



BILLINGS FARM & MUSEUM

DRAFT ANIMAL CELEBRATION:

WHY DO WORKING STEERS HAVE HORNS?

Almost all cattle are born with the ability to grow horns, even cows (female cattle)! Most of the time, farmers will remove the horns on their cows to prevent any accidents. Working steers and oxen on the other hand almost always keep their horns.

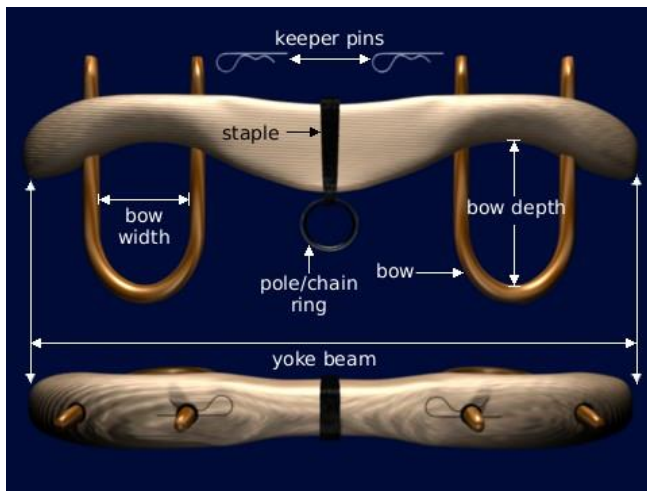


Diagram of a yoke

When a team of working steers is put in yoke the heavy yoke beam sits across their necks and the bows come up under their necks. In the middle of the yoke is a metal ring where a cart or farm equipment is attached, usually by a chain.

There are a few differences between steers pulling and horses pulling. Horses have large neck collars and harnesses that attach them to what they are pulling. These collars are not ideal for steers because they inhibit their natural movement. The beam and bows

of a yoke are loose and swing back and forth as the steers walk. Because steers pull from their shoulders and neck this is a much more comfortable way to work. So, why do steers need their horns then?

One of the commands steers will learn is “back” which means they need to back up. If they are yoked to a piece of equipment, they need to back that up as well. When they hear the command “back” they will lift their heads and push their horns against the yoke beam. This allows them to push the equipment backwards.



A teamster drives his oxen in yoke.

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Colt, 3 years old, growing his horns.

Steers also use their horns as brakes. When going downhill, steers will lift their heads and push their horns against the yoke beam thus slowing their load. Without horns, the yoke would slip right off their heads.

When steers and oxen were used to pull covered wagons westward, they all needed to have horns. Many of these wagons did not have brakes and weighed upwards of 3,000 pounds. The horns on the steers and oxen were the only braking systems the wagons had.



Two teams of oxen pull a covered wagon.