

Teamster Ben Klopchin

by Anna Knapp-Peck

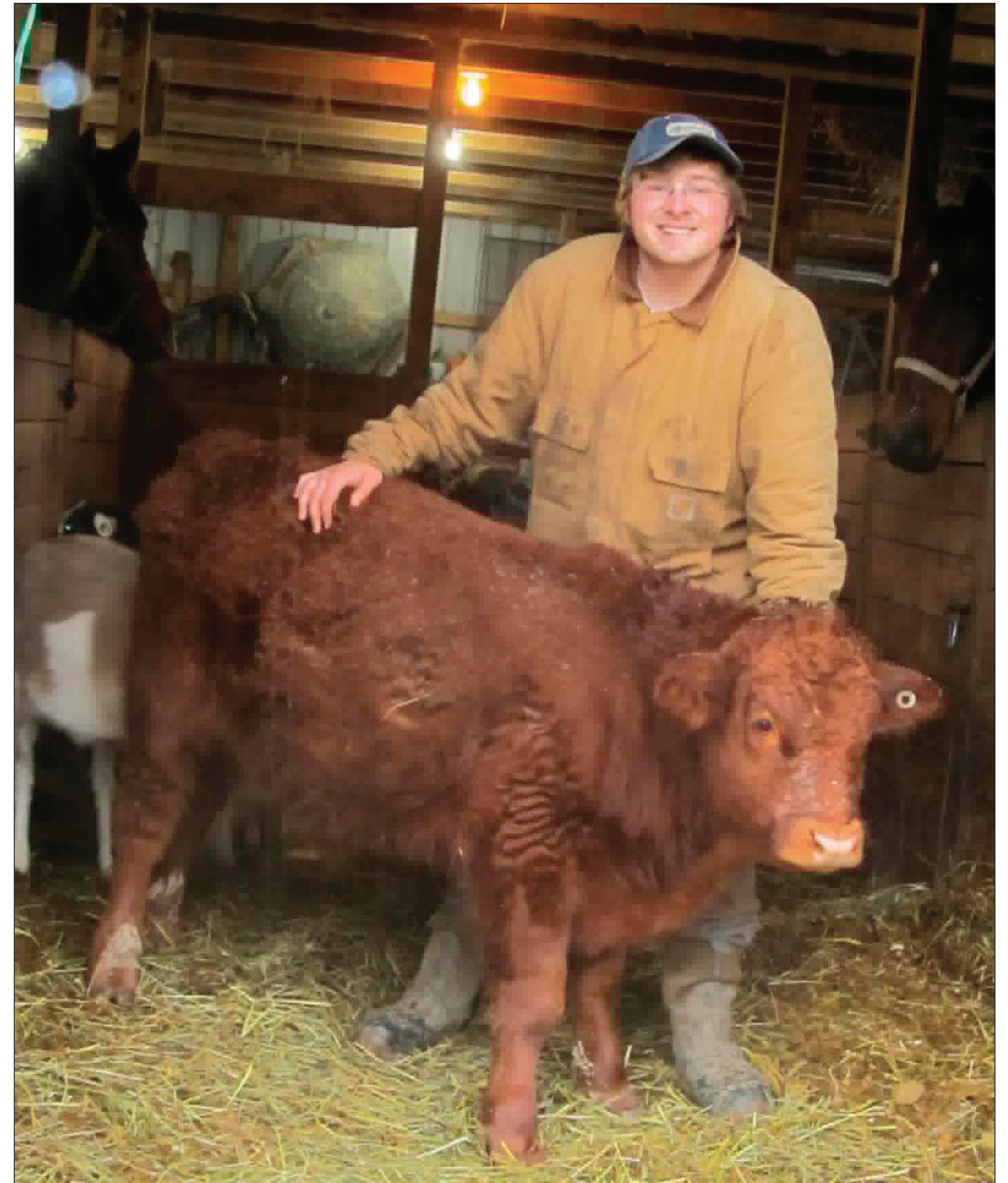
Ben Klopchin lives near the Catskill Mountains of New York where he grew up. There is no history of draft animal use in his family, although he showed goats in 4-H, and his mom took in rescue horses. Ben has a passion for history and a strong interest in antique garden tractors and hit-and-miss engines. Those interests paved the way for oxen when the opportunity came along.

Ben's cousin worked at Full Moon Farm in New Paltz, N.Y., where they raise South Devon beef cattle. In May of 2019, a first calf heifer had twins, and she rejected the second calf, which was Tony. The farm didn't have time for a bottle calf, so Ben was contacted and Tony entered his life. Ben raised Tony on goat milk, and even with his rough start he's grown into a strong and healthy ox.

Without a family history with draft animals or a local mentor, Ben is self-taught. He learned by watching



Ben raised Tony on goat milk. Here Tony is nursing from a nanny on his family's farm.



