

Kids Korner

Meet Homer And Albert — The 3,000-Pound Pets

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FREDERICK, Md. — "What are they?" is the question people ask Ernie Jackson most frequently when they see Homer and Albert.

"I've had people ask me if they were yaks," said the Frederick ox teamster, "they just can't figure out what they are, and I like to let them guess."

What they are, in fact, are a pair of mammoth-sized Brown Swiss steers that were kept around the farm. Now 12 years old, the pair, called oxen because they have been started under yoke, have a combined weight of more than 6,000 pounds, and stand almost six feet at the withers. Yet because they have been pets all their lives, Homer and Albert are as tame and gentle as a pair of kittens.

Ernie acquired the steers when his niece, Daphne Sigler, asked him if he was interested in a few bull calves. Daphne and her husband Robert milk a herd of registered Brown Swiss cows. Ernie took three calves with the idea he would feed and slaughter them. But this pair were always together, and, according to Ernie, "I just fell in love with them. And so I kept them." That was the start of a 12 year friendship between Ernie and his team.

When they were five years old, Homer and Albert made their debut at the Great Frederick Fair.

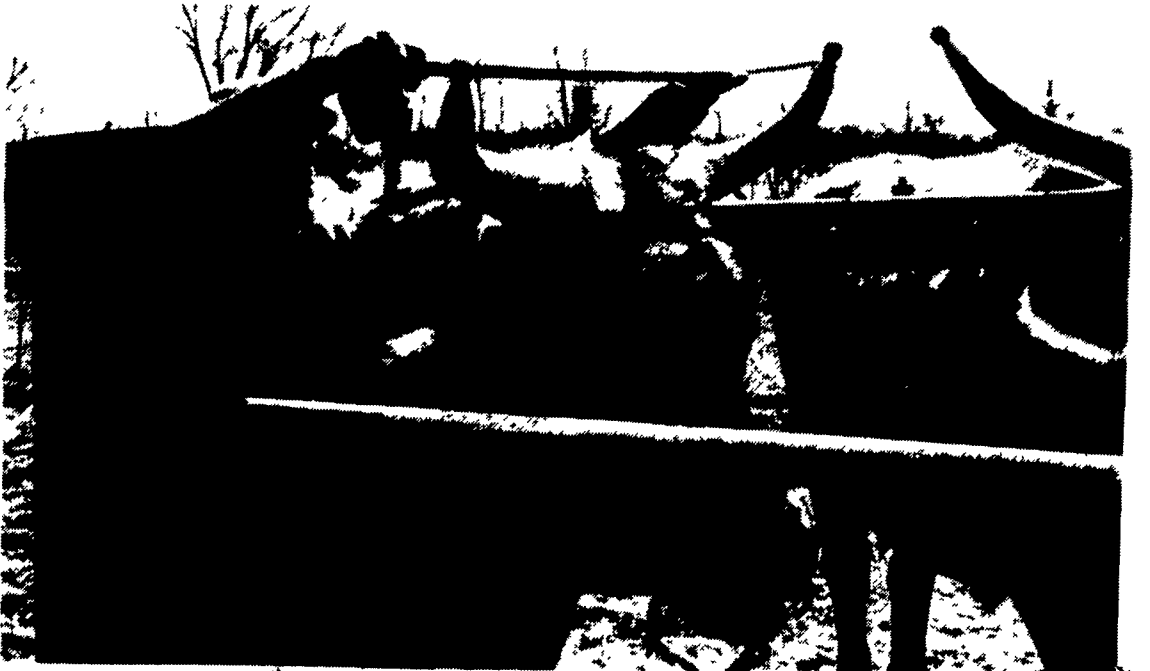
They were housed in box stalls in the beef building, where people could get a good look at them. They didn't cause much of a sensation at first, Ernie said, because people didn't know they were there. Then a local newspaper did a small feature on the team. "The next day, people were asking for them, they wanted to know where they were," said Ernie. That was the start of an illustrious career for the oxen.

Word spread quickly about Homer and Albert, the gentle team. Now not only are they booked well in advance for the Frederick Fair, Montgomery Agricultural Fair, and the Maryland State Fair, they have also been invited to the state fairs in Richmond, Virginia and in Delaware. They attend many community shows around Maryland, and lead the parade at the Brown Swiss Futurity show each August. They have even been on TV, on the local news and in 1995, on the Willard Scott show nationally.

Each day the oxen eat four bales of grass hay between the two of them, and about half of a five-gallon bucket of grain. They are housed on an 11-acre pasture with a shed so they can get in out of the weather. Ernie removes their halters when he turns them out, for fear they would get caught on something. Although they are surrounded with board fence, "You



Albert, in the background, and Homer, in front, enjoy the pasture after being unhitched.



