

Fun Facts

("Old Sturbridge Village Kids", Winter 1997)

Did you know it takes more than three years to train oxen to work at Old Sturbridge Village?

Farm interpreters work with a variety of animals at the Village every day. Some animals - like chickens - don't require much training. Others - like oxen - need lots of attention, especially while they're young, to make them gentle enough to interact with staff and visitors.

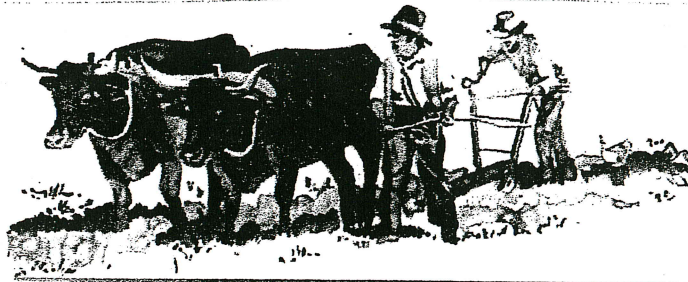
Village farmers usually start training oxen by haltering a calf when it is only a few days old. The human trainer and calf may then spend months learning basic spoken commands together (see below). Two oxen similar in age and size are eventually paired as a team, to begin training together with a tiny yoke. One of the hardest things is getting the team to back up (not something animals do naturally). Practicing alongside a fence keeps them walking "in line."

The team also begins working in public (often with just a neck rope) to overcome their fear of people and other animals: eventually they're big enough to start dragging things - like a chain, then a post, then a long pole.

The calves are neutered (made into steers) when they're six months old. After a year they're strong enough to attempt big tasks, like pulling the "stone boat" (a sledlike device), first empty, and then with heavier and heavier loads of stones.

After two years, the team begins working in Village fields, helping first with harrowing. Next they learn plowing and how to pull small logs out of the woods. At three, they graduate to pulling a set of cart wheels (without the cart box!), to get used to the sound and feel of hauling a wheeled vehicle. After a few months of this training they are ready to handle a real cart and begin "pulling their own weight" as full-fledged oxen.

The team and driver continue to learn from each other - for as long as they work together.



"Come up" - Move forward

"Whoa" - Stop

"Easy" - Slow down

"Gee" - Turn right

"Haw" - Turn left

"Back" - Back up