

# Lion & Bright

Quiet steady oxen have a long history in the region

by Marjorie Simmins

Deep in the big barn's interior, you hear the bells first, tinkling like ice-chimes in the wind. The oxen teams are belled, yoked and ready to work. At more than 2,000 pounds, some ox are immense. Others weigh far less, but are still uncommonly strong. Most wear the traditional crimson head-yoke, along with ornately decorated forehead pads. The brass accents shine. Soon the big animals will follow their teamsters out into the arena to pull a 500-pound stone boat loaded with cement blocks. While this is a time-honoured competition, oxen will perform any tasks given to them. So it has been for centuries past, and so it seems sure to continue.

Nova Scotia's first oxen came to Port Royal in 1610, with French explorers. Calm and hard-working, they worked for the Acadian settlers first, but were adopted by all following pioneers. Oxen toiled in the forests and fields, and on the beaches, hauling fish and seaweed. They transported lumber and goods. Harnessed singly or yoked as teams, oxen gave their all, raising homesteads and towns for the newcomers.

The gentle ox is still much loved throughout Atlantic Canada. From books and films in their praise, to the dozens of yearly ox-pulls and parades held at country exhibitions, to their active use on museum farm sites and small independent farms, many here either know of oxen or work directly with them. As an artist's model, the ox has proved irresistible to painters and carvers, notably Nova Scotian artist Maud Lewis whose oxen paintings are colourful and whimsical—often depicted head-on—sometimes with four legs, and other times with only three.

## Defining oxen

"Traditionally, an ox is a castrated bull, of any breed of bovine—Ayrshire, Hereford, Guernsey, Holstein or cross-

breeds," says Barry Hiltz, site manager at Ross Farm, a working farm museum in New Ross, NS. "So, any male bull [dairy or beef], between three and four months old. Once he's neutered, he's a steer. But he's not an ox until he's trained. You start with leading them as singles, then you teach them to stop and stand, then you tie them together."

There are numerous country exhibitions and 4-H shows throughout the Maritimes in the summer and early autumn; ox pulls and displays are a big attraction at events such as the Albert County Exhibition in Riverside-Albert, NB and the Dundas Plowing Match and Agricultural Fair in eastern PEI, but oxen participate mainly in Nova Scotia.

Some of the exhibitions are venerable. "The Big Ex," a week-long annual fair in Bridgewater, is more than 100 years old. Held in July, it commonly attracts around 50,000 people. One of its most popular events is the International Ox Pull, which brings together teams from the Maritimes and the Northeastern United States, to compete for cash prizes.

"Overall, there are approximately 125 teams in Nova Scotia," says Hiltz, who has teamed oxen himself. Ox-rich areas are predominantly the South Shore and the Annapolis Valley, but also range to the Truro and New Glasgow areas, and into Cape Breton, he says. Adding to the numbers would be the single oxen, often called "sloops" or "smilies."

Oxen are uncommon in Newfoundland and Labrador today but Mike Camden, who now breeds Newfoundland ponies at his farm in Ontario, spent many summers as a boy in Daniel's Harbour, on the Northern Peninsula, and remembers five or six oxen wandering around the small community, back before anti-roaming laws required animals to be fenced in. "There was one in particular called Gandhi. He was a great big white guy with



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just one horn. He was enormous...the size of a bus."

Oxen in Nova Scotia are usually called only two names, Lion and Bright. Ross Farm, which is open to the public for tours and activities year-round, has one team of Durham (Shorthorn) oxen with these names for farming and logging.

"These are traditional names," says Hiltz. "Probably because it made it easy to switch teams." In years gone by, the teams were rarely colour- or breed-matched, as they almost always are now, he says. "They even used a cow and a steer together. It was mix and match, even if you worked a neighbour's ox, if one of yours got sick and died." Other common names include Spark and Diamond, Spark and Star, or Lion and Turk.

All Lions are trained to work on the left side and all Brights to work on the right, though most can work both sides. The teamster walks beside his team, usually on the left. The ox nearest to him is the "nigh" ox, and the far one is the "off" ox. The oxen learn separate commands, including: Back (back up); Gee (turn right); Haw: (turn left); Get up (go); and, of course, Whoa (stop).

### Steady and stable

"Oxen listen well," says Hiltz. "They are quiet, steady and stable." These qualities made pioneer loggers and fishermen prefer oxen to horses. "Cattle were the only ones who would stand

her family on a hobby farm near Bridgetown. The rangy black and white Holsteins, a dairy breed, stood out amidst the greater numbers of red Shorthorns and other solid-coloured beef breeds on show that day. Gilles is particularly fond of Lucky, whom she has had with her since he was a day old.

