

Oxen the original ‘work horses’ of the prairie

Before the introduction of draft horses and then steam and gasoline-powered tractors, oxen provided the muscle on pioneer Corn Belt farms. These beasts of burden, which were usually yoked in pairs, were prized for their strength, steadiness and endurance.

It was oxen power that helped early farmers refashion Central Illinois by plowing up the tallgrass prairie for cornfields and pastures, transforming a pristine, natural landscape to one devoted almost exclusively to commercial purposes.

In 1831, William B. Carlock’s family settled northwest of Bloomington near the Woodford County / McLean County line. Between their farm and the new county seat of Bloomington there was a twelve-mile stretch of unbroken prairie, with nary a “fence or house or building of any kind to be seen.”

Late in life, Carlock recounted how he had helped break the first prairie along this route. “The plow was drawn by four yoke of oxen,” he said, “and a boy about ten years of age and myself, then about nine, drove the oxen, he walking on one side of the team and myself on the other and each having a very long plaited buckskin whip.”

Oxen, contrary to a popular misconception, are not a breed apart from cattle. Rather, they are castrated male cattle, usually four years or older, trained for heavy work. Although slower and more methodical than horses, oxen can pull heavier loads for longer durations. Known for their docility, oxen are also none-too-easily spooked and less excitable than horses—a trait which proved particularly beneficial when breaking a stretch of tallgrass prairie rife with rattlesnakes!

“In the early day a great deal of the teaming, breaking prairie and ditching was done by oxen, and I had several teams,” recalled Samuel Baldrige, who settled in McLean County’s White Oak Township in 1852. His prized pair of oxen, Buck and Berry, helped train other pairs. In fact, they were so well schooled that when Baldrige called “ho! Buck” and “come under Berry” in their rail corral, the two would mosey on over and stick out their heads, ready for the yoke and a hard day’s work.

Oxen were needed for more than prairie breaking. The first railroads did not reach Bloomington until 1853, and until then oxen carried heavy loads over land, including the important route from the Pekin wharf on the Illinois River to landlocked Bloomington. Oxen also plied town and city streets pulling heavy wagons loaded with everything from kegs of beer to grand pianos.

Even after railroads arrived and brought wholesale changes to most everything everywhere, oxen were still needed to plow up the prairie, and in McLean County and elsewhere in Central Illinois there was much left to be broken. “We saw fourteen yoke of oxen yesterday on Washington Street, attached to one wagon,” reported the May 19, 1857 Pantagraph. “Probably they were going out to break prairie.”

The fact that there is no taboo regarding the consumption of beef as there is with horsemeat proved to be another advantage in favor of the ox. In other words, many unfortunate oxen, after toiling under the yoke for several years, were then fattened for the farmer’s table or the slaughterhouse.

In early July 1860, N.C. Bump of McLean County shipped 118 head of “fat cattle” to the New York market. Included were two six-year-old oxen, previously used for plowing or drayage, each weighing 4,300 pounds. Once freed of hard labor and “beefed up” (pun intended) by Bump they were able to gain 1,200 pounds in ten short months.

In 1863, a pair of oxen owned by John Cheney of Cheney’s Grove took first place in the McLean County Fair. Cheney then spent the fall putting flesh on their too-lean frames and by Christmas Eve these blue ribbon beasts had become part of Bloomington butcher Edwin Hartry’s festive epicurean display. “This beef, and other meats, pork, mutton, etc., dressed in the finest style, was exhibited until midnight, forming the best show of meat ever seen in this city, if not in the state,” remarked The Pantagraph.

Beginning in the latter 1850s, the increasing popularity of French draft horses known as Normans (and today as Percherons) led to a steady reduction in the number of oxen in Central Illinois. The Town of Normal became a national center for the importation, breeding and sale of Normans, which were large and muscular enough to handle much of the work previously reserved for oxen.

Although horses remained an integral part of Corn Belt farming well into the 20th century, by that time oxen had all but disappeared from the countryside. Their numbers in McLean County, for instance, plummeted from 684 in 1850 (the first U.S. Census to count these animals) to a mere 25 by 1880.

Another contributing factor in the decline of the ox involved the development of new farm equipment and implements. Cultivators, as well as harvesting and mowing machines, demanded a quicker pace in the field, one suited for the far more nimble and speedy horse than the plodding ox.

A few years ago a vestige of this lost era was itself lost when a White Oak Township barn, said to be the oldest in McLean County, succumbed to the elements. Built by Christian Ropp in 1857, the barn included “free” (or open) stalls, built specifically for oxen. Unfortunately, it’s not known if any still-standing barns in the area have architectural features that similarly hark back to the age when the ox strode the prairie.

Oxen, with their strength, even temper and steady gait, proved a useful metaphor for poets and politicians alike. At a June 30, 1858, Republican congressional district convention in Joliet, Congressman Owen Lovejoy used the ox to help explain his support for a proposed legislative compromise that rankled his fellow abolitionists.

The congressman “defended his action in the case as the best that could be done under the circumstances,” noted a *Pantagraph* correspondent at the convention. Lovejoy added that “if he was stuck fast in a slough (a low-lying, wet prairie), he would ride an ox out rather than not get out, and would not consider that he had thereby affirmed the principle that oxen were better animals to ride than horses, or had bound himself always to ride oxen thereafter.”