

Forest friendly

Loggers use horses to take worst trees, leave best

By [Don Del Rosso](#) - Staff Writer

A roaring chainsaw echoes through the 10-acre stand of trees.

Sawdust flies from the base of a 20-foot-plus tall tree at Over the Grass Farm off Rockhill Mill Road between Marshall and Middleburg.

Chad Vogel cuts off the noisy machine.

He lifts the visor of his orange logger's helmet and takes a deep breath.

Hands pressed against the severed trunk, Mr. Vogel digs his boots into loose, rich soil, leans hard against the tree and tips it over.

Mr. Vogel, 25, fells three or four more similarly sized trees, clearing a path to a 3,000-pound log he'd cut the other day.

He pounds a hook-shaped spike called a "grab" into the huge log.

It takes five or six roundhouse swings of a "skip" hammer to get the job done.

A chain links the "grab" to the back of a log "arch" - a kind of workingman's chariot constructed of steel, wood, a cushioned seat for two and a couple of heavy-grade, black rubber tires.

Two, 1,600-pound "Suffolk Punch" horses, harnessed and ready to haul, await Mr. Vogel's instructions.

On foot and from the arch, the Sperryville man gently guides the English-bred horses with tugs of the reins and a series of commands.

"Whoa, back, whoa," Mr. Vogel quietly orders the horses, taking baby steps up the muddy trail. "Whoa, back, back."

The chain between the arch and the log goes slack.

Mr. Vogel hunches behind the arch and cinches the chain tight.

He climbs on the arch, issues a few quick commands and the horses take off, clip clopping along a well-worn trail to a staging area at the forest's edge.

He unloads the log at the top of the path. Later, he uses a large grapple mounted on a flatbed truck to stack the timber, which will be shipped to a mill.

Mr. Vogel and only about 21 others in Virginia belong to a rare breed of horse loggers, who practice what they call "restorative forestry."

The process involves removing the worst trees first, one at a time.

Staff Photo/Chris Moorhead

Chad Vogel and his team typically can harvest 20 to 25 trees per day - far fewer than loggers using heavy machinery.

They selectively take damaged or diseased trees, which permit the healthiest and, frequently youngest, trees to thrive and mature.

Adherents of "restorative forestry" sometimes call themselves "biological horsemen," says Mr. Vogel, an affable, compact man with curly brown hair and pail blue eyes.

"It's not about getting as much as you can but leaving the best behind" for future harvesting, he says during a break.

That approach allows the forest to continuously replenish itself with the hardiest of trees, which can be timbered five, 10 and 15 years later, applying the same harvesting criteria.

Ideally, he and fellow horse loggers want to restore woodland to "pre-Colonial conditions" before wanton and destructive timbering became the norm, says Jason Rutledge, who established Healing Harvest Forest Foundation.

Restorative forestry, also known as "forest gardening," contrasts sharply with the methods and results of the "industrial" timber companies, explains Mr. Rutledge.

Big timber companies "clear cut" sites, leaving virtually nothing behind.

Heavy equipment used to remove timber disfigures the landscape and permanently alters ecosystems, says Mr. Rutledge, whose foundation promotes and creates awareness of environmentally sensitive timbering practices.

Responsibly managed forests yield "top-dollar" timber for the landowner every 10 to 30 years, says Mr. Rutledge, who has helped log Over the Grass Farm.

D.L. Fleischmann and Richard Vietz, who own the 420-acre farm, routinely turned away timbering companies that offered to clear-cut their woodland.

The idea of that appalled Mrs. Fleischmann.

"No, no, I said," to them, she recalls. "You're not going to come in here with heavy equipment and leave a naked mess! I am a steward of the land; my father taught me to be a steward."

Mrs. Fleischmann grew up on a farm near Cincinnati, Ohio.

She bought Over the Grass Farm in 1979.

Previous owners hired timbering companies that "abused" the woodland, Mr. Rutledge says.

He believes it might be 15 years before the land can be properly timbered to his standards.

Big companies reforest the land they've stripped. But, it takes 75 years or more before such trees reach maturity, Mr. Rutledge says.

Mr. Vogel began timbering Over the Grass Farm about 15 months ago.

He owns four horses and borrows others, as needed.

On a good day, he and team of horses remove 20 to 25 logs, or up to 2,000 board feet of lumber.

An industrial timbering company removes 10 times that daily, Mr. Rutledge estimates.

Heavy equipment and a take-no-prisoners approach account for such volume, he says.

Horse loggers work their animals four to six hours a day, depending on the season.

A Suffolk Punch can put in 25 productive years.

"They're well-trained athletes," says Mr. Rutledge, a rugged 54-year-old with gray hair, piercing blue eyes and a tan ball cap pulled to his brow. "It's labor intensive, hands-on work. That's the price we pay for being gentle on the land."

Mr. Vogel expects to complete his work at Over the Grass Farm in a couple of weeks, ultimately timbering about 150 acres of forest.

"It's been a lot of uphill skidding here, which has been difficult," he says. "But it's been fairly good ground to work on."

Farm tree species include poplar, black oak, scarlet oak, white oak, chestnut and black gum.

Though defective in some ways, the timber removed gets used for hardwood floors, furniture, paneling, molding, board fencing and railroad ties, Mr. Rutledge says.

Mr. Vogel declines to discuss the details of his contract with Mrs. Fleischmann.

His price, like that of all horse loggers, differs according to the job. Access, topography and other variables dictate cost.

Loggers transport timber to mills, negotiate a sale price. They calculate their costs and then share the profit with the landowner.

But nobody makes a bundle from garden forestry, according to Mr. Vogel and Mr. Rutledge.

In fact, bartering thrives among horse loggers.

Mr. Vogel recently agreed to give a friend some firewood in exchange for fresh vegetables, he says.

"We're basically scraping by," says Mr. Rutledge, a 30-year veteran of horse logging. "The materials we're extracting is of low value. There's a lot of love in what we're doing."

Long hours. Physically demanding. Skimpy wages.

Hmmm.

Mr. Vogel acknowledges there are easier ways to make a living.

"I like being outdoors, the physical labor, being good and tired at the end of the day," he says of horse logging.

He pauses and smiles.

"I guess I could get that digging ditches. But there's a pride in the work and satisfaction in knowing I'm doing something good for the environment."

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