



# The last of New England's drovers

By JOE HEANEY

New England's livestock drovers went on the endangered species list as soon as cattle cars rolled over the rails.

Then came the livestock trucks with their big, wide tailboards. Later the sumptuous horse vans arrived ... and the drovers were extinct.

Cattle and horses weren't the only creatures shepherded along dusty country roads and noisy city streets by switch-carrying drovers, frequently wearing long, tattered coats and ragged hats.

Sometimes a farmer in Lebanon, N.H., Randolph, Vt., or York, Maine, who wanted to get their sheep to market, had no choice but to herd them over the road.

Occasionally, a herd of hogs became the drover's squealing cargo.

For generations, Brighton was the livestock capital of New England and both point of origin and destination for many drovers. ... Some who had to battle the foul fragrance of the old abattoir?

Old-timers recall cattle being moved along Massachusetts Avenue in Central and Harvard Squares, Cambridge, heading for Brighton.

Brighton Street in Belmont was named after a key livestock route to and from Brighton.

Now, the Stockyard Restaurant on Market Street is the only reminder of Brighton's history as a livestock center.

The last of the drovers were still working out of Brighton in the 40s and I was one of them ... employed by a clever Lexington horse trader named Raymond J. Barber.

Barb, who looked like the late actor, Charles Colburn, would be on Kendrick Street in Brighton every Wednesday

morning buying horses and ponies at J.C. Keith's weekly auction.

Barb would fill his undependable truck ("Lick The Japs," written across the brow of the cab) with horses shipped by rail from Nebraska or Iowa.

But frequently, because the truck was indisposed, he left extra animals to be ridden and led over the road by his drovers.

Barb picked us up at school and drove us to Brighton in a 1935 blue Plymouth sedan filled with the horse trader's cigar smoke. He was never without his cane or cigar.

I often rode with Charlie Mitchell or Willie Pierpont, who have disappeared the way boyhood pals do.

On the way to Brighton, Barb briefed us as best he could on the horses he barely knew ... having bid them out of the auction ring that morning for as little as possible.

"I don't know which one of you boys is going to ride the paint horse I bought, but be careful.

"He's supposed to have come off an Indian reservation in South Dakota and be broke the best by the chief's son. But he looks a little spooky to me. Might be bad when you get him in traffic.

"Be careful coming through Watertown Square," Barb always warned. I don't want the horse up on the sidewalk. Can't sell a horse who gets banged up."

A lot of the horses were Army horses because the cavalry was becoming mechanized in the early 40s and the horses — with long serial numbers branded on their necks — were being sold all over the country.

But most of the horses were green, and sometimes we had to ride one horse and lead another. This was rough because you need both hands with a half-broke horse.

Many of these horses had never seen heavy automobile and truck traffic ... let alone been in it.

Watertown Square was the worst place on the road back to Lexington on an uneasy horse from "out west."

There were truck drivers who liked to blow their horns to see if they could scare the horse. There were wise guys

who threw snowballs. And there were bad dogs and bad weather.

I remember riding a big roan who jumped up on the sidewalk and into a shoe factory doorway after being frightened by a bus that backfired.

The bay mare I was leading just stood there after getting loose, but I had to lead the roan half way to Lexington before he quieted down enough to remount.

Using many expletives, the shoe store manager let me know he didn't appreciate the visit.

March was a rough month for a horse drover because of the wind. A rider on horseback must be the wind's favorite target.

But April brings the good weather and that's when Yankee traders like Raymond J. Barber could sell horses by the dozen. They wanted a barn-full when spring arrived.

And sometimes the only way to get them home was to have them ridden over the road by the last of the New England drovers.

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