

Oxen and Mules

Many of the anecdotes of the early Marvels refer to oxen being used as beasts of burden. Since their use has been virtually discontinued it is appropriate to discuss the nature of these animals and why they were once so popular. The word oxen is plural but common in use because the ox was almost always used as a team or a yoke. The ox on the left, facing the direction of travel, being the "nigh ox" and the other the "off ox". The driver walked by the nigh ox and carried a light stick called the goat.

The ox is a bovine of either type, dairy or beef, or any breed. A young male bovine is called a bull calf and may, if he is well-nigh a perfect specimen, become a full grown bull and spend the next few years generating offspring. Often, especially in the dairy breeds, his life will end early as a veal calf. If he avoids these ends he will be castrated and thus become a steer. More than likely this will delay his trip to the slaughter house for a period rarely exceeding eighteen months while he is fattened on his way to becoming steaks, roasts, and hamburgers. If the steer's fortune is to become an ox, after enduring the castration, he will spend the first four years as a working steer while he learns the skills of being an ox. Once an ox he can look forward to as many as a dozen years of being part of a yoke—that is if he can survive.

A competitor for the ox was the mule. A mule is the sterile offspring of female horse (a mare) and a male donkey (a jack or jackass). For the inquisitive, a hinny is the offspring of a female donkey (a jenny) and a male horse (a stallion). The mule is almost always larger than his father and can become larger than the mother if given proper care. They are more versatile than less flighty than the horse and are not afraid of fire. They can survive, like the ox, on grass and hay whereas the horse will most always require some grain.

Which was the best, the mule or the ox, seemed to be a personal choice both having characteristics that were attractive to different people. A count, made in 1850 at Fort Laramie, revealed 36,116 ox and only 7,547 mules passed through in a year's time. The popularity may have been influenced by the cost, an ox could be bought for twenty five dollars while a mule was selling for seventy-five dollars. In addition the mule required a complex, and costly, harness whereas the ox did not. Yet another reason for the popularity could have been that beef was preferred over mule meat if the conditions warranted such action, which was not unusual.

The number of oxen, or mules, needed to pull a wagon varied from one team to as many as sixteen. Two or three being a common numbers on the wagons used by the pioneers in their westward travels. When Prettyman and Joseph Marvel, sons of Wiley Marvel [61334] traveled to Pike's Peak on their search for gold they had two yoke of oxen for each wagon. When Martha (Gillette) Shepherd, daughter of Eliza Ann (Marvel) Gillette [6133473], and family moved to Canada, they were met by her father. Martha remembered that "he had a team of oxen and a covered wagon." and it required "a week to travel the ninety or so miles to my folk's place." Most accounts indicate that ten miles a day was considered good progress. This should be kept in mind when today we are delayed a few minutes by heavy traffic on our freeways or when the airplane is a few minutes late.

Robert L. Smith Jan. 1994