

Draft Oxen Coming Back Into Style

If you've ever thought of putting oxen to work on your farm, you need to find an Annie Robillard in your area. Robillard and her husband, Len Esposito, train and use oxen on their Driven Acres hobby farm near Potsdam, N.Y. She says it's a practice that is gaining new followers.

"A lot of people up here are going back to draft teams to do farm work," she says. "We use them on the farm, show them and do parades. When we are on a major road, we have to have a police escort for crowd control."

The two work their oxen on stone boats, carts, and a covered wagon they rebuilt. Robillard's current team is a pair of Holstein steers called Diesel and Fuel with a total weight of 4,200 lbs. She says they are her best team yet.

Her husband is running a pair of young Ayrshires that is already placing well at shows. They are one of two pairs of Ayrshire twins the couple is training for draft work.

"We love to get twins about two to three days old," says Robillard. "They are tough to get, so we often try for half brothers with similar markings. If you do shows and parades, you want them flashy."

When starting with such young calves, it's important that they grow to the same mature size. Robillard says the trick is to measure from the hock to the ground. If it's within a quarter inch or so, they will grow at the

same rate.

Robillard starts training her calves at about a week or two of age with small training yokes. This is when they first start learning commands.

"Our pine yoke weighs only about 3 lbs., but at first they have trouble holding their heads up," she says. "Within two days, they are holding them up and working like a team."

In addition to the three teams, Robillard has a single ox named Bolt who weighs 3,200 lbs. Bolt had been paired with Nut. When Nut had to be euthanized due to arthritis pain, she retrained Bolt as a single. She had to have a harness specially built for him to use instead of a yoke.

While Robillard won't put a price on Diesel and Fuel, she sold a pair of yearlings for \$1,400 and a pair of two-year-olds for \$2,600. Oxen prices, she says, tend to follow the price of beef. Price also is tied to how the pair looks more than size.

Robillard is willing to train oxen for people as well as train them to train their own oxen. She suggests more difficult than finding calves is finding appropriate yokes and hardware. She has made training yokes using laminated 5/4-in. pine, cut to shape. However, she buys her full-size yokes.

"Yokes are priced per inch across the bow," says Robillard. "A 12-in. bow can



Annie Robillard and her husband train and use oxen on their farm near Potsdam, N.Y. "We use them on the farm, show them and do parades," she says.

cost \$1,200."

Even lifting the yokes into place can be a problem, she adds. The yoke and hardware she uses on Diesel and Fuel weigh close to 70 lbs.

"Some people use a pulley system to mount the yokes," explains Robillard. "It's hard to

put one over an animal that stands 5 ft., 6 in. at the shoulder."

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Heer Tractor Was Ahead Of Its Time

All-wheel steering with all-wheel drive is nothing new. Heer tractors, built between 1913 and 1916, had them. Stop by the Antique Powerland museum near Salem, Ore., and you can see a Heer, thought to possibly be the last of its kind.

"It was brought to Stayton, Ore. to pull four large freight wagons of flour to Salem where they could be shipped by riverboat, rail or other means to markets," says Jim Heater, Silver Mountain Christmas Trees, Inc. "It was geared to approach 5 mph while other tractors ran 1 to 2 mph."

As roads improved, trucks replaced the Heer. Heater's dad had seen it while still a boy in school in Stayton. In 1949 or 1950, he bought it, towed it 10 miles to his farm, serviced the engine and put it to use.

"We honestly don't know how much it would pull," recalls Heater. "We never hooked it to anything it couldn't handle."

The Heer has a marine-type, opposed, two-cylinder engine. It's governed at 450 rpm's and idles at 200 rpm's. The 7/8-in. link, chain drive runs through the transmission assembly and around sprockets on front and

rear differentials.

"The drive chain is the biggest I have ever seen. It's similar to an anchor chain," says Heater.

The Heer has a rigid frame with differential casing with flexible mounting to the frame on both front and rear axles. The front axle has a ball and socket mounting. The rear has a king bolt mount and flexible bracing.

Shifting disc-type clutches engage high and low gears in order. A separate disc clutch shifts from forward to reverse and back.

All-wheel steering is made possible by a steering shaft with two worm gears. Chains from the worm gears run to each axle. Wheels are 50 in. in diameter with a 12-in. wide, open tread. Even with the all-wheel steering, the tractor has a substantial turning radius. Starting it was also a substantial job.

"You don't use a crank," says Heater. "You use a 3 to 4-ft. long bar with a band and clamping unit on one end, like what's used to loosen oil or fuel filters. It fits around a small pulley on the outside of the flywheel. After pulling the engine a few times, a knife switch turns on the battery-powered ignition.



Heer tractors, built between 1913 and 1916, had all-wheel steering and all-wheel drive. This one is kept at an Oregon museum and may be the last of its kind.

A few more turns and it starts up."

After a few years, Heater's dad sold the Heer tractor. Fast forward to the early 1990's, and Heater was asked to pick up and move a tractor to the Antique Powerland museum.

"It was the same serial number as the one my dad had," says Heater. "It's now owned

by two local men who have put it on display at the museum."

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Ford Garden Tractor Fitted With Pinto Engine

Jim Killion replaced the original 14 hp engine on his Ford 165 garden tractor with a Ford Pinto 4-cyl. engine. "It has 75 hp so it'll really go," says Killion, who notes that Pat Prom of Eden Prairie, Minn., did the actual repowering work.

"I use it mainly in parades and for showing off," says Killion. "The Pinto engine is painted blue just like the tractor. I installed a pair of small aftermarket mufflers so the engine isn't all that quiet."

The tractor has 6-in. wide wheels on front and 15-in. wide wheels on back.

Killion bought the tractor 6 years ago from someone who had already started rebuilding the tractor. The original owner had started to convert it into a drag tractor, so Killion followed up on that idea, adding wheelie bars and a parachute on back. He bought the Pinto engine and had it overhauled, then took it to Prom.

The 4-cyl. engine was a very tight fit, says Prom. "But I didn't have to stretch the tractor frame or raise the hood. I did have to replace the 4-gal. gas tank with a smaller 2-gal. one and move it back under the hood. I also moved the battery back behind the tractor's rear end.

"I put the Pinto engine in backwards in order to hook up to the tractor's original hydrostatic transaxle. I made an adapter to fit between the transaxle and the front pulley on the engine. The Ford Pinto has the oil pan drop on front of the engine so by putting the engine in backward, it fit right in the open part of the tractor frame and worked out just right."

Prom also removed the tractor's original steering sector and mounted the rack and pinion steering sector off a Ford Pinto on the left side of the tractor, just outside the tractor's frame. "I managed to fit the Pinto's



original radiator in the tractor's front grille," notes Prom.

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Jim Killion and Pat Prom repowered this Ford 165 garden tractor with a Ford Pinto 4-cyl. engine, adding a pair of small aftermarket mufflers.

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