Ben and a Tony, his young South Devon steer.



Tony is put to a 1930s-era farm wagon.

YouTube videos about oxen put out by Tiller's International and reading articles on the internet. Ben met a fellow teamster at a New York fair named D. J. Clary, who recommended Clark Bending to buy yokes and bows. He uses a britchen with his single yoke made by a local harness maker. Ben said most of his learning has been done by trial and error.

He started training Tony at a year and a half old. With future oxen he would train them younger starting between 7 months and a year. Tony is the only cow on the farm, although he does have horse and goat companions. Ben has spent so much time with him working on basic commands they have developed a strong bond.

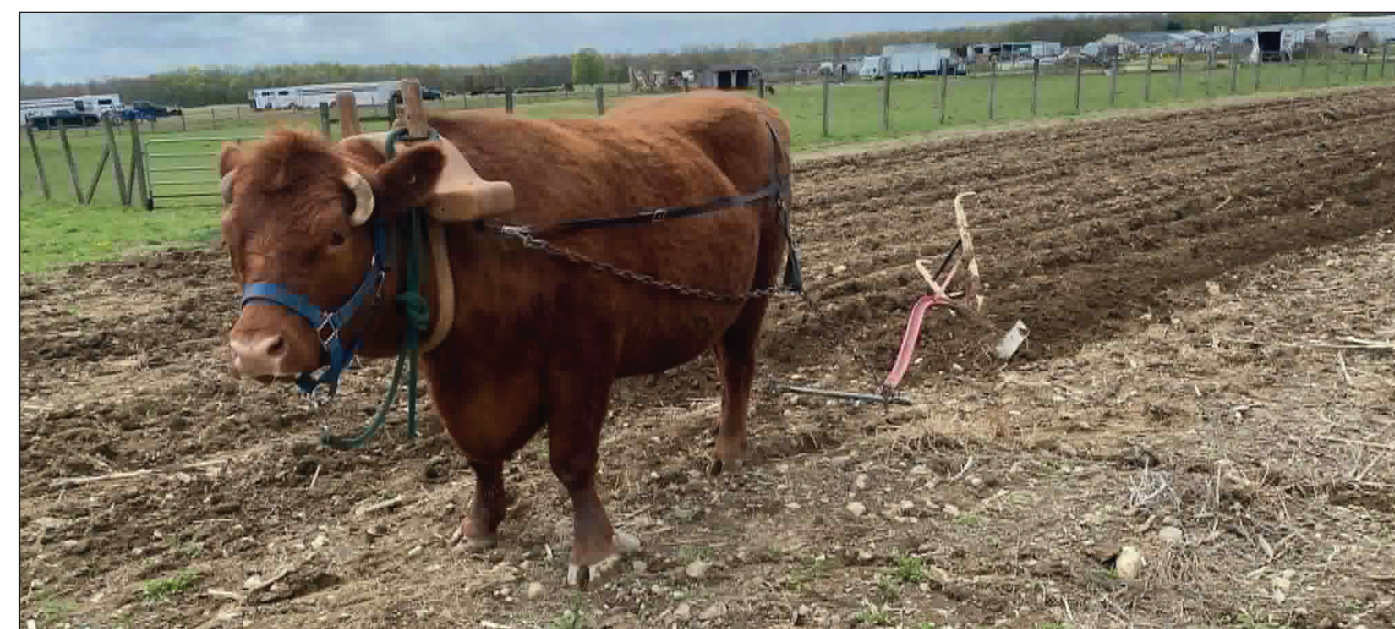
Tony does a little bit of everything on Ben's property. They plowed the garden with a walking

plow, a difficult task for one animal. Ben and Tony use a stone boat to haul stone from the garden, and they move firewood year-round. Tony also pulls a 1930s-era wagon with the original rubber tires. The wagon was found completely preserved in a local barn and accompanies them to events like the Deposit (N.Y.) Lumberjack Festival and the Ulster County Fair. Ben often exhibits his steam engines and Tony at the same events.

One of the reasons I wanted to talk with Ben is that Tony is clearly a beef breed, and I have never seen one actively working. Ben said there are some drawbacks, Tony is thick skinned, so it's hard to get a response to cues given with a goad; he is also stubborn. Ben also mentioned that he can't work as long as other breeds; the heat bothers heavier



Tony hauls bundles of small grain to a threshing machine.



Tony on a walking plow.

animals. He would like to train a pair of Milking Devons and drive them with lines.

I asked Ben what the future of oxen looks like for him and what advice he would give new teamsters. He would tell people just starting out to find a mentor and work with them in person and do as much as possible with your animals in that first year.

To see some of Ben's work with Tony and his impressive collection of antique engines, you can follow him on his YouTube channel: Upstate Iron. To meet them in person, visit the DAPNet Field Days October 2-4, in Shelburne, Vt. (www.draftanimalpower.org/field-days).

