



*In today's Stow, farm animals are most likely to have recreational or "hobby farm" roles. These elegant equines live on Harvard Road.*

## 22. Animal Farm Things

**O**n most farms in early Stow, animals were beasts of burden, of commerce and of consumption. Most farmers raised small herds, flocks and other assortments of cattle, swine and poultry for sale or for their own use. And most kept oxen or a horse or two to pull plows and wagons. This pattern seems to have continued into the 1800s, until the arrival of railroad lines in the 1840s made the sale of goods in distant markets more feasible.

**Even then, when milk became a major product for Stow,** individual herds of dairy cows don't appear to have been

large. In 1876, when Stow had some 150 farms within its boundaries (and 237 residences), town records indicate there were 627 cows. Most properties had one or two cows; owning three or so wasn't uncommon. A few possessed 10 to 15. A partnership called Parks, Silas and Lewis owned 30 cows and Samuel Parks 2d reported another 23.

**Horses were more consistently distributed in 1876** – with 201 horses counted, most landholders owned one or two. Farmers or not, they needed horsepower for carriage transportation.



*Farm animals hardly ever appear in photos from the 19th and early 20th Centuries, unless they're bystanders in a picture of people or places. Perhaps this three-horse team was unusual enough that it warranted recording.*

*Once the foundation of Stow's economy, raising cattle is now more hobby than commercial enterprise.*



Benjamin Gleason, owner of Gleasondale Mill, had five (and three carriages. And two cows).

**Counts of livestock in Stow are trackable** because – unlike today – farm animals were subject to property taxes during much of the 19th Century. Tax records for 1860 indicate that a cow might be valued at between \$20 and \$30, and taxed at about 80 cents apiece – about \$20 each in current money. Horses were often assessed at between \$40 and \$80 in 1860 dollars, but values went as high as \$140.

**As changing economics pushed farmers farther** toward specialization, milk production became increasingly significant. By the beginning of the 20th Century, the town had about the same number of cows as humans – some 1,000 of each.

**After World War I, farms diminished** in number, cows less so. In 1933, when there were only 22 operating farms in Stow, there were 450 cows. And horses remained useful as farm animals but not as draft animals – there were only 93 in the town.

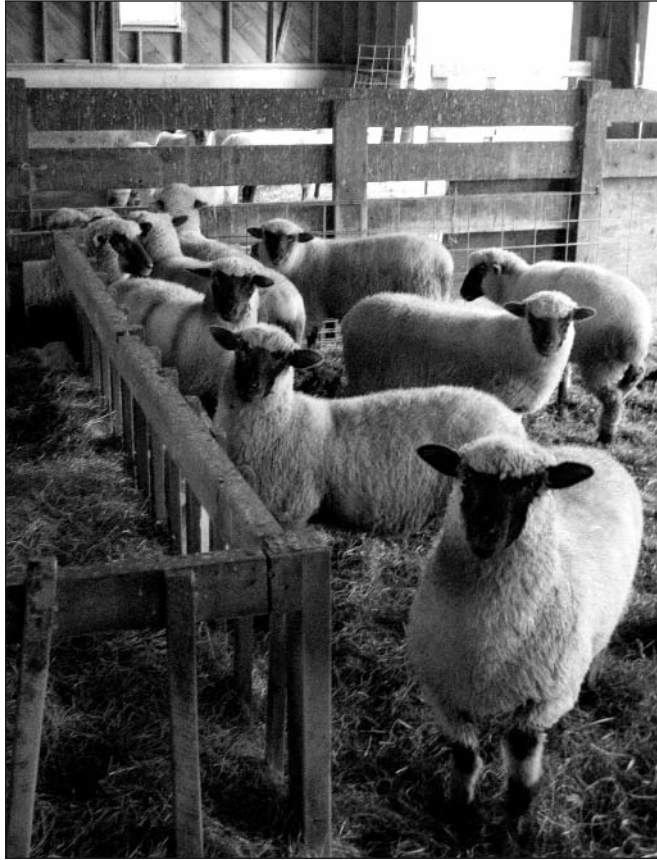
**Poultry farming increased.** While Stow farmers reported 3,000 fowl in 1909, by 1934 they were raising 10,400. By 1950, poultry farms were raising 33,430 chickens,

turkeys and ducks. That year, cattle in Stow numbered about 400; horses were counted at 23. There were 16 sheep.

