

Concluding Remarks

Rob Collins

For much of the past 20 years, I have been a volunteer, then an instructor, and finally a board member for Tillers International. In the instructor role, I teach students, historians, homesteaders, international guests, and hobbyists the craft of working oxen. I also teach classes in woodworking and traditional crafts. In most woodworking and oxen classes, I begin with the same joke: most traditional skills can be done six ways. Two of those six ways are arguably the “best” way – although experts may disagree as to which is truly the best. Another two of the six will work under less-than-ideal conditions. The final two ways are likely to injure or kill you. The essential task in teaching traditional skills, then, is to move toward the best practices, understand the times when compromise is necessary, and to gently abandon those things which can, and should, be replaced.

These proceedings contain a wide-ranging look at the state of draft cattle around the world in 2024. Some of it is clearly the ‘state of the art.’ those practices which have worked for millennia and – although they may differ across cultures – represent effective and efficient practices. Examples here would be the German three-pad collar and the American-style bow yoke. In the summer of 2025, I spent a week at Lauresham with Claus Kropp and now he is employing a Tillers’ bow yoke for some tasks, while I am home in the United States prototyping three-pad collars for possible work in the developing world.

Some practices documented within these proceedings fall into a middle group: places and situations where draft cattle are being used, but not necessarily maximized, due to various cultural or economic factors. Where draft cattle and oxen are used only for primary tillage, for example, we can envision opportunities for expanded use in weed control, power generation, transport, or road building. Where farmers revert to less-than-ideal equipment because of economic barriers, we can imagine possibilities rather than obstacles.

Also reported in these proceedings – notably in Barbara Corson’s and Matilda Holmes’s work on skeletal pathologies – are practices to include in that third category mentioned earlier: those lessons that act as cautionary tales and those practices to be avoided whenever possible. For draft cattle to remain viable, we need to work to replace injurious hitching and harnessing methods from the past with low-stress training and ergonomic equipment.

So now what? Seeing these proceedings as a snapshot of best practices, opportunities, and existing challenges in 2024, the danger is that we also see them as just part of the lexicon of oxen and draft cattle literature, a document to go on a shelf for reference sometime, someday.

But ‘someday’ has arrived. These proceedings are a call to action, or rather, several calls to action. A single path won’t ensure the viability of oxen and draft cattle going forward, just as no single event or action tipped the scales away from their widespread usage. As members of the draft cattle community, none of us can complete this work alone; together, sharing the load, we can preserve the knowledge and skills of working cattle -this intangible culture- provided that we commit to gathering and sharing it faster than it is being lost.

No matter the connection to the draft community, we have a role to play. Historians: collecting examples of oxen culture from around the globe may be more important now than ever. Open air museums have become the first, and often only, place where the public sees oxen working. As that touchstone, we need to advocate for more usage of draft cattle in institutional settings. Scientists and researchers: objectively testing yokes, harnesses, equipment, and methods in both the laboratory and the field lends a seriousness to draft cattle. Teachers and leaders: intentionally building networks for sharing knowledge, techniques, and objectives will facilitate better adoption of draft cattle as a workable solution to future agricultural problems. Writers and thought leaders: changing the narrative about working cattle as a realistic option will shift political will to incentivize their use. And finally, practitioners and farmers: employing draft cattle while adapting and reinventing their use will show the world in clear terms that the past and future are as one and that humans remain ‘cattle people.’

Clearly, these roles need to interconnect. For too long, a hindrance to oxen and draft cattle culture was its fragmented nature. Best practices lived in isolation. Deeply held traditions resisted change either by distance or intent. Innovation and exchange seemed threatening. With these proceedings, however, that work – and the support of our fellow travelers – seems a bit more certain.





Fig. 1 Annual meeting of the Midwestern Ox Drivers Association (USA) at Tillers International in 2022 (Picture: MODA).



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