

UNH's Drew Conroy Writes Definitive Book on Oxen

By [Sharon Keeler](#)
UNH News Bureau

DURHAM, N.H. -- On a cold night in 1978, 13-year-old Drew Conroy and his father drove 30 miles over snowy New Hampshire roads to look at twin Brown Swiss calves. It was love at first sight. For \$50, Conroy bought the pair from Donald Hawes of Milford. Young and eager to embark on his new adventure with his first steers, he talked his dad into taking them home that night.

Conroy didn't anticipate the daunting challenges he'd face. The calves were reluctant to follow him on the lead rope, and even more reluctant in the yoke. Neither of his parents could offer advice to their son, as they had never raised or trained oxen.

"Somehow, I managed to train Zeb and Luke. I suppose I was motivated by my father's insistence that we could always eat them if I didn't get them trained," says Conroy, jokingly. "One of the greatest lessons I learned is that there's no substitute for time spent working with animals. I also learned the importance of communicating with people and learning from the experience of others."

Twenty-one years later, Conroy is an animal science professor at the University of New Hampshire's Thompson School of Applied Science. His recently published book on training and working oxen now helps others interested in the "lost art." Titled "Oxen, a Teamsters Guide," the 345-page book includes information on every aspect of raising, training, driving, and showing the animals. It also includes many illustrations and photos, which include a number of well-known New Hampshire teamsters.

Conroy has found a role in training individuals how to use oxen today on small farms and in international development. He has traveled as far away as Tanzania and Uganda in Africa to teach people about the

productive use of oxen. He has also been involved as a consultant for the movie industry.

"The book emphasizes New England methods of training and working animals that can be applied anywhere, and at the same time describes how oxen are yoked, worked and used in the United States," says Conroy.

The Berwick, Maine, resident wrote his first book, "The Oxen Handbook," when he was a junior at UNH in 1985. It quickly became a reference for 4-H and adult teamsters everywhere. The new book expands on Conroy's first work. It covers the basics, from choosing the right breed and properly feeding and housing oxen, to correctly fitting a yoke and bow, to keeping oxen healthy. It also provides information for readers interested in using oxen for farming and logging, as well as competition.

The book includes a chapter on oxen in history, as well. Conroy argues that without oxen, European settlers could not have survived in North America. Their role in farming the land and in westward expansion were paramount to developing this country.

"History changed with the beginning of farming and the domestication of animals," Conroy explains.

"Following centuries of human labor, the first draft animal put to work in early agriculture was the ox, which was used long before horse and other equine animals were domesticated. Oxen provided the draft power that helped create an agricultural revolution by allowing farmers to till more land, harvest crops in a timely manner, and transport crops and other goods in large quantities over great distances."

According to Conroy, the first oxen were likely domesticated in southeastern Europe and western Asia, most likely in Greece and Turkey. Cattle husbandry in that region was common 7,000 years ago. Other than the domestication of the dog, domestication of cattle was the most important step in manipulating the animal world and exploiting the land for agricultural purposes. Cattle supplied the meat, milk, leather, manure and power for agriculture.

In his book Conroy also discusses the use of cattle as

draft animals in Third World countries today. Offering a living history lesson, he explains how the Maasai in East Africa continue to herd their cattle, as many early Asian and Eastern European cattle owners did.

"The Maasai and others like them in Africa are beginning to adopt more productive ways of farming their land, and oxen are an important part of that change," says Conroy. "They are just beginning to face the trials of training and using oxen. In addition to the ox's most important role in plowing the land, they are also using this animal to transport manure, carry water and move materials from the forest to build fences and new homes. Observing these people and their use of oxen is like traveling back in time."

Conroy says the primary audience for his book is New England people with oxen, 4-H groups, museums, and living history farms like Sturbridge Village in Massachusetts. But he also hopes it will find a niche among international development groups like the Peace Corps.

"There are more than 200 million oxen in the world today, mostly in Third World countries," Conroy says. "So I hope it will somehow find its way into the hands of international development groups that can put it to good use."

Conroy continues to own and train oxen today and his two new additions, a pair of four-year-olds named Rex and Ely, help him work his 10-acre farm in Berwick.

"Oxen, A Teamsters Guide" is published by Rural Heritage Press. It may be purchased on their web site at www.ruralheritage.com/bookstory, or by calling 1-931-268-0655.

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