

## **Horse farming in Holland, South America, and the USA**

By Dale K. Stoltzfus and Jelmer Albada

### ***Blz. 52 van de beurscatalogus: Het verhaal van Jelmer Albada.***

Two very special people showed up from the Netherlands for Horse Progress Days 2009 in Montgomery, IN. They were Ties Ruigrok and Jelmer Albada. (See the 2010 Horse Progress Days Program Guide page 169 for their story.) This summer in Clare, Jelmer will be returning to the event, this time as part of the program.

#### **Impression of the Amish**

In his email letters after having left the US in the fall of 2009 and returning for a brief time to his home in the Netherlands, Jelmer reflects on some of the things that made an impression on him while here. He says “the US is a big country with a lot of variety in peoples, culture, and landscape.” He says the culture surrounding the Mennonite and Amish faiths made a big impression on him, especially as he thinks about “holding the lines” on change, keeping one’s ideals and morals first, above modernity, having himself come from a culture where “we always run toward new things.”

#### **From the Amish back to The Netherlands and on to South America**

After returning to his home for a few weeks, Jelmer moved on to a small herb farm in Chiquian, Peru. Here he stayed for a few months. The farming practices, he says, were like the “difference between night and day” from what he saw on the Amish farms of North America; in Peru, poverty, poor houses, skinny cattle, slow mobility and plows like the ones used in the Netherlands in 1500 B.C., this being “a wooden plow with steel teeth that only scratches the surface of the land, called an Ard in English. In front of it walks a mule with a bad harness.” While in South America, Jelmer also spent some time on a farm in Ecuador. He made connections with a farmer who seems open to trying new things.

While there, Jelmer observed a cultivator being pulled by a horse. The horse was being led by one person and another person held the handles of the cultivator. Jelmer went to a harness/ saddle store and explained what he wanted. He introduced lines to the set-up, and adjusted the harness to improve the line of draft and to make the horse more comfortable. The harvests were being put in boxes on a wagon pushed by two men while the horse stood in the meadow, so Jelmer showed the farmer how to put the horse in front of the wagon and make the job easier. This also freed up the other person to do something else productive. This particular farm does have a tractor, which can be used in conjunction with the horse. For instance, the tractor can be used to do the heavy work, like powering the rotary tiller and the horse for the light work, like cultivating weeds. It is to this farm in Ecuador that he is returned to in the fall of 2011.

#### **Shipping machinery to Ecuador**

In the summer of 2011 Jelmer worked again on the herb farm in the Netherlands. In his spare time he worked on developing weed control equipment to ship to the farm in the Andes Mountains of Ecuador. The name of the farm is Terrasana Organics. There are 7 green houses covering 1.5 hectares of the total 10 hectares (acres) of land on the farm, which has been in operation since 2002. There is a small tractor, and another little motorized, walk-behind “tractor.” There are two work horses and three Llamas. It has 11 employees and grows for a nacional supermarket. The crops include broccalli, carrots, lettuce, and puerro (leeks), among other things. The farm is organic. It can produce crops the year round. The land is sandy with no stones. In preparation for his time there, Jelmer has been busy trying to find horse drawn tillage tools. He decided he wanted a Meyer cultivator, or “hacke,” as it’s called in Germany, and assumed he would find one fairly easily, since the company only stopped making them in 2003. This was not the case; it seems those who have them do not wish Germany (this, he says, is “THE pro modern Draft Horse group in Europe”). In spite of their stature in the European Draft Horse Industry, the IGZ was not able to help him find his Meyer Cultivator, in fact, whoever he talked to said that if he finds two, they want to buy one. So, he got on the internet and there he found a Planet Jr. one horse cultivator. This cultivator was introduced and manufactured by a company called the S.L. Allen

Company in Philadelphia, PA., from the 1860s to the 1960s. Incidentally, Mr Allen's company developed the Flexible Flyer sleds we all enjoyed so much growing up. It's said he got into making the sleds in the winter months to keep his employees busy when demand for farm equipment was low. They're still being made, in China. Apparently the Meyer "hacke" was a German version of the Planet Jr. one horse cultivator. Since the company is no longer in existence, anyone can build a version of the Planet Jr. and call it that, under their own label, a little like calling all tissues Kleenex.

