



OXEN AND THE OX YOKE

The domestication of cattle was an important step in the process of civilization. It occurred around 6,000 years ago at about the same time that the wheel was invented. Since then, cattle have provided food in the form of meat and milk, leather for clothing and tools, and service as draft animals. 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 been used to pull plows, carry supplies, grind grain, haul goods, and drag everything from fallen trees to stone blocks. 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 crossbar, usually made of wood, with a U-shaped piece that encircles the neck of the ox. An ox yoke shifts the weight of the load to the ox's shoulders. This means that a heavy load will not pressure the windpipe and 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. The use of oxen has defined land area for centuries. During the Middle Ages, an acre of land 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 is defined as 1/640 of a square mile, or approximately 4840 square yards.

Until the 19th century, oxen were preferred over horses as draft animals because of their strength, docile nature and endurance. They were less likely to shy at loud noises or flashes of light. They were less expensive to purchase, and less prone to illness. When they died, they were also better to eat! Along the Oregon and California trails oxen were much preferred over horses. They could pull a heavy load for 15 miles each day and not wear out. They were easier to harness in the morning, and they were less likely to be stolen by Native Americans. An ox cost about half as much as a draft horse, about \$25 in 1846, and could be sold at the end of the journey for \$40 to \$60 in Oregon or California.

The ox was important in the development of civilization and in the growth and expansion of the United States. It set the standard for land measurement for centuries, and provided essential goods and services to its owner. The strength and power of the ox could not have been harnessed effectively without the invention and development of the ox yoke.