurship (Scorsone, 2003). Traditional paradigms in financial agricultural education need to be reviewed in order to address this strategic objective (Gustafson, 2002). Entrepreneurship should be encouraged when traditional methods are no longer successful. Part of the process in encouraging entrepreneurial thinking is to broadcast that which already exists in the rural community.

The purpose of the study reported here was to determine and describe the variables responsible for the revival of the draft horse industry in East Texas--a successful sustainable rural entrepreneurial industry. A qualitative study was conducted using 14 purposively (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) selected draft horse industry participants in East Texas. Structured and semi-structured interviews were used. This research showed that the culture of practicality, inventiveness, and risk taking has allowed individuals in the draft horse industry to achieve financial success, where others have been forced to abandon their businesses and seek other sources of livelihood.

Page (1996) suggests that a gulf separates agriculture and industry driven by capitalistic theory development favoring industry over agriculture. That is, the draft horse industry promotes entrepreneur manufacturing in rural communities. Page further postulates the importance of locality and regional development. Conroy (2000) suggests the primary goal for the education community should be supplying a well-trained work force, whether they are interested in traditional agriculture or not. The draft horse industry and its ancillary businesses can provide a foundation for this growth.

The theoretical underpinnings of the study are based on Jack and Anderson's (2002) construct of structuration. Structuration, or recurring patterns of thought, states that the future is anchored in the past. This theory applies as well to education, though in the contextual areas of Extension and organization and community the current paradigms do not take into account the change management possibilities of looking to technology of the past for solutions to current problems.

The theory of Jack and Anderson (2002) affirms Rindos' (1980) observation that a positive selection

for instability has characterized agriculture from the beginning. The historical use of draft animals was on the mind of the subjects of this study when they first started to acquire and use them. Jack and Anderson (2002) suggest that embedding, or the depth of one's ties to his environment, plays a key role in his success.

Educators need to encourage entrepreneurship when traditional methods of earning a living in rural communities are no longer successful. Part of the process of encouragement of entrepreneurial thinking is to broadcast information which already exists in the rural community. There is evidence of entrepreneurial efforts in the U.S. draft horse industry (Telleen, 1979). This study delineates the contextual applications in agricultural education used for acquiring the knowledge and skills necessary for the operation of contemporary businesses supporting the use of draft animal power. The study demonstrates that selected agricultural educational contexts and their applications in economic pursuits work in nontraditional ways. These applications should be used as potential sources of solutions in the economic revival of contemporary rural societies.

## **Methods**

The study was a qualitative study of 14 conveniently selected respondents (non-Amish) drawn from draft animal users in East Texas. In particular, the researcher used unstructured and semi-structured interviews while making the necessary adjustments to the questions as the interviews proceeded. The interviewer did not pass judgment on the answers to his questions, and the respondents were expected to answer with thought and veracity. Document analysis and long term observation were also employed.

The qualitative study followed acceptable procedures and applied trustworthiness quality criteria set forth by Lincoln and Guba (1985), Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, and Allen (1993), and Merriam (1998). The field notes were organized and transcribed using the procedures outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Both formal and informal member checks were used. Trustworthiness was assured by credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). An audit trail was maintained (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Internal validity was addressed using Merriam's (1998) six strategies for enhancing validity.

In order to determine where and from whom the data would be collected, the inquiry's focus was provisionally defined (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The focus of the study required using participants who were successful in their business enterprises, which required purposive sampling. Thus the researcher would ask people who were interviewed to whom else he should be talking--snowball sampling.

In qualitative research, the researcher and the respondents contribute together to the study through their interaction with one another during the interview process. The truth and applicability of the study are dependent upon the accuracy of both the subjects and the researcher in reporting the answers and the questions.

Participation by the respondents in this study was voluntary. The answers from the interviews were coded and kept confidential. Throughout the study, the answers were written down during the interviews. There was a set of questions the interviewer had prepared, and he would refer to them throughout the interview. With the semi-structured interviews, the interviewer was prepared to delve deeply into the respondent's answers to gain further information.

On several occasions, the participants would be asked an opening question; they would start talking and would basically continue to talk without any prompting or questions for the rest of the interview. These interviews became unstructured interviews. The researcher would simply write down their thoughts. Unstructured interviews do not have a set schedule of questions. The interviewer asks questions and, as the answers flow, adjusts his questions and focuses on the responses received to tweak out the most information he can from his subject.

## **Findings**

### **The Participants**

Most of the men and women interviewed were middle aged. The work they were doing in the draft horse industry was a second, third, or fourth career. Almost all of the facilities visited were located on non-tillable soil. This demonstrates sustainable economic use of rural locations that otherwise would generate little traditional agricultural income. The men and women interviewed were living and working in a rural environment in an agriculturally related field in a nontraditional agricultural occupation. They were doing so in an environmentally friendly way on soil that would not support traditional agriculture.

