



OXEN AND THE OX YOKE

The domestication of cattle occurred about 6,000 years ago, about the same time that the wheel was invented. Oxen have been used as draft animals since that time. Today, in the United States, the animal we call an “ox” is usually a steer used as a draft animal in farming and the timber industry.

Oxen have pulled plows and wagons. They have ground grain and dragged logs. In order to pull heavy loads or work all day in the fields, oxen had to be hitched to a wagon or a plow. The hitch for an ox is called a “yoke.” This device consists of a wooden crossbar with a U-shaped piece that encircles the ox’s neck. The yoke shifts the weight of the load to the ox’s shoulders so the heavy load does not choke the animal. Oxen are most often yoked in pairs. A pair of oxen is also called a “yoke.” A wagon pulled by “3 yoke of oxen” would mean that 6 oxen were required for the job.

Oxen have been important throughout history. During the Middle Ages (1200 – 1500 CE), an acre was defined as the amount of land that could be plowed by one man behind one ox in one day, or about 4840 square yards. Today, an acre in the United States is approximately that same size.

Until 1850, oxen were preferred over horses as draft animals because of their strength, endurance and docile nature. They were less expensive to purchase, less prone to sickness and tasted better after they died! In Missouri in 1850, an ox cost about half as much as a draft horse, about \$25. That same ox could be sold at the end of the trail in Oregon or California for \$40 to \$60.

The ox has been important in the development of civilization and the expansion of the United States. The strength and power of the ox could not have been harnessed effectively without the invention and development of the ox yoke.