Homer, Albert, and Ernie Jackson. The Brown Swiss charmed Ernie as calves, and escaped their fate as slaughter animals.

could keep them in with baling rope, almost," says Ernie of the docile Brown Swiss.

They do have rings in their noses; Ernie put them in when they were young, to control them if the vet needed to treat them. They have brass horn knobs. Those are primarily to protect them from each other when they are penned together at shows.

Although their huge horns look intimidating, the animals don't use them in an aggressive manner at all. The only times you really have to watch them, according to Ernie, are when they throw their heads around because of flies, and when he is grooming them. Once when Ernie was brushing out Albert's coat, Homer started to rub up against him. He wanted some attention, too. Within a minute, Ernie felt himself lifted up into the air. He tried to reach the ground with his feet, but couldn't. He was suspended in the air by his belt, which was hooked firmly on Homer's horn. Ernie had to swing himself to the side of the pen, where he could step up onto a rail, and finally unhook himself.

"When I brush them now, I tie them up separately when we're at the fairs, 'cause, well, that's quite a problem to get off the horn when your feed are off the ground," said Ernie.

Ernie started the team under a yoke last year for the first time. "Everyone would ask me, 'Do you work them?,' and I got tired of saying, no we don't. So I thought I might as well hook them up. I told my wife, 'Well, I'm going over to put a yoke on them.' Homer just stood there, he thought he was in a headgate," relates Ernie. "And I finally got them to move." Ernie

made the 60-pound yoke himself. He had an ox cart custom made by a man in Leola, and hopes to teach them to pull it this summer.

Although they look very similar, Ernie has no trouble telling the two big Brown Swiss apart. Homer is lighter in color, and bigger in girth. His horns, at 32 inches, are a full 10 inches shorter than Albert's. He is also the tamer and quieter of the two. "And he'll drink his water," explains Ernie, "I don't know why, but Albert,

every time you bring him a bucket of water, he'll knock it over. Just likes to see you carry water, I guess."

But Albert only upsets the first bucket of water you bring him. After that, he settles down for a long drink just like his partner Homer.

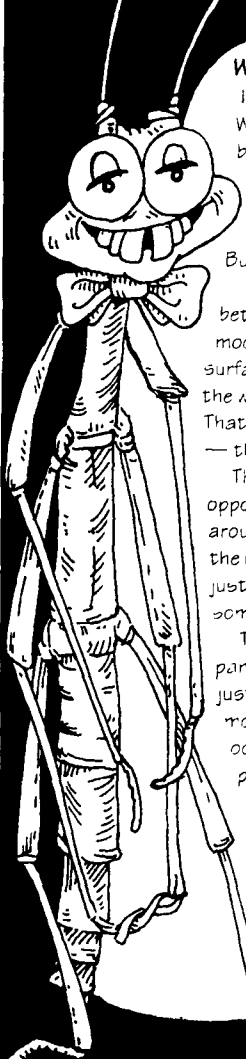
Only Albert knows why he upsets his water bucket. But, after all, if that's his 3000-pound Goliath's idea of fun, who's going to stop him?



Ernie removes the yoke from Albert. Made of four pieces of wood glued and bolted together, it weighs approximately 60 pounds. Ernie created the yoke himself. The bent pieces of wood were custom made by a man in Leola.

MILK AMERICA'S HEALTH KICK

Smart Stuff WITH TWIG WALKINGSTICK



Where does the water go when it's low tide?
It's being pulled up towards the moon!
Water along the shorelines of oceans and other large bodies of water slowly rises to a high point, called high tide and shrinks back to a low tide twice a day. High tides come in pairs — if there's a high tide on your shore you can bet there's another high tide somewhere. But these tides are caused by two different forces.
The first high tide rises on the Earth's surface directly between the center of the Earth and the moon. The moon's gravity tugs at the Earth and makes the ocean surface bulge out. The bulge rises as the moon as it circles the world so you see high tides when the moon is over land. That means there are high tides in the middle of the ocean — they're just harder to see!
The second high tide is on the other side of the world opposite the first one. This tide forms as the Earth twirls around an imaginary pole that sits between the Earth and the moon. The water gets pushed out into a high tide — just like you get pushed against the car door when someone drives around a curve really fast.
To mimic the force of the moon, lay a napkin in an empty pan. Pick it up at the center. You are swinging on the napkin, just like the moon pulls at the seas. And the napkin moves away from the pan's edges just like the ocean does during low tide snatching off land's pretty beaches!

Scientifically yours,

Twig