"Sabrina loves the oxen," says Gilles' stepmother Donna Grant, herself a 4-H oxen leader. "She has a saddle horse too, [but prefers the oxen.]" Gilles shrugs: "It's more fun with steers."

Gilles' friends at school don't understand the bond she has with her bovine friends. "I don't care," she smiles. Most oxen live about 12 or 16 years, says Grant—then into the "beef system" or processing plant. It's simply the way of life and death with cattle. But, says Grant: "Lucky'll never go in the beef system while Sabrina is alive—he'll go in a hole—she'll bury him. She loves them both, but especially Lucky. She says Lucky is her best friend. She's gonna keep 'em forever."

Terry James, photographer and author of *In Praise of Oxen*, published by Nimbus in 1992, is not surprised to learn of Gilles' affection for her oxen.

"The kids absorb the talk of oxen in their families from the adults who are working the teams," says James. "The bond comes from the reliability of the oxen. That sense of being on

**"I have heard these stories so many times—if a teamster got hurt, the oxen brought the man home. Even in the dark. With a logging accident, for example, if the man could get himself onto the wagon or sled, the oxen would bring him home"**

up to their bellies in the water while they off-loaded fish from the boats." The oxen's cloven hooves and short, strong legs were an advantage for working on pebbled or rocky shores.

It is also traditional for oxen to wear bells around their necks. "The bells were a signature of who had the oxen," says Hiltz. "Bells all have different tones. On a frosty fall morning, they'd know who was coming—a mile away." On narrow country roads, the bells also alerted a teamster that another team was approaching, and would need to pass. Neighbours all knew who was coming and going—and so did families. "They say that the women would put the potatoes on to boil when they heard the bells."

### A new generation

At just 15 years old, Sabrina Gilles is the proud owner of her own pair of oxen, Chuck and Lucky. Last August Gilles and her team took part in the Annapolis Valley Exhibition, held at Lawrencetown, NS—winning a trophy for "Best Broke Pair" in the Under Two (Years Old) Class.

"The best part of being an oxen owner is spending time with them. I like that mine are different," says Gilles, who lives with

a team. It brings both creatures closer together." In fact, oxen have saved many lives. "I have heard these stories so many times—if a teamster got hurt, the oxen brought the man home. Even in the dark. With a logging accident, for example, if the man could get himself onto the wagon or sled, the oxen would bring him home."

James, who lives in Riverport, Nova Scotia, was drawn to the images of oxen. "Photography was the initial driving force—oxen are a great subject, big and powerful, and they work in interesting environments." But he came to appreciate the animals comprehensively. "Have you ever been to an ox barn?" asks James. "They have quite a presence in their own barn."

Ox-pull competitions are all about strength and teamwork. The event requires two oxen, one teamster—and up to two tons of cement blocks being pulled along on a "stone boat" or "drag." The oxen must haul the drag three feet in one good pull, and get three tries to do it. The teamster holds up a whip and "chirps" or speaks to them to make them go. The pulls are done either according to the oxen's weight (light, medium or heavy), or by percentage, where the weight of the cattle is divided by the load. The heavier the oxen—they range from



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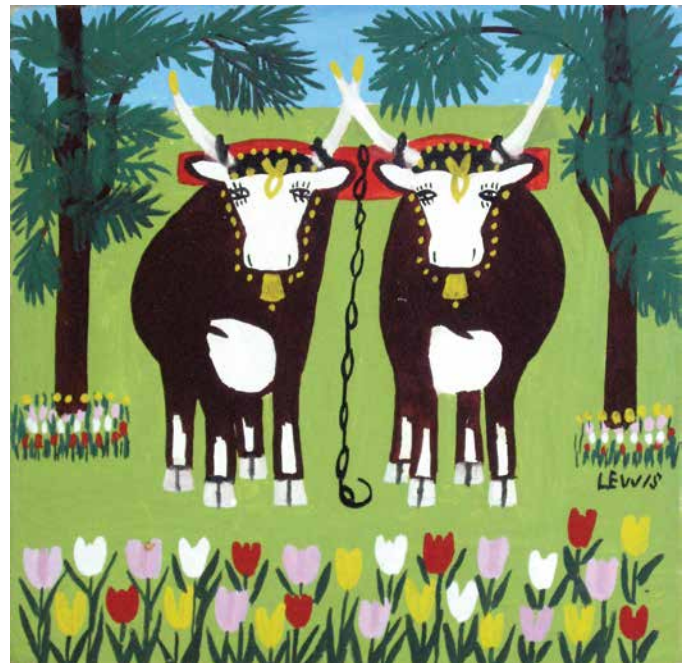
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Sabrina Gilles, top left, with Lucky, one of her two oxen, at her family's farm near Bridgetown, NS. Top right and bottom left: Teamsters working their oxen at exhibition. "He's not an ox until he's trained," says Barry Hiltz of Ross Farm in New Ross, NS. Bottom right: Cameron Broome and Barry Hiltz work a pair of oxen at Ross Farm.

