

THE OX YOKE

It has been in my garage in Denver for, oh, 30 years or more. Because of its history and my sentimentality, I didn't want to get rid of it. But I never knew what to do with it. So, it languished with the autos, perhaps an appropriate resting place for an object connected to transportation. You can tell it has seen years of use by the smooth underside, worn by the necks of many beasts of burden. Then Barbara had the idea of leaving it at the Ranch in Hayden. Geoff said he was preparing a space in the barn for memorabilia, so at last we have an appropriate resting place for the ox yoke. But moving the yoke to the Ranch stirred memories of how I acquired it and why. Therefore, I am writing this (what shall we call it) "essay", to explain.

The story begins with a movie, the name of which I do not know. In the summer of 1943, Dad got a telephone call that in the stockyards at Rifle or Silt a Scotch Highland cow with heifer calf at foot was about to be auctioned for slaughter. Dad was intrigued and investigated. He learned that several head of cattle had been imported from Scotland for a movie which was now completed. No longer needed for show, they were sold for beef. Only the one cow and her calf remained, temporarily.

Dad was beginning to experiment with crossbreeding. We raised purebred Herefords — large Herefords. No miniatures or dwarfs on the Carpenter Ranch. We sold big, leggy bulls that would walk 20 miles in the desert to find water or breed a cow — perfect for the open range.

For his crossbreeding program Dad had to have that Scotch Highland cow. He bought her and the calf at once and trucked them to the Ranch. Both thrived in the cool mountain climate, and the production of Hereford-Highland hybrids began.

The cow was indeed a magnificent animal with long shaggy yellow-brown hair and an enormous set of horns that curled upward (not straight out like a Texas Longhorn). Both she and the heifer calf were purebred. They could have posed for the Rosa Bonheur print of Highland cattle that hangs over the mantle in the old Ranch house. Dad bred the cow to his best Hereford herd sire, and she was soon "with calf".

She had a mean temperament. I learned that next year in the spring of 1944 when, to Dad's delight, she produced not one but twin bull calves. Dad had also become interested in an attempt to do what Alexander Graham Bell allegedly had done for sheep — breed cattle so that they produced twins with regularity. So the two Highland-Hereford calves were indeed a bonus which he proudly showed to all visitors at the Ranch, driving them to the pasture in the pickup since the mother threatened to charge anyone on horseback or afoot.

I adopted the twins and in my spare time made halters for them and broke them to lead. As the two little bulls matured, mama cow became less protective and by mid-summer I could drive them into the corral on horseback, separate the calves from their protective mother and work on gentling them. At some point we steered them.

It was a presidential election year, 1944. Governor Thomas E. Dewey of New York and his running mate, Senator John Bricker of Ohio, were opposing the Democratic incumbents, President Franklin Roosevelt and Vice-President Harry Truman. Since we were a staunch Republican family, it seemed appropriate to name the twins Dewey and Bricker. They were identical, except that Dewey had more red on his neck and red circles around his eyes. In all other respects they looked like Herefords with a totally white face and heavy coats of thick red hair.

By winter time, I could walk up to them in the corral, put the halters on, and lead them into the barn. I don't remember asking Dad to give them to me, but they were mine. I must have made a silent pact with Dad to keep them on the Ranch as pets. They were "show and tell" for Dad. No feed lot and slaughter house for them. I already had the idea of breaking them to the yoke. The cattle buyers and other visitors to the Ranch were told of my plans as they admired the rapidly growing steer calves. But where could I get an ox yoke? I inquired, but there was not one to be had in all of Routt or Moffat Counties.

The years passed. I was traveling and away from the Ranch the summers of 1946 through 1948. Dewey and Bricker exhibited their hybrid vigor with rapid and exceptional growth. The pride of the Ranch, they were a most handsome pair and always gentle.

The summer of 1949 found me back at the Ranch, irrigating and working in the hayfield. I renewed my efforts to locate an ox yoke for the twins. A bull buyer from Florida volunteered that oxen were not that long gone from his state and he thought he could find an old ox yoke for me. Another cattleman visiting from Tennessee thought the same. Sure enough, within a month two ox yokes arrived by Railway Express. I do not remember the names of the ranchers who sent them. But, I was now two yokes rich and eager in my spare time to work some animal-training magic on my Scotch Highland-Hereford recruits.

