



BILLINGS FARM & MUSEUM

DRAFT ANIMAL CELEBRATION: HOW ARE WORKING STEERS TRAINED?



Working steers begin their training shortly after birth. In the beginning, it is not necessary to harness them as the size of the teamster is enough to influence them. Steers will be introduced to a halter early on so they are able to be led.

Once the steers are accustomed to being in yoke, they will begin to learn the five verbal commands used to drive a team. The first two commands are “get up” which tells the team to start moving and “whoa” which tells them to stop. As they learn these two commands, more can be added. The teamster will teach them “gee” which means turn right and “haw” which means turn left. The most difficult command to teach is “back” which asks the steers to step backwards. This is not a natural way for steers to move and can be confusing. Backing up also requires a lot of trust. If the steers don’t trust who is driving them, they won’t back up.

When the pair of steers knows all the commands, they will be hooked up to a small sled or tire. This gives them a solid and steady weight to pull. Sometimes steers may be startled by the weight or sound of something dragging behind them at first.

The teamster uses not only her voice but also a goad stick to guide her team. This stick is used to reinforce the voice commands by tapping the steers as commands are given.

When the steers reach the age of four years, they become oxen and are fully grown. Training must continue through all four years and beyond to continue using steers for draft work. At their full size they are able to pull much heavier loads and work longer.



Billings Farm’s team of Jersey working steers
Colt and Rooster.