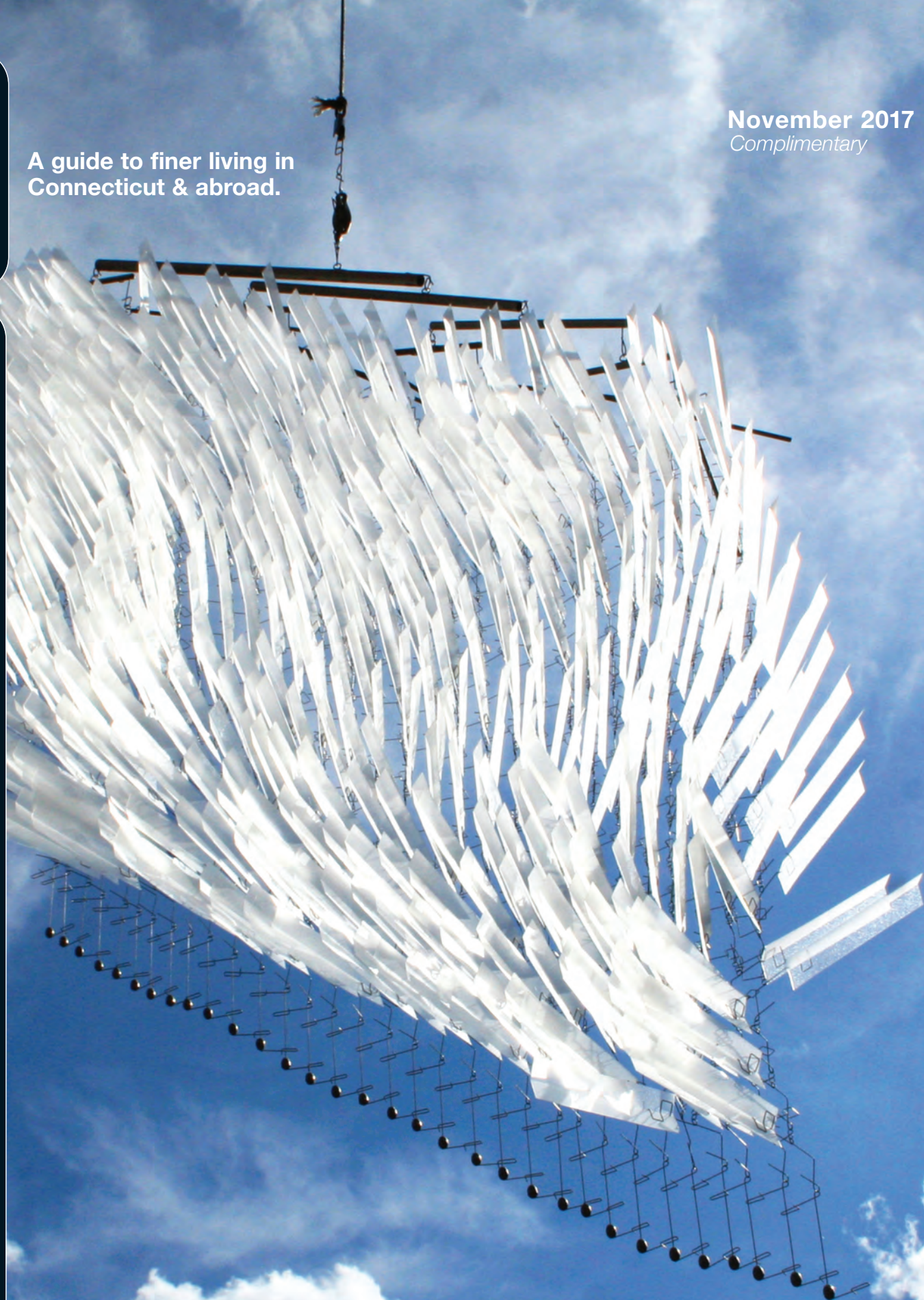


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Team of Six Learning to Pull Their Own Weight

Photos and profile Anthony Reczek

Earl Endrich Jr. rises most mornings by 4 AM, not that unusual for a working farmer.

He'll feed the cats, fix some breakfast and pack a lunch, and head over to the computer where he keeps track of the business affairs of his family's Townline Farm. It's a 92 acre spread of mostly hardwood forest, situated on hilly terrain on the western side of the Connecticut River, about five miles up from the Sound. It's a farm that has been in his family for five generations now.

He doesn't sit for long though, and probably won't be sitting again for the next 12 hours.

By 6 AM he's off to the barn to rouse his "workers," the two pair of oxen at the core of the logging operation on the land. Trees and lumber are the main "crop" at Townline Farm and its principal source of revenue. It's year round work, usually four-five days a week, but the nature and rhythms of harvesting wood allow for significant flexibility. There's time off for wet or snowy days, extremes in temperature, or simply to allow man or beast some extra recovery time after especially difficult days. The harvest is, after all, four thousand pounds of hardwood every working day. That's two or three large trees, cut up into twelve foot lengths, and hauled a quarter mile for pickup. It is hard physical work.