Then joy and excitement turned to despair. My now five-year old steers had grown a horn spread of more than three feet and weighed in excess of 2,400 pounds each. They were still identical in size and in the shape and length of their horns. When I tried to fit them with the yokes that had arrived from the South, neither yoke was large enough. The bows would not go around their necks, and no slack remained for the ends to protrude through the yoke and be pinned. Worse, the yokes were built for smaller warm-weather cattle and the twins would have been locked much too closely together with their partner's horns in their faces. Their bodies were not spread far enough apart by the yoke for them to walk, much less swing their mighty heads. I thought about cutting one of the yokes in two, and patching a wooden block in between. But that would not work because, as I said, the bows were too small to begin with.

I was discouraged and at wit's end. So I consulted with the most knowledgeable person on such matters at the Ranch, Fred Schaefermeyer. I must tell you a few things about Fred before I explain his role in this ox yoke narrative. At that time, 1949, Fred was about 85 years old, subsisting on Social Security, and an unreported summer job which Dad always saved for him. Fred would sometimes sleep in the bunkhouse, but he pitched a tent by the River as his "legal" abode just in case the welfare lady came snooping around. He feared the value of the Ranch housing might be credited against the amount he was eligible to earn without losing his monthly stipend. Actually, I think he liked the tent with his kerosene lantern and no one to bother him.

He was, or had been, a consummate axe man as well as a blacksmith, homesteader, farmer, cowboy, recluse and pensioner. In his youth, he earned his living cutting ties for the railroad. He rolled up his pant's legs one day. It was the middle of summer and he was still wearing long johns, so he rolled up those legs, too. He showed me the axe scars from his days as a tie hacker. Pointing to each jagged scar, like a general proudly describing his military ribbons, he told me stories of "terrible wounds", of crawling back to camp on his hands and knees, of making a tourniquet out of his shirt, and so on.

He so impressed me with this display that I was actually rather pleased that same summer when I had an axe slip and hit me in the foot, ruining a brand-new boot and giving me a 3-inch scar of my own. Fred seemed to be impressed that I was well on my way to following in his footsteps.

Fred had homesteaded on Elkhead near Dad's homestead and had helped Dad build his cabin, shaving the timbers with a broad axe so that they were square instead of round. He still had his broad axe and showed me how to use it. In fact, he had half a dozen axes which he stored at the Ranch in the winter. He gave me one small axe. It was so sharp I was almost afraid to use it. I still keep it as a treasured memento of our companionship.

Fred had not received a single hour of formal education. He taught himself to read and consumed every newspaper and magazine he could get his hands on. He told me that he had read the unabridged dictionary, word-for-word, all the way through. I believed him then and I believe him now.

We had a good blacksmith shop at the Ranch with a forge, anvil and all the tools. Fred was the master of that domain. In those days of teams and harnesses, with some homemade motorized hay machinery, Fred was an essential cog in the haying process. Whatever part broke, Fred could mend it or make a new one. He sharpened the sickles for the mowers, he repaired the broken leathers in the harnesses and he heated in the forge and pounded out on the anvil innumerable links, hooks and other parts.

So you can see why I turned to Fred to keep my dream of owning a pair of cross-bred oxen alive. Being a man of few words and moving slowly because of his age, Fred

indicated that there was a solution to the ox yoke dilemma. We would build a yoke, he and I together. He made clear that it was a partnership between the two of us, he to supply the brains, I the muscle. Honestly, I was flattered to be associated with a man of his experience in such an innovative project. Oak, Fred declared, is the only wood stout enough for a yoke. He was an expert on the many types of hardwoods. I knew there was plenty of scrub oak brush on every hillside, with a diameter no more than three inches. But oak trees don't grow in Routt County at our altitude of 6,600 feet. Yes, said Fred, they do, but at only one location in all of northwestern Colorado. That place, according to Fred, was only a few miles from the Ranch