One evening Jelmer took his car and headed for the address of the Planet Junior he found on the internet. Taking a look at it in the gathering dusk, he decided he would buy it. When he told the erstwhile owner of the cultivator his plans for it, he could tell that even though the owner meant to act like he knew what Jelmer was talking about, he didn't. The owner didn't know what to call this piece of equipment that had been standing in his garden year round for the past 15 years. An air of feigned understanding mixed with curiosity accompanied Jelmer's project the whole time he was working on it in The Netherlands. Those who visited him in the shop while he worked, smiled when he dropped the words "horse" and "cultivator", and while they didn't say it, their looks said; oh yes, everybody has their hobby. When they heard it was for a South American country, they completely lost interest. Now that he had his cultivator, Jelmer took stock to see how many parts he would need for it so that it could perform like he wanted it to. He wanted to be able to hoe as close to the plants as possible and also do hilling of earth up to the growing plants. He went looking for parts in a place someone told him about that had lots of old machinery scattered around, with weeds and trees growing through it, some of the equipment was for horses. But the owner was not eager to show him everything because some of it was stored on a wet piece of land behind the barn, and he didn't want to put on his boots! Jelmer found an owner of a small tractor shop he told about "his doings", and the shop owner invited him to use his shop to work on the equipment he was collecting for South America. This man even had some steel and wooden eveners in his shop, along with ground drive cutter bar mowers and other things to hook to horses. Jelmer says it put him back in Amish country for a bit. The man even gave him two eveners for free.

*Here, more or less in Jelmer's words, is his response to a question I asked him; Why do you want to go to South America to work on a farm there and how do horses fit into the picture?*

### **Why work with horses?**

Some say it is outdated, while some point to the windmills we still use. They are an old concept transformed to modern use. The same can be done with draft animals. As a crop grower, I want to use the horse where it works best; in mechanical weed control. I want to use the source of energy that suits best. The tractor can do the heavy work like tilling the soil and loosening it up. Then the horse walks on it to mechanically control the weeds. Since there is less soil compaction in a horse print than in a tractor tire, the microorganisms in the soil can more effectively continue their work of keeping the soil loose so that precious nutrients in it are available to the plants. Another thing about the horse is that it can reproduce and replace itself. Horses walk on the farm produced fuel that they use; the pasture. Their manure will be used on the farm, and horse power is often cheaper and easier to repair than tractor power. What I like about the Amish is that the horse in their culture keeps them together. If they would farm big acreages with tractors and drive cars, their small farm communities would come apart. With the horse comes only a certain amount of acres one can farm and a certain amount of distance one can drive with a buggy. I believe this can make a community stand strong because it can only reach to, or cover, a certain area.

**Working with horses in Ecuador** I worked with horses in Europe, but it is the tractor farming era there, though some people still use horses for environmental reasons or because of a passion for them. When I set foot in South America, I saw how traditional draft power is used there, and that there can be a lot of progress made. For instance, you can see a lot of farmers in the mountains tilling the soil with an Ard. This is an implement we used in the Netherlands before the plow was invented; from 1500 BC until the middle ages.

Two weeks before I first went to South America, I was in North America visiting the Amish. It was like I was stepping back in horse progress history. For me, the Amish horse machinery is a good example of horse progress. Compared to Europe, the Amish always worked with horses, and have

different routines and different practices from “regular” farmers. Even in North America there are differences from region to region in horse farming. And, in Europe, the people who are interested in horse farming have picked it up again, after they had more or less lost track of it. When I saw conditions in South America, I thought horse progress has a lot of potential there, especially in the mountains where the tractor can hardly set foot, the horse, mule, or ox could be used more efficiently and effectively. Horses and other draft animals have been a part of our cultures for many centuries. It is farming, and I enjoy using such an intelligent animal. I enjoy the culture surrounding the work horse. The tractor is the surrogate of the horse, but the horse has an individual character while tractors are basically identical, known only by brand. I admit that I can also enjoy watching the big GPS tractors operate with the machinery they pull, when they do a good and efficient job, but while watching I am thinking about the differences and I try to see if some of it could be translated to horse traction. I enjoy watching development of any kind when it is done well. I like working with the horse, but I dislike becoming an old-timer or doing something in a museum kind of way. It is nice some people do that, but I want to use the workhorse in agriculture in a realistic way in this age and beyond. That is why I like to combine the old and the new in horse machinery, to make progress. The work needs to be efficient, practical, and realistic.