The four animals - Red and Rock, and Tom and Lucky - are usually asleep in their sandy floored stalls when Earl arrives, despite the nearby braying of John the donkey, which starts up as soon as he hears Earl leaving his home across the street. But the cattle rouse fairly quickly - what with a breakfast of 16% (copper-free) pellet grain awaiting them - and are easily led to the feeding trough outside where they'll eat and take on their yoke for the work day.

Oxen are male cows that have been castrated or "crimped" at one year of age and subsequently show some ability to pull a load. (Those that don't - called beefers - usually end up at the



slaughterhouse. Lucky got his name after Earl rescued him from that fate). Red and Rock are the larger pair: magnificent, tawny, rust-hued Devons weighing in at about 1330 and 1460 lbs. respectively. At seven years of age, they're approaching their prime years.

Devons - three heifers and a bull - first arrived on these shores from southwestern England

with the Pilgrims, aboard their ship Charity in 1623. The breed is especially valued for its hardiness, docile temperament, and ability to thrive under rugged conditions. Earl finds that they're "resilient to feed, will eat anything and stay body weight, and can survive just



about anything." Devons became quite popular in New England (the original Vermont seal from 1778 featured a red Devon), but were also the draft animals of choice on the Oregon Trail in the 1800's.

Earl first saw this particular pair when they were 13 months old and loved their spirit. "They were at odds with each other...head butting each other...you can tell that they had some life to them."

Tom and Lucky, the smaller pair, are two year old Durham Shorthorns; and despite weighing nearly 900 lbs. apiece, still are basically gangly adolescents. They're in training and do get yoked up to the sled behind the two older ones, but contribute little to the pulling effort





The domestication of wild cattle, called aurochs, first began over 10,000 years ago in the Near East, shortly after humans began to farm. Genetic studies (cattle are one of the few animals that have their entire genome mapped) have shown that modern day cattle are descended from as few as 80 animals in that region. It's believed that wild cattle were quite numerous, significantly larger and less docile than their descendants, offering what Science News in March of 2012 termed "considerable challenges" in their capture, management, and breeding. The use of cattle to pull loads (drafting) emerged somewhat later, perhaps 6000 years ago.



Like his ancestors, Earl's path to farming was somewhat circuitous, involving both the sea and the land. His great-great grandfather was a fisherman in Germany who emigrated to this country in the 1860's, worked in NYC sweatshops, and eventually bought a fishing boat with a dream of starting anew in Downeast Maine. As fate would have it, the family was at the mouth of the Connecticut River when the engine broke down. Heading inland for repairs, the boat hit a sandbar not three miles from the land that eventually became Townline Farm. Earl himself was in the commercial fishing industry in Florida for nearly fifteen years, then auto sales, before finally moving back to the farm 10 years ago.



at this point. As they become larger and stronger and increasingly acclimated to the work, the loads on the sled can increase.

By 8AM everyone is ready to go, including John the donkey, who wanders about but stays close - loosely supervising the operation.

Earl feels that his main work with the oxen is "getting them to pay attention." The more he is able to do that, the easier the work proceeds. That means getting them to listen and respond to his commands.

"The older ones know six or seven basic commands; the younger ones probably none at this point," Earl laughs. The first and most important to be learned is WHOA (stop), followed closely by HAW (turn left), and GEE (turn right). The training then proceeds to GET UP (move forward), STEP IN (step toward the load/chain), STEP OUT (step away from the load/chain), and BACK (move in reverse). These are the classic commands used in North American

oxen work. Earl can sometimes be heard working the oxen a mile away, down the valley.

It takes time to train oxen and usually never proceeds in linear fashion. Earl certainly understands this. "Tom and Lucky can be



very unruly. They just want to run, they just want to go for food. You've got to work with them all the time. If you let them out to the pasture and don't handle them, they get wild very fast. You have to handle them all the time."

There's a science and an art to successful training. It requires judicious use of both positive and negative reinforcement; that is, any type of action that gives the animal pleasure, or conversely, discomfort. For oxen, scratching behind the horns, feeding a treat by hand, or taking a break are ways to help them feel comfortable in the presence of the human and more willing to respond to whatever is asked. On the other hand, using a crop is one way to dissuade the animal from unwanted behavior. From the beginning, the human must be firm, patient, and persistent in helping the animal understand what is being requested.

It's mid- afternoon when the team finally comes down the hill and settles in the barnyard with the load of red oak. Earl, who's been in motion the whole time, looks a little tired, more so than the oxen. John the donkey seems none the worse for wear.

Earl will be asleep by 9PM.