Without more conversation, at Fred's direction, I caught and saddled old Prince, Dad's best cowpony, and buckled on Dad's lariat. I backed the Ford truck up to the loading chute and led Prince into the back of the truck (Prince loved to ride in the truck). We threw in our equipment and headed off, going along Highway 40 for two miles, and then north up Wolf Creek on the county road, Fred pointing the way. We had driven 10, maybe 15, miles when Fred told me to stop "right here". We jumped Prince out of the truck and Fred instructed me as follows: "I can't walk that far because its uphill. But you ride straight up through this gate and up the draw. About a half mile up you'll come upon the only stand of large oak trees in the county. Pick out the best, straightest and largest tree. Cut it down, limb it and cut it into a log six-feet long. Take half-hitches with your rope on the end of the log, dally around the saddle horn, and Prince will drag it back to the truck."

I never thought to question the reliability of his instructions. I rode Prince up the hill, perhaps a half mile, maybe more, and there on the south slope of the mountain, just as Fred had described it, was a stand of (as I remember it) 30 or 40 full-size oak trees. Scarcely believing my eyes, I picked out the best one, worked the axe the way Fred had taught me, limbed it, tied on the rope and, with Prince throwing his head and quite skittish at what he was requested to do, triumphantly rode down the mountain towing my prize. Fred was resting in the truck calmly smoking his Bull Durham and absolutely confident that I would return with our wooden prey.

As an aside, I can tell you that I have driven up Wolf Creek many times since then and I cannot identify the gulch that I rode up that day. I suppose some old-timer in the country knows where that stand of oak trees is hidden. I think it would take me an entire summer to find it. How Fred could go right to it, though he had not been there for 30 or 40 years, and how he ever knew where it was in the first place, I will never know. Even today I get emotional when I think about it.

But, to continue, back to the Ranch we went and right to the blacksmith shop. Out came the broad axe which Fred sharpened. He showed me how to trim and square up the trunk of the oak tree. A good broad axe man marks with his foot exactly where his next cut will be — or so Fred said. He did not recommend this procedure for me, but a day or so later, when he had gone back to his tent for a short nap, I tried this foot-marking procedure for myself and, as aforesaid, ruined one-half of a new pair of boots. At the doctor's office they stitched my poor foot and Fred cut and sewed a leather patch on my boot, so it wasn't

ruined after all. I wore that patched boot proudly for many years, inwardly delighted, but outwardly nonchalant when someone asked me to explain why the patch was there.

So the work proceeded that summer as we tailor made our own ox yoke, with the bows more than three feet apart so that Dewey and Bricker would not gouge out each other's eyes with their great horns. We tied the twins next to each other in the stall and measured the yoke on them to get it just right. We curved the outer edges so that the yoke would lie smoothly on their shoulders, now nearly five feet from the ground. The ironwork was Fred's domain and he fashioned a centerpin extending down through the yoke with a ring through it to fit the tongue of a wagon or a logger's chain. It was one mighty fine piece of metal work. The ring was seamless. You could not tell where Fred had welded the two ends together of what was once a solid iron jack handle.

The most difficult parts were the bows. We did not have the right kind of wood to bend without splintering and breaking although we tried every type of tree on the Ranch and all the various wood from the lumberyard. We boiled them in water and we boiled them in oil, but the technique used by the old-timers was unknown even to Fred. I tried the library but books gave no clue. I am somewhat chagrined to admit that we ended up with common lead water pipe which we bent on the anvil and then wrapped with rawhide. So what the heck, when finished the bows looked professional, as though we had intended them to be wrapped that way from the very beginning. They worked perfectly, and were large enough to accommodate the necks of the steers. We secured the bows at the top with wooden pins. Numerous coats of linseed oil were applied to the former oak tree until finally we had an ox yoke for the centuries.