"The kids absorb the talk of oxen in their families from the adults who are working the teams," says Terry James, photographer and author of *In Praise of Oxen*. Below: Albert County Exhibition in Riverside-Albert, NB. Right: Summer Oxen by Nova Scotia artist Maud Lewis, who loved to paint colourful whimsical scenes of hard-working oxen.



500 to 3,500 pounds—the more weight they are given to pull. The pulls proceed round-robin style; all the teams in a weight class do a pull, then go around again with more weight, or each team pulls and weight is added until they can't pull any more.

### The legends

There are many star competitors in the sport, both human and bovine, young and older. And then there are the legends.

Darrel Watkins, from Wellington, Yarmouth County, NS, has owned more than 1,000 pairs of oxen. He started competing at seven years old and 67 years later, at 74, he is still at it. Watkins currently has 15 pairs, three of which he competes with—all named Spark and Star. He stands next to a pair of oxen. "Big pets, really. They're seven years old—in their prime."

In 1991, when Watkins was 51 years old, he was in a car accident that left him badly injured. It just made sense to him to slowly rehabilitate himself by working and walking with the oxen. "My father had oxen and went to the exhibitions. He also went to the woods [to log]." As a boy, Watkins had seen the easy companionship between his father and the slow-moving animals. He knew right then he'd keep oxen too. "I like oxen, and I like the sport of ox-pulls."

Watkins kept one team for 11 years, Spark and Lion. Before his accident, in the 1970s and 80s, he won seven international ox-pulls in Cumberland, Maine, four with Spark and Lion, and three with another team, Spark and Star. "It felt good," he says quietly.

Then Spark and Lion did what all creatures must do—they aged. Watkins, a farmer all his life, dreaded what came next. When cattle get old they are taken to a processing plant to be humanely killed. It is a part of the cycle of life on a farm, especially big farms. But Lion and Spark had given him so much, so many championships—so many hours of good company—he couldn't leave his old friends to end their lives with strangers.

"The guys at the plant didn't think I could do it. But I did it, I

held their heads as they were put down." Watkins turns his face away, and pats the ox nearest to him. "It was hard, really hard. But I had to," he says. "That's what those oxen meant to me."

Watkins looks more to the future than the past. And he sees a good future for ox-pulls. "I've seen the exhibitions slack off twice in a lifetime—and seen them come back." His son Darren is a successful competitor, as are his grandchildren, Savannah, nine, and Brady, 10. Darren's eldest daughter, Kandiss, 18, competed in the ladies oxen pull last year at the Digby County Exhibition in Bear River, NS. For Darrel Watkins, it is the pleasure of sharing an activity he enjoys: "Sure, I like to win, but it's the fun of it, and being with my family."

### A return to tradition

Barry Hiltz believes there could be a return to traditional methods of farming with animal power. "I see a future for the oxen. I see them being used," he says. "The small farm will start to come back again. People will want to know where their food is coming from."

Indeed they do. It was a desire to "connect city people with country rhythms" that made businessman Sean Gallagher open his Halifax café and wine bar Lion & Bright on Agricola Street. Gallagher chose the name because it worked as double-entendre. The café, like a team of oxen, is two-sided, changing from a coffee-serving entity in the day (Bright, on the right), to a bar in the evening (Lion, on the left). The bartender in the centre is the café's "teamster."

"It's all about... the joy of re-connecting with our agricultural roots. We need to nourish our communities and support local farmers." The oxen can help with this, he says. "Oxen helped to initiate and develop agriculture in Nova Scotia for hundreds of years. Oxen are a big part of our heritage. They allowed settlers to be prosperous. The ox is a humble beast that is ingrained in the soul of Nova Scotia." 🐃

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