### **Geographical Underpinnings**

The northern or northeastern link to draft horses and draft equipment in Texas was a compelling reminder of the history of the draft horse industry in the United States. The horses and equipment bought by the draft horsemen of Texas almost uniformly came from the collar states or provinces around the Great Lakes. This region of the country is the Diaspora of the draft horse industry (United States Census Report 1900).

## The Market

All of the interviewees noted Texas residents as their primary market for horse sales. Many of the subjects noted that their clients were people who had ridden quarter horses all of their lives but were now getting older, may have a touch of arthritis in their knees, and wanted a safer way to own and use horses. These people would buy one or two draft horses and pull a wagon or a cart. A couple of the interviewees noted they sold draft horses to be ridden. With that in mind, they broke their young horses to ride and drive. In a recent article in the *Draft Horse Journal*, there was a story about a man in Montana who specialized in half draft/half riding horses for use by overweight riders.

As Armstrong and Levesque (2002) proposed, entrepreneurs set a target quality level to maximize profitability. The subjects of the study were very clear about what segment of the draft horse market they served. The men and women interviewed clearly identified their target markets and sold horses in the continuum from the high-quality show horse customers to the lower quality pet draft horses.

The people interviewed for the study all participated in service businesses using their horses. They hired out their horses and carriages for any number and type of events. The subjects not only break and train horses for their own uses but also break and train horses for their customers. If they have someone come to them requesting lessons on care/management of draft horses or wishing to learn how to drive horses, the interviewees provide such service.

Horses and carriages are available for hire for corporate parties as well as private parties. Most of the subjects were willing to drive people in weddings and funerals. Some of the participants made the military funeral a specialty, because national cemeteries are few in number and require strict adherence to protocols. Draft horse shows were used to promote those herds that have breeding stock. Several interviewees stood stallions for public service. A farrier interviewed promoted his blacksmithing work through his work in the show ring. Several of the participants hired themselves out to show horses on behalf of those who want their animals shown but can not do the showing themselves.

## Self-Directed Learning

The men and women interviewed were all self-directed learners who learnt best with andragogical methods of instruction. They had a need, and each went about filling it, usually in some fashion similar to everyone else interviewed. To stay current and to learn new markets and what was going on, all but two of the subjects subscribed to and read the *Draft Horse Journal*, used the Internet for learning and communication, and read the publications from the state associations and national breed associations. Everyone interviewed noted working with subject matter experts. To most of the participants, these experts are found in the Amish community. They either worked at the present time with the Amish to find horses and equipment or worked with them in the past, when they got started using draft horses.

## Charity Work

There was a definite conscious effort made by many of these horsemen to engage in charity work. They were serious about it and seemed to relish their role in bringing happiness to people, often institutionalized, who need it. Several horsemen noted that they would not sell horses to people who they thought could not or would not care/handle them correctly. Some of this thinking has its roots in the care lavished on the horses and mules seen during this study.

## Seeking Business

Entrepreneurs must fulfill a need in society to be successful. They accomplish this by maintaining business and personal networks, ties, and relationships across wide geographical distances. "Traveling as far as the money goes" is the motto of most of the people visited. They charged 50 cents a loaded mile, \$700 per wedding/funeral, or up to \$750/month to train a horse. Board was an additional fee. Stud fees for the stallions ran to \$500, while jack fees were \$100. Only one of the fourteen interviewed indicated a limit on how far he would travel to find horse business or work.

## Conclusions and Implications

Based on the findings of the study, andragogy and self-directed learning have been shown to work as educational foundations for economic sustainability, even when utilizing relic technology, by the participants of the study. The reacquisition of knowledge and skills utilized by the participants was in part historically, culturally, or geographically driven. The methods used by the study's participants in their acquisition of the knowledge and skills necessary for success should be used as a role model for how other rural industries can start and flourish. The methods used by the participants for their successful non-traditional environmentally friendly work in rural arenas should be learned and taught by Extension and university personnel alike.

The results of the research have implications for higher education and for Extension. The subjects of the study uniformly tapped informal sources of information--family and friends, personal

contacts with subject matter experts, books and magazines, interest groups and associations, the Internet--rather than formal institutions of learning. Not one of the subjects interviewed even mentioned Extension or higher education institutions as a resource. Apparently, the draft horse industry in Texas has taken root without the assistance of formal educational institutions.

The authors propose that Extension along with agricultural education departments in universities and colleges rethink their traditional role of supporting and providing resources for agricultural enterprises. Rather than expecting entrepreneurs to approach for assistance, Extension should approach new entrepreneurs such as the draft horse professionals. We have much to learn from these self-directed adult learners about developing an economically successful agriculture-based industry. Then, perhaps most important, Extension educators can analyze the model and disseminate it to others who seek a way to sustain themselves in today's agricultural environment.

A core group of motivated adult learners was investigated and found to be hungry for information about ways to make their agricultural environments economically sustainable. These learners do not turn to Extension in their search for knowledge and skill building. Understanding *why* they do not seek out Extension is beyond the scope of this study. Clearly there is an opportunity for Extension to carry its success story outward. If Extension reaches out to them, this group will respond. After all, they are lifelong learners, and Extension is a lifelong provider of learning.

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