### **Appropriate machinery**

When I was back in Europe working, and planning how and when to return to the Ecuador farm, I was thinking about what machinery to get. Off course, I am young and I want to use new machinery. There are some brands of new horse weed control machinery. I contacted some German farmers who use the newer kind and they advised me to use an older, lighter machinery. I do find that some North American horse machinery is too heavy for the light horses of South America. Then this past summer I talked to my good friend Ties. He and I are both interested in horses and machinery. We had not seen each other since our three month trip to the Amish in 2009. We had some catching up to do and I told him my part about South America and the need for a good machine for weed control. We put our heads together and came up with what we thought the perfect machine would look like. I was glad we met again, because Ties is one of the very few persons I can talk to about the fine points of this subject. Our history together before and during our trip to the Amish, and our interest in horse progress taught us to see what kind of machine would be needed to do an appropriate job. So, thinking that new machines are too heavy and old machines need too much improvement, I thought I would build me a machine when I got to Ecuador. Meanwhile I looked in an old reprinted farm machinery book, and there it was, the machine Ties and I had drawn up was already made in 1955! How surprised I was. It was a German company that built it. I looked on Google and discovered that this same company now makes no-till tractor machinery.

### **Finding machinery for Ecuador**

Now how was I to find one of these machines? I took the picture and mailed it to a German Draft Horse organization. The reply came back that if I were to find such a machine I would be very lucky since every Draft Horse person would like to have one, but the person who responded forwarded my request to their email list. Well, I got an email from one who said he knew someone who had such a tool. I contacted this person thinking I could take pictures and make drawings of this tool so that I could build it myself, but it turned out he had one for sale! I drove to Germany and he put his horse in front of the machine so I could try it out and see if I liked it. I was impressed with it. The machine is light built for a light horse in light soil, exactly what the farm in Ecuador needs. I asked the man a lot of questions and he could tell me all about it. This machine is actually the work of a student engineer who had developed it for his final diploma. It is worked out in great detail and the more I heard about it, the more I wanted it. It was in good shape and I got it for a good bargain. As I was loading it into the van, a man drove by who collects old iron. The man who sold it to me said he was glad I got it. Being young and innovative, I checked the machine to see what else it needed to make it more efficient. I bought some modern gadgets for it and adjusted it a little bit. I had space left over in the shipping container from shipping this one machine. We Dutch come from a very small country and we like to use every square inch we have available, so I looked for more machinery suitable for Ecuador. I knew what I wanted (the Meyer one horse cultivator) because it was easy to adjust. I thought since it was built up until 2003 I would find one easily; not so. I searched a lot, putting an ad on the internet

and going to Draft Horse people all over Holland. No luck. I did find a Planet Jr. one horse cultivator on the internet. It was what I wanted; even though I had to drive a long way to get it and it had stood outside in a man's garden for 15 summers and winters. The wheel was rusted away, and the teeth, and the handles could not be moved. I worked on this machine after work and on the weekends and I found out that the one horse cultivator I had first wanted was a copy of the Planet Jr. This made it possible for me to buy new parts from the Meyer company in Germany to put on the Planet Jr. That worked out well, but there was still space available in the container. I was given a chain harrow and I bought another type of harrow. And I wanted more machinery.

### **Helping neighbors**

A neighbor of mine who is an old tractor machinery collector liked what I was doing. As I was busy in the shop repairing machinery for the container, he took me to a private museum of agricultural machinery. Well...there stood another planet Jr. one horse cultivator. I had already found one, and that was a miracle, but there stood another one, I had to ask. I told my story about South America and the owner of the museum listened to it and gave me the machine, for free. It still had the original teeth and wooden handles and looked in very good shape. Meanwhile I was working in two tractor repair shops on the horse machines. If I was going to ship it, it needed to be perfect. People were curious and looked amazed and made some jokes about what I was doing there, and for what.

Still, I had one last wish to put in the container. I wanted a second hand Cambridge roll to break the crumbs in the fresh soil and to stimulate the soil for water storage and capillarity. I said this quietly to my neighbor, saying I will not find one. He called me up a few days later and told me he did find one! So I went with him in his van again to pick up the rolls. This was also a bargain. He said it was just a matter of good searching, but I must add that luck has also a good part in it. Altogether, these machines are elementary to the preparation of the soil and for weed control.

### **Horse Progress Days Seminar**

There are several things to be seen in the seminar, parts of horse farming in the Netherlands and Germany as well as horse farming in Ecuador. I want to show how horse (produce) machinery has developed itself in Europe. Europe is a good example because equipment there has been made quite appropriate and efficient for small scaled farming. This could still be used and developed for today's produce growers everywhere. What it comes down to is that every centimeter we can do with a machine in mechanical weed control is less hand work. The machines I am sending to Ecuador make it possible for weed control to be done very precisely.

### **Meanwhile**

In 2012 I am working in Ecuador. The machinery will arrive from Europe in the beginning of the year and from then on it will be used, and will prove its functionality. These experiences will be part of the Horse Progress Days seminar in the summer of 2012.



# Horse Progress Days™



*Something for Everyone*



THE 19TH ANNUAL  
**Clare, Michigan**  
June 29th & 30th, 2012