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Gave Bob Semple a Ride in a Bullock Dray

Probably the last man to own and work a bullock team in Taranaki if not New Zealand, is Mr Joe Chamberlain of Regan Street West, Stratford. He established a team of bullocks in about 1926 while at Kaponga and carried out considerable work with them for the County Council and neighbouring farmers.

At one stage he had 18 bullocks making up two teams of eight with two spares. His wife drove one team for him on occasions, not from necessity but she enjoyed handling the animals once the load was attached. Mr Chamberlain had a solid rubber tyred motor truck working in conjunction with his bullock teams. The truck took care of most of the road haulage.

He originally carted all the firewood for the local dairy factories, and carted a large quantity of log timber for the Egmont Box Factory. Much of the timber came from Pukengahu and he camped out there while bringing the logs to the road for haulage by truck. Up to sixteen bullocks were needed to pull a 'catamaran' loaded with logs. Sometimes he struck trouble in the swamp and needed extra power; in this case he used what he termed a 'Burton Purchase' which he described as an arrangement of tree stumps and ropes to act like a block and tackle. He said in this manner he could treble the pulling power of the team over short distances.

In nearly twenty years handling bullocks as working animals, he learned that steers were not as strong as bulls. A bull could pull as much as a horse and Jersey bulls were the best in mud conditions. He said bulls made the best pole animals on account of their larger neck muscles, they were also generally stronger in the body.

GIG RIDE

Mr Chamberlain came to New Zealand from Switzerland in 1913 to work for his brother Len, at Kaponga. He was about twenty years of age and still recalls his journey from Wellington to Hawera by train and the horse and gig ride from Hawera to Kaponga. He could speak no English at the time and with twenty other young Swiss, he had the greatest difficulty buying a railway ticket on the Wellington Station.

The man that was to pick him up at Hawera did not ask him if he was hungry (which he was, after the Wellington trip), but asked him if he wanted a 'beer'. Apparently the same gentleman had already been imbibing rather much and when they both mounted the gig, he promptly went to sleep and left Joe wondering which way to go. He said he was glad to hear a voice in the darkness call his name and he knew he had met his brother, who was wondering why the travellers were so late.

TE KIRI

Mr Chamberlain carted all the shingle for the Te Kiri Bridge as well as the staging timber (that was mostly willows from Ngaere). Mrs Chamberlain helped him on this job. He chuckled heartily when remembering the special opening ceremony of the Te Kiri Bridge. Mr

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Syd Mann was the engineer and an extra large crowd turned out for the ceremony.

Included in the V.I.P.'s was Bob Semple and his wife. The Hon. Robert Semple was Minister of Public Works at the time. Mr Chamberlain explained the bullock dray was high off the ground and was a bit awkward for the ladies to get into, so they made a special staging for the occasion but owing to certain pre-celebration bottle opening, the dray arrived at the bridge minus the staging.

Apparently the ladies of the day were unabashed and climbed in over the high wheel to stand in the tray. Here Mr Chamberlain chuckled as he tried to tell me that he suddenly realised he couldn't use the regular bullock language to get the team moving so he yelled, "April, May, June, July and I don't care if it's August." The dray moved off with the usual first jolt and upset Mrs Semple in the bottom of the wagon.

BEES

Another time, the leading bullocks knocked over a beehive and Joe received a bad stinging. He moved a house with two teams of bullocks—his wife driving one team.

However, around the 1940's Mr Chamberlain began to receive complaints from the Counties regarding the use of the highways—incidentally the animals grazed the roads in most cases. Then one of his bullocks was killed by a motor car so he rather reluctantly sent the animals to the works.

BULLOCK TRUCK

Mr Chamberlain must be the only bullock driver to drive a team hitched to his truck. This occurred during the fitting of a culvert in Wirimu Road many years ago. He had to load his truck at the Pihama Railway Station with the huge concrete pipes. Later he hitched the bullock team on the front and with the engine pulling with the bullocks, he was able to negotiate the streams and swamps to deliver the pipes to the job, sitting at the steering wheel in the cab of the vehicle. He said it worked because there were no reins to handle.

Joe farmed while running his bullock team and ploughed with a four animal team worked efficiently but by doubling the team to sixteen you did not double your pulling power to any great extent. He did not like parting with the bullocks "you know them by name, each one," he said. He also recalled the dog "Crip", who would bring the bullocks together on call.

Joe farmed while running his bullock team and ploughed with a four bullock team and a double furrow plough.

His sons do the farming today, but Joe at eighty years of age, is still a very active man and is quite prepared to handle a team of bullocks any time "once I get to know them."

It was with reverence to the past that we did not comment when Joe spoke his parting words. "If I was a young fellow and had a bush farm to break in, I'd still use the bullocks!"