**And, then, there were dogs.** Stow began licensing dogs – and charging fees – as early as 1860. In 1877, the town of 237 residences granted 52 licenses – with 46 owners possessing one dog each. All but six of the dogs were males. In 1899, the dog population numbered 76 – with only one female. By 1934, the count was 148 dogs, 44 of them females.

**As Stow began its transition to a residential suburb** after the middle of the century, the roles and counts of animals changed dramatically. Dairy farms declined. The period 1956-57 saw significant transition. In 1956, Stow counted some 400 cattle, in 1957 only 67 (presumably, one or more farms went out of business). By the early 1980s, commercial dairy farms had disappeared from the town. Commercial poultry farms followed. In 1993, there were only 179 fowl reported in the town.

**If animals in Stow's farming past** were beasts of burden and commerce, in the residential present they're beasts of passion – four-legged friends, recreational vehicles and enthusiastic avocations.



*At the end of the day, these yearling lambs at Pilot Grove Farm gather along with the other sheep in the barn. The number of animals at Pilot Grove fluctuates. Farmer Skip Warren keeps about two dozen ewes year-round.*

*Typically, each ewe produces two lambs a year, tripling the size of the flock. Unfortunately, there isn't much job security in being a lamb and the count falls back to the two dozen or so ewes by year's end.*

**A few gentleman farms raise cattle and poultry for sale**, but not as main-income businesses. In 2008, Stow animal counts stood at 38 cows and steers, 113 horses and 22 ponies. There were 40 goats, 275 chickens and 50 waterfowl and 1 turkey. Also, 44 rabbits but only 1 hog.

**Although the sheep of Pilot Grove Farm** now seem an iconic image for the town, sheep have not been major commercial livestock here. For much of the 19th Century, none were even counted. In 1895, 14 sheep appeared, in 1897, 25 sheep. But in 1909, 1925 and 1933, none.



**And there's one donkey** – Isabelle the Guard Donkey at Pilot Grove Farm.

**Isabelle, aged 26 in 2009, serves as companion, nanny and protector** for Pilot Grove's flock of 20 to 60 sheep, leading them between the fields and the barn, standing guard between them and coyote-harboring woods and generally hanging out.

**It turns out that between braying and kicking**, donkeys are good at warding off the coyotes and other predators that have proliferated as the forests have returned to central Massachusetts.

*Rock Bottom Farm's eight active horses – it has two retired 26-year-old Belgians – take part in about eight events a year. Here, the team performed at Collings Foundation in 2008.*



**In 1945, sheep reappear – all 10 of them.** By 1956, sheep numbers had risen to 56, by 1980 to 131. In 2008, there were 26 sheep in the town, most at Pilot Grove Farm. Pilot Grove's modern shepherd-ness is half-way between hobby and commercial operation. A major customer: Nancy's Airfield Café.

**If Stow's horse population was only 23 in 1934,** for 2008, it was reported at 113. They included horses stabled at Red Acre Farm and Eye of the Storm Equine Rescue. But many are privately owned riding horses on properties throughout the town.

**And 10 are Belgian draft horses –** not animals that labor in the fields but show horses that compete at fairs and take part in parades (including Stow's 2008 Spring-Fest parade). Ed Perkins has made a hobby of raising the powerful horses at Rock Bottom Farm in Gleasondale since the 1990s. The events in which they compete match them against other draft horses for appearance, teamwork and handling (not weight-pulling).

**Definitely not part of 1876 Stow – or even 1950 Stow –** are the town's llama and alpaca populations. The Shelburne Farm orchard keeps a llama as part of its visitors' zoo and there are several others around the town.

**On the other hand, Stow's alpaca** collection – alpacas are variations of llamas that are renowned for the quality and warmth of their fleece – are the specialty of Springbrook Farm.

Rather than a hobby, the 16 or so animals of Springbrook Farm are raised as a business. Richard Bolton, a retired banking executive, originally raised sheep and corn on his farm, located between Birch Hill and the Assabet River.

In the early 2000s, he and his family became intrigued with alpacas and today raise them for sale and stud services. If you want to start your own alpaca farm, they'll help you do that, as well.

**Dogs, again: In 2009, Stow counted** more than 1,100 licensed dogs – an average of nearly one for every two households in the town.

*Alpaca yearlings at Springbrook Farm. The farm also sells alpaca fleece, yarn and goods such as blankets and stuffed animals. You can view them at their on-line store (at [www.alpacasof-springbrookfarm.com](http://www.alpacasof-springbrookfarm.com)).*

