



BILLINGS FARM & MUSEUM

DRAFT ANIMAL CELEBRATION: WHAT'S AN OX ANYWAY?



Colt and Rooster, Jersey steers, in yoke.

Have you ever wondered what exactly is an ox? Put simply, an ox (or oxen if you're talking about more than one), is any cattle over four years of age that has been trained to do work. Most often they are steers (castrated male cattle). Any breed of cattle can be trained to become an ox, although some breeds are better suited to it than others.

When a steer is under the age of four and training to become an ox, it's called a working steer. The teamster (a person who trains and works with draft animals) will work with him every day getting him used to a halter, the yoke, and listening to her commands.

They will learn five voice commands that the teamster will use to drive them. If the teamster wants her steers to start moving, she will say "get up" and if she wants them to stop, she'll say "whoa". She can also ask her steers to back up by saying "back". The steers will learn that the sound "gee" means turn right and "haw" means turn left. The teamster will also use her goad, a long stick, to tap the steers and reinforce her voice commands.

As the steers grow, they will need bigger and bigger yokes. Just like kids growing into new shoes, steers grow fast and need a new yoke often. Once the steers reach the age of four, they are fully grown and called oxen.



A yoke with two bows for a team of working steers or oxen.

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Oxen are used on farms to do work. They can plow fields, pull stone boats, help with logging, pull carts, run machinery, and more. Oxen work slower than horses which makes them ideal for plowing. The farmer can walk behind the team with the plow at a smooth and steady pace.



A team of oxen harrow a field at Billings Farm, c. 1890

At Billings Farm, we have a three-year-old team of Jersey working steers named Colt and Rooster. They are half-brothers who work together in yoke to pull things. We also have a single American Milking Devon steer called Huck. Huck works alone in a single yoke. All of our steers are being trained by our teamster Amy Deome.



Using a goad and harness, a young teamster drives her ox at Billings Farm's Draft Animal Day.