



## OXEN AND THE OX YOKE

People domesticated cattle 6,000 years ago. This was about the same time the wheel was invented. Oxen have served as draft animals since then. In the United States, the animal we call an "ox" is usually a steer used as a draft animal in farming or in the timber industry.

Oxen have performed many tasks that require great strength. An ox had to be hitched to a wagon or a plow in order to pull heavy loads. The hitch for an ox is called a "yoke." It is made 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 it 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 to do the job.

Oxen are important animals. In the Middle Ages (1200 – 1500 CE) people defined an acre as the amount of land that could be plowed by one man behind one ox in one day. Today, an acre is about that same size. Oxen pulled most of the pioneers' wagons along the Oregon and California trails. They were less expensive to buy. They had greater endurance and were easier to hitch every morning. The pioneers said, "If they die along the way, they will also taste better than horses."

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.