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From Your Commissioner . . .

Swanzey's Oxen Pulling for Land Conservation

Swanzey farmer Mike Johnson keeps a menagerie of livestock. In fact, he supplies a lot of the critters for The Friendly Farm, the popular agri-tourism enterprise in Dublin. But his colossal team of Simmental oxen, affectionately known to everyone in town as Buck and Ike, were no longer being worked in the woods, and were getting to be an awfully expensive pair of ornaments to keep around.

A year ago members of the town's Open Space Committee became friendly with Buck and Ike when touring the 110-acre Johnson farm to consider working with the Johnson family to permanently protect the land from development with a conservation easement. The team was already known around town for their appearances in the town's outdoor Old Home Day play – presented every year since 1939, excepting three years during World War II. This fixture of local culture was co-written by local popular playwright Henry Denman Thompson, and populated with local characters. The play opened in Boston in 1886, with Thompson in the lead, to such smashing success that it made him a wealthy man for the rest of his life.

According to Open Space Committee Chair Victoria Reck Barlow, her committee and the non-profit group that puts on *The Old Homestead* play saw an opportunity to join forces to “bale out” Buck and Ike. Swanzey's biggest rural characters – each ox weighs in at nearly 3,000 pounds – would remain in town, promote open space protection, and continue to star in the annual play. With the help of numerous people in the community, Buck and Ike's fan club developed a plan to raise \$3,000 annually to foot the team's bills for feed and care. Fund-raising efforts have only further cemented the pair's status as town mascots. Visitors to the Town of Swanzey official website are greeted by a photo of Buck and Ike relaxing in a pasture.

Barlow says it quickly became clear that “the whole Buck and Ike scheme would fall apart” without a teamster to regularly train with the team and handle them at events. Johnson's trusted teamster Tiger Batchelder had time only for occasional guidance and one or two big events like the Old Home Day parade. Barlow, whose small size makes the Simmentals look even larger by contrast, stepped up to master new skills and take responsibility for care and training of the oxen to ensure their good manners around crowds. A video of her learning to work the team is one of “The Adventures of Buck and Ike” series that can be viewed on YouTube.com. Barlow has roped her husband and son, local artists, and others into promoting the team and open space conservation by making videos and DVDs, banners and plush, stuffed toy oxen. Besides being featured on the Open Space Committee's webpage, Buck and Ike also champion the cause of open space protection on their own website, www.buckandike.org.

Barlow, who is also a skilled hand spinner, weaver, and dyer, has become very attached to the big red and white oxen, visiting the Johnson farm regularly to help care for them. Roland Church, the team's hoof-trimmer from Bellows Falls, Vermont, is building a forecart for the team. And with the help of the Open Space Committee and the Monadnock Conservancy land trust, the Johnsons are permanently protecting their farm.

“Every town has its own personality,” Barlow observes. She thinks that Buck and Ike speak to the people of Swanzey in a way that has really brought people together in appreciation of their rural heritage and the natural beauty of the land.

Lorraine Merrill, Commissioner