

# JINGLE BELLS

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*Jingle bells, jingle bells,  
Jingle all the way.  
Oh, what fun it is to ride  
In a one-horse open sleigh.*

I don't know about you, but the adjective that comes to my mind isn't *fun*, it's *cold*. I guess I'm getting old.

The mental picture I have when I hear that song is of a Victorian sleigh with lots of curved lines and narrow iron runners, similar to the Portland cutters offered in the 1900 Sears, Roebuck and Co. catalog for \$12.95–\$22.50, definitely a luxury item.

Luxury items and my ancestors don't go together, so how did my ancestors get around in the winter, especially in early America?

## SLEDS AND CARTS

I have an inkling from an item I found in the Revolutionary War era town records of Acworth, in western New Hampshire. At the town meeting in March 1776, the town selected its Committee of Safety and voted that all ox sleds made for the next winter must be four feet between the runners. Apparently they were having problems with rutted roads. This width would be different from that of the wheeled vehicles and would keep the ruts from worsening and might even level the roads a bit.

Notice that they refer to sleds, which were probably low platforms on runners, but I've also wondered if they didn't convert some carts and wagons from wheels to runners for winter use. Notice also that the animal pulling the sled was an ox, not a horse.

Continuing my quest for information from "real records," I examined the probate inventories for Middlesex County, Massachusetts, beginning in 1649. The first thing I noticed was that there were very few horses. Many inventories had none, some had one horse, and in one that had two, the white horse was lame! Oddly, saddles and bridles were not included in most of the inventories that had horses. None of them seemed to have buggies, sleighs, wagons, or any of the other terms we might expect as a vehicle of transportation.

There was usually only one type of vehicle listed, a *cart*. It is clear that its use was agricultural, as it was normally included with plows, chains, yokes, and, other implements of husbandry. The terminology in one inventory, which calls it a *tumbrel*, is most illuminating. A *tumbrel* is a farm tipcart, a vehicle with two wheels.

Let's think more about those carts. They had two wheels, hence could be tipped to make unloading them easier. Very efficient. I noticed in the inventories that "wheels" were often listed as a separate item. These were probably either extras (bad roads meant they broke frequently) or offered variety (different diameters or widths for different uses).

## OXEN

But how were they pulled? It is likely that for some families on some occasions, they were people-powered, at least for short distances—something that can be done with a small tipcart. But for most, they were oxen-powered. From the inventories it is clear that the oxen wore yokes that were attached to plows by chains. The tipcarts surely had tongues or shafts that attached to the yokes.

Having grown up in the Midwest, I've certainly seen a lot of farms, but I honestly couldn't say that I was familiar with oxen. More research was required. I reexamined the probate inventories. Those listing oxen also identified other bovine animals using the terminology cows, young cattle, steers, heifers, bulls, and yearlings. Next I consulted several resources.

I think the clearest way of explaining it would be to say that oxen are not a breed but a condition. They are male cattle that are domesticated, castrated, and trained for draught work such as pulling a plow. Thus, oxen aren't born as much as made.

Oxen are big, strong, slow, and relatively easy to handle (as compared to horses and mules), so were the favored animal for farm work throughout early America. However, they don't do well in heat, so they were less prevalent in warmer climes. Because they were used for labor, they often were shod, like horses, to keep their hooves from wearing out or cracking (but with a different type of shoe because their hooves are split, not "horseshoe-shaped"). When they grew too old to work, they were slaughtered for food like other cattle.

## ROADS

We need to think about what the environment was like for any specific ancestral community, rather than relying on historical generalities. In New England, the people were residing in communities with houses close together and fields (often community fields) nearby but not adjoining the houselot. To attend church, visit friends and family, call for the midwife, attend militia muster, and go to the fields, they walked.

They had little time for "traveling," so little need for well-developed roads between towns—and little time to maintain such roads. They did, however, need to transport "stuff." This might include items such as tools of husbandry, hay from the fields, and wood from the forests.

Therefore, the roads, paths, or streets that were needed were those within the town, those from home to fields, and those to the river. Aha! We are so oriented toward thinking of moving about on land that we forget that the most efficient way for our ancestors to transport themselves and goods was via water. We'll talk about that in a future column.

For any roadway, our ancestors did the minimal amount of clearing and maintenance, just enough to remove obstacles such as very large rocks. The roadway

was only wide enough for whatever needed to traverse it. Thus, a path through woods might be just wide enough for a rider and horse; those for carts or wagons just wide enough for one vehicle. Encountering another wagon required some serious maneuvering. If effort was to be expended cutting trees, clearing stumps, and moving rocks, it would be done to increase tillable fields.

There was little reason to do anything to maintain road surface, so mud, rocks, mud, small stumps, and mud were

the general rule outside cities and towns until well into the nineteenth century. The first indication of attention to road maintenance in an area usually is found in road orders in court records. These are specific assignments of overseers or surveyors to establish a new section of road or maintain an old section. These are wonderful tools for genealogists, as they often name the head of every household along that section of road.