It was still mid-summer when all this had been completed and now the real training began. I confess that I did not know "haw" from "gee" although I had read enough "across-the-plains-by-wagon-train" stories to understand that one meant "turn right," the other "turn left", and oxen were supposed to know the difference. Both Dewey and Bricker failed my vocal training, so I rigged up a rein (probably Fred's idea) through a ring on the outside of each halter. With these two reins I could pull Dewey, who was on the left side, to the left while shouting "haw" in my best bull-whacker voice, so that he swung to port and took Bricker with him. Or, contrariwise, I could yell "gee" to Bricker and turn the pair to starboard. (This was before my Navy service so I'm sure I just referred to it as "left" or "right".) Early on I gave up shouting "haw" and "gee" and just pulled on the reins. That seemed to be the ticket, and saved my lungs for normal teamster profanity. Working with cattle of any kind, and one-ton oxen in particular, calls for more than a drawing-room vocabulary.

With a log chain through the ring in the yoke, we hitched the oxen onto an old "stone boat", a solid wood sled about four feet square, used for hauling blocks of building stone. Around and around the barnyard we went. Only one thing was wrong, I could not pull back hard enough on the reins to stop the pair of them. And they would not stop on their own until the mood struck them. It was "heads down and Pike's Peak or bust" for those critters. "Whoa" was not in their vocabulary.

So, I adopted the tactic of dropping the reins and running out in front of them, then standing still with my back to them. They loved me. I gave them grain every morning. They would never run over me or hit me with their horns (although you had to be ready to duck if they inadvertently swung their heads). They would stop with their noses touching my back and they would stay stopped until I urged them on again, perhaps with a light flick of the rein on their rears.

There was never a time when one went forward and the other didn't. They always walked together, slowly, in unison, just like good oxen should. People commented on that and what a wonderful animal trainer I must be. I took the credit, but it came naturally to my bovine proteges.

What a summer that was. Everyone who came to the Ranch wanted to see the oxen and everyone admired them. They were stupendous animals and I have photos to prove it. There was not another pair of oxen in western Colorado, so far as I was aware. Certainly no oxen broke to the yoke of that size and conformity had been seen in that country for more than 50 years.

Then came the time in late August for "Ride 'N Tie Days" in Craig. And we began, Fred and I, to think about putting Dewey and Bricker in the parade. But first I have to tell you my favorite story on Fred.

We were at the breakfast table at the Ranch, perhaps 14 people enjoying coffee and eggs, biscuits and gravy, bacon and oatmeal. It was mid-August. Aunt Ruth, for whom Fred had worked off and on for a number of years, was visiting. Sitting across the table, she asked Fred where he was planning to winter that year. Fred did not lightly engage in social conversation, being the taciturn fellow that he was. But, of course, he would courteously respond to a question, particularly from Aunt Ruth. "I'll head for "Tuck-son", he said, slowly, with emphasis on each word. There was silence around the table and then Aunt Ruth, fearless as she was (and a bit pushy, too) said, somewhat condescendingly, "Fred, I think that's pronounced "Too-san". Again, a long and angst-filled pause ensued. Many of us wished to be somewhere else. We all wished Aunt Ruth had just let it pass. Fred looked up from his hot cakes, looked right at Aunt Ruth and said "Some folks may call it that". Case closed, the subject was changed and never brought up again.

But, I started to tell you about the parade. "We need a cart", Fred explained. "We can't just pull a stone boat down U.S. 40 through the main street of Craig. We should have something with wheels and something that looks "old timey". Not just a modern hay wagon like the ones here at the Ranch, but a cart like the pioneers pulled across the prairies with their oxen."

So, with Fred providing the inspiration while I furnished the perspiration, we went to the cottonwood forest along the River and looked for hours until we found the biggest tree of all, with a trunk at least six feet in diameter. We cut down that tree with our axes, or

rather I cut down that tree with Fred's axe, while he sat on a stump critiquing my strokes like a country club golf pro at a summer training session. When the tree was down we took the six-foot lumber saw and sliced off two "wheels", each about one-foot thick. It was just like slicing a cucumber, except that each cut took a half hour and the whole process consumed one Sunday.

The remains of that tree are probably still rotting on the bank of the Yampa River where we left them. To do that job today we would probably first have to file an environmental impact statement and wait a year and a half for a permit. But we asked no permission of anyone, not even Dad. In fact, when Dad saw the wheels that we shaped, the cart that we built out of used lumber pulled from the old granary, with the tongue from a long-abandoned sled, he was quite impressed and praised "our" ingenuity.

