

How Pioneers Used Animals Back In The Day

We live in a world of electronics and machines.

While many see these as mere conveniences or ways of entertaining ourselves, the reality is that we use most of them to do a lot of our work for us. From mousetraps to computer systems, each has its place in our lives; making things easier for us. But what did our ancestors do, before having all of these mechanical and electronic marvels to depend on?

While our ancestors did have some machines (although they didn't have modern electronics), more than anything, they depended on animal power. I'm talking about the pioneering era of our country here, the early 1800s, before the automobile hit the scene. Other than the steam locomotive and the telegraph, technology hadn't really hit the scene.

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Back then, America was an agricultural society, with most people living on farms and homesteads. Those people depended on animals for a lot of things, from providing raw power to drive machines, to help them with their work and even to providing them with food. The basic saying was, "If it doesn't work, it's food."

Of course, which animals a family had and how many of those animals they had was an important part of identifying that family's wealth. While those animals are a help in doing the work around the farm or homestead, it costs something to feed them; especially those which require grain.

One way a family would deal with this expense is to kill off their excess animals, converting them to food, either for their own use or for sale to others. Whole animals would also be sold or traded, to get them off the farm and reduce the cost of caring for them.

Draft Animals

Probably the single most important category of animals on any farm or homestead was draft animals. These were, quite literally, the workhorses of any farm, providing the motive power for planting, harvesting, wagons, travel, pulling up tree stumps and any other task that required more raw strength than a man could provide himself. Having the right draft animals not only made work easier, but it made it possible to work more efficiently, getting more work done.

- **Horses** – Horses were the most common draft animal used on farms. But these were draft horses, not the riding horses you usually see portrayed as draft animals on television. We're talking Clydesdales and other closely related horses; big and powerful, but not so great to ride. While some more wealthy people might have horses for riding, most used their horses for pulling wagons and plows. Even though they eat horse meat in France, it was not common on the frontier.
- **Mules** – The mule is a cross between a horse and a donkey, providing more stamina than a horse can. They are also more surefooted in the mountains, especially in rocky terrain. Their greater stamina made them great for farm work, as they could plow more in a day, before tiring.
- **Donkeys** – The humble donkey is a great worker, carrying a surprising amount of weight for their size. It is from the donkey, that mules receive their greater stamina and surefootedness. While not as common on farms, where pulling is required, they are great pack animals.

- **Oxen** – Oxen are slower than horses, but also more powerful. Most of the wagon trains heading westwards were powered by oxen. They are excellent draft animals, due to their great strength. They also do a better job of living off the land than horses can. Finally, they could always be killed for food, if needed.

Other Work Animals

While draft animals were the main workers on farms and homesteads, they were not the only animals who worked. Other animals were kept for their specific abilities. These were not pets, as we have them today, but rather work animals who became part of the family.

- **Dogs** – Dogs have been used as work animals in a number of ways, most commonly as herd animals. Not only do dogs do well at herding sheep, they can also herd cattle. Being territorial, dogs are great at protecting property, a use for which many people have dogs, still today. But back then, the concern was to protect the homestead from bears, wild dogs, and raccoons. Dogs could also be useful for hunting. While it is possible to eat dog, that would only happen in times of desperation.
- **Cats** – Cats have become the laziest of animals in today's world, thinking that they own their owners. But in pioneering days, cats were important for keeping rodents out of feed bins, hay stacks and other food storage areas. They were not fed, but rather expected to hunt their own food.
- **Sheep** – While sheep can be eaten, they were mostly raised for the wool they provided, which was highly prized in that time. There were no synthetic fabrics, so wool was much more important to pioneering people, than it is today. Lambs would be more likely to be slaughtered for food, than the adult sheep, although in

an emergency, an adult sheep can provide a couple of meals.

- **Bees** – Some farmers would keep bees, even going to the point of importing them, when necessary. This was especially important for those who had orchards, as the bees were needed for pollinating the trees. The bees also provided honey, which could be sold as a cash crop.

Animals for Food

We're talking farms here, so of course there would be animals which were raised just for the food they offered. These might be food for the family or for sale to others. Often, whatever extra animals were sold off just before winter, to avoid the cost of feeding them. Many of those which weren't were butchered through the winter to feed the family.

- **Hogs** – Hogs were a very popular farm animals, as they required little care. They are easy to breed and will eat just about anything, even things that other animals can't eat. One advantage that hogs have here is that their bodies extract poisons from foods, passing them out through their hooves. So hogs can be left alone to feed themselves, usually in the woods, without much risk of them getting sick. The fat from the hogs was useful in making soap and we all know how good bacon is.
- **Cattle** – While raising cattle was generally left to ranchers, some farmers would occasionally have cattle, especially dairy cows. The milk was a valuable crop and could be converted to both butter and cheese. Once they passed the age where they produced milk, cattle were a good source of food.
- **Chickens** – Chickens are a great food source, producing both eggs and being able to be slaughtered and eaten. On the average, mature chickens will produce eggs two days out of three. They are scavengers and will eat literally anything, plant and insect alike, clearing ground right

down to the earth. This gets converted to food at a very efficient rate. Chickens need very little grain, usually only when the ground is covered in snow.

- **Turkeys** – While turkeys were rarely brought west in wagon trains, it was not uncommon for farmers to catch local turkeys and domesticate them. Turkeys are fairly docile creatures and will stay around the farm, eating, growing and laying eggs. They provide a lot more meat than a chicken does too, making them a useful addition to any homestead.
- **Geese and Ducks** – Although rarely domesticated, ducks and geese would often adopt a farm, living there, especially if the farm had a convenient pond or lake, as well as a good, natural source of food. These could be easily trapped or shot for food.
- **Doves and Quail** – Both doves and quail are easy to raise, although they need cages which fully contain them, unlike chickens, whose flying ability is limited. While they don't have a whole lot of meat on their bones, there's enough to flavor some soup.
- **Rabbits** – Being rodents, rabbits are fast breeders and easy to feed. They can be fed leftovers from the farm's kitchen garden and will grow just fine on it. A good source of protein, their fur is also useful for any type of warm-weather clothing.

On Your Homestead

As you can see from this, there are a large variety of animals which can be raised on a homestead, whether you are homesteading now or are looking to homesteading as an option for survival. The two key elements you need to consider, when deciding on a particular type of animal are how much space they need and how hard they are to feed.

While it may be easy to feed these animals today, you might have serious problems feeding them in a post-disaster world,

where you can't just go to the local farm & feed store and bring home a few bags of grains. In homesteading, one of the biggest uses of space can very easily be raising grain for your livestock. So think this through thoroughly when considering various types of animals.

You'll probably want to start raising some animals before a disaster strikes. Check your municipal laws however, to find out what limits there are on raising animals in the city where you live. Many will place limitations on the numbers and types of animals that are allowed in your backyard.



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