We were now ready to cross the plains, or at least travel the two-mile route of the "Ride 'N Tie Days" parade. My good buddy and college roommate, Al Davis, journeyed down from his ranch at Horse Creek, Wyoming, to join Fred and me in the festivities. We loaded the steers in the truck. We must have made at least two trips because the cart and the yoke also had to be transported the 25 miles to the start of the parade at the western end of Craig.

Fred was in the spirit of the thing. He wore his handmade buckskin jacket and leggings, carried ice tea in a whiskey bottle which he pretended to imbibe from time to time and did, indeed, look like he had just emerged from a wagon train crossing the prairie. I don't claim that we were the hit of the parade and outshone Miss Ride 'N Tie Days, or anything like that. But, there were a lot of camera flashes going off as Al walked beside the oxen with his buggy whip, Fred rode in the wagon and made like he was drunk on arrival at the frontier, and I strode beside Dewey, ready to step in front of the yoked team and stop the progress of this wild bunch before it overran the Model T just ahead carrying the ladies and gents in their 1915 costumes. But, I must say, it was our photo that made the front page of the Craig Empire Courier, and Miss "Ride 'N Tie Days" was on the inside page. I have the newspaper to prove it.

Thus the summer of 1949 ended for me and for Al as we went back to school and for Fred as he headed south to "Tucson".

The story does not end there. Dad, always one for center stage, had watched us train the oxen all summer. He had been on hand at the Craig parade, too, extolling the virtues of hybrid cattle and, I hope, basking in the glow of his youngest son's unquestionable triumph as a drover.

So, along comes the Routt County Fair and Rodeo in Hayden. It is mid-September now. Fred and I have departed, but Dewey and Bricker are there and the yoke is languishing in the barn. Dad decides to participate in the Hayden parade. He successfully transports the oxen and the cart to the fairgrounds where the parade is organized, yokes the oxen with their reins snapped into their halters, and away they go, up Poplar Street to

Jefferson Avenue and U.S. 40. I wasn't there, but I heard about the results. Dad's observation of our ox training sessions and our success at "Ride 'N Tie Days" had apparently been limited, like the amateur football fan who watches the ball and misses the key block. He did not realize that there were three of us working the oxen in Craig and for a good reason. He apparently thought that he could stop Dewey and Bricker by simply tugging on the reins that were used to turn them. Turn they did, but stop they wouldn't. Dad did not know my technique of running out in front of them and then bracing myself while they ambled up behind me. He started out as the last entry in the parade and I am told that, despite his late start, he was the first one to pass the reviewing stand in the middle of town. He simply went through, or hopefully around, every other participant and exhibitor because he could not stop 5,000 pounds of gentle, plodding, unflappable, Scotch Highland-Hereford hybrid oxen. Well, he wanted to show them off, and I doubt that anyone, sideline spectator or parade entrant, failed to see them. I don't have the picture to prove it, but that's what I heard.

This story is almost concluded, but there remains one final chapter.

I am at school when a proctor brings a message that I am to call home. There were no telephones in the dormitory rooms in those days and I had to go to the administration building to make the call. I feared the worst, because my parents had never called me at school in three years, although Dad wrote me every week and Mother quite frequently. It took forever to complete an operator-assisted long distance call across country in 1949, and I was quite anxious when Dad finally came on the line. "Great news", said he. "I can sell your oxen to a city fellow who saw a photograph of them in the newspaper. He says he wants them for a movie. I think he will pay \$2,500 which, as you know, is a year's tuition. Is that okay with you?"

On the one hand I was greatly relieved that I had not been summoned by long-distance telephone because of death or injury in the family. But, the depression that I felt at the possible departure of my prized oxen prevented me from speaking for several seconds. The offer was a year's tuition and Dad had paid that tuition for me every year without my having to work or depend upon a scholarship which I had not earned. I could not say no, so I assured Dad that he had my permission. I was touched that he even thought to call and ask for my consent. It was really not like him, but he understood my deep attachment. I knew that my future lay in the benefits of my college education and not in my ability to keep my place in line while driving a team of over-sized steers in the local parade.

A week or so later a letter arrived from Dad and he admitted that he had made a terrible mistake when he told Mr. Howard of Northridge, California, that I would sell my steers to him for \$2,500 (which was at least twice beef value). Mr. Howard asked naively if that was per steer or for both of them. Perhaps because he was inherently honest, Dad, the quickest-thinking man on his feet I have ever known, replied "for both" and then realized that he had just let a second \$2,500 slip through his fingers. Mr. Howard had no idea of the price of cattle and would likely have paid the \$5,000 if demanded.

I had not thought about the yoke when Dad called me that Sunday evening at school, but of course I knew that it was made to order for the twins and it would have to be sold with them, which it was. Mr. Howard did not want the cart and for years it rested with the rusting farm machinery back of the barn. So the steers departed while I was at school and, though saddened, life was exciting and I did not dwell on the matter. Hank Snow's "Movin' On" was at the top of the Country & Western chart and, like Hank, I was "moving on".

The story, however, was not concluded.

Several months later a letter arrived from Dad in which he enclosed a newspaper clipping. I still have the clipping, now somewhat yellowed. Neither the date nor the name of the newspaper can be determined, but there is a photo of Harvey E. Howard standing next to Bricker, yoked with Dewey on the left. Our made-to-order ox yoke is clearly visible between the pair. In the photo Mr. Howard is measuring their horns with a yard stick and in the article he declares the spread to be ten feet. That would have to be the two of them — four feet each, with a two-foot exaggeration by Mr. Howard.

Another man is shown holding the oxen. Rings have been inserted in the noses of both Dewey and Bricker, to which the reins are attached, a cruel but effective way of stopping the beasts with a tug on the reins. The accompanying article is headlined "GIANT OXEN TWINS NOW CALL NORTHRIDGE HOME", and then a subheading, believe it or not, which states in capital letters "FARMER REPORTS SPECIES WHICH HE FOUND IN COLORADO'S DINOSAUR AREA IS NEARLY EXTINCT".

No kidding, that is what it says, followed by the explanation that Mr. Howard has identified this nearly extinct species as five-year-old twins, a pair which he says cannot bear to be separated and together tip the scales at 5,380 pounds (possibly true), compared to the average ox weighing 1,200 to 1,400 pounds. I don't know where anyone goes these days to get the weight of an "average ox", but it is clear that Mr. Howard would be good competition for my Dad as storyteller to the cattle industry.

I am quoting now from the newspaper article: "I found the giant oxen in the dinosaur country in Colorado, said Howard. They were in a lost canyon very near the Dinosaur National Monument where the prehistoric giant mammals roamed. There must be something in the soil or grass or something, he added. When I saw Tom and Jerry rise out of the grass where they were lying, I was stunned."

Well, I was stunned at Mr. Howard's fabrication and upset that Dewey and Bricker were now plain old Tom and Jerry.

Apparently aware that he had now sunk the hook in the newspaper reporter conducting the interview, Mr. Howard really laid it on. "Getting them to Northridge was a problem because no truck or loading chute could accommodate the bulk and horn spread of the animals without some modification. On their way to their new home by truck the

party ran into a man in trouble. His heavy six-wheeled truck was mired in mud up to its axle. A tow truck tried futilely to extricate the mechanical giant. The twin oxen were hitched up and with one tug put the vehicle on firm terrain with no apparent effort, Howard reported. A comparable incident occurred on the farm, the cattleman said, but this time the oxen cracked a solid oak yoke in the process." End of "story".

So, my yoke was busted and my oxen were gone and renamed after a cartoon cat and mouse. The entire incident started with a movie being made in Colorado, but there is no record that Dewey and Bricker ever made it big in Hollywood. It would have been a nice touch if they had.

Gone but not forgotten, they live on in my photographs and newspaper clippings. And, yes, the ox yoke leaving my garage and destined for the barn at the Ranch is not the one Fred and I made, but rather a smaller one from Florida or Tennessee. But, it won't matter and, attuned to the spirit of oxen tales, as recounted by Mr. Harvey Howard of Northridge, California, we will claim that the yoke came off the very oxen Abram Fiske drove from Missouri when he homesteaded the Ranch on the Yampa.

Willis Carpenter
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