

A Traditional Log On

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Foundation promotes 'restorative forestry,' horse logging

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In his mind, Jason Rutledge sees the future of logging, and it's the horse.

Rutledge says horse logging can help a landowner make money and improve the forest at the same time.

"It's not a bad office we have, either," said Rutledge's son, Jagger, on a mild, blue-sky day in the woods last week in New Kent County.

Aboard a log-pulling buggy, Jagger called to his two Suffolk draft horses, Rudy and Wedge. The muscular, dark chestnut horses, with long-lashed, sleepy eyes, dragged away a 12-foot-long, 3,000-pound section of northern red oak like it was a chopstick.

Instead of the roar of machines, you could hear the clanking of the rig's chains, the crackle of hooves on leaves and even the distant drumming of a woodpecker.

The horses hauled the log to a dirt road, where a truck with a boom would load it for a trip to a mill.

Jason Rutledge, 53, of Floyd County watched as Jagger and two others carried out his vision.

Rutledge is president and co-founder of the Healing Harvest Forest Foundation. The group promotes what it calls "restorative forestry" and encourages people to take up horse logging as a trade.

Tree farms often are planted with pines and then clear-cut "with the mentality of a 35-year corn crop," Rutledge said.

Some loggers selectively cut the best trees. That practice, called "high grading," can create a poor forest.

Using horses, Rutledge works the opposite way. He cuts about 30 percent of a stand every 10 to 15 years. He cuts damaged or defective trees first, like weeding a garden. That leaves more light, water and nutrients to help the remaining trees grow.

"You just go out and take the worst trees first, and the forest will get better," Rutledge said.

In addition to working with the foundation, Rutledge owns the Environmentally Sensitive Logging and Lumber Co., and he breeds and sells Suffolk horses.

Rutledge said horses work perfectly with his vision of helping forests through logging. Horses can easily get to select trees, and their hooves do less damage than heavy equipment to the trunks and roots of the remaining trees, he said.

Taylor Moore, 56, owns E.T. Moore Manufacturing Inc., a Richmond company that salvages antique wood and cuts it into fine molding, paneling and other products. Moore knows and likes wood.

His family owns the 1,100-acre Marengo Plantation, a former tobacco farm in western New Kent. In September, Hurricane Isabel knocked down hundreds of

trees there like pickup sticks.

Preserved by the cold of winter, those trees can still be cut for timber.

Many loggers, to maximize profit, would want to clear-cut.

"The choice was, let it rot in the woods or have a commercial logging company, who wants to cut it all," Moore said. "I don't want to denude the forest."

Moore called in the cavalry - Rutledge and his horses.

Rutledge's method leaves a forest that looks pretty, harbors wildlife and adds to the land's value, Moore said.

On top of all that, Rutledge's method allows Moore to cut trees - and make money off the plantation's 600-acre forest - every 15 years or so.

"I'm a businessman," Moore said. "Economically, in the medium and long term, I make more money."

Rutledge strives to create a forest with trees of different ages, heights and species. Mimicking the effects of storms, he creates openings where new trees can grow.

A diverse forest provides different habitats for animals and is generally healthy, said Bryan D. Watts, director of the College of William and Mary's Center for Conservation Biology.

Watts said Rutledge's method seems to fill a niche, particularly on land where conservation is the main goal.

"One benefit of this approach is that you can preserve the unique quality of a conservation site but at the same time generate some revenue," Watts said.

"These two objectives don't have to be mutually exclusive."

>From a forestry perspective, Rutledge's approach appears sound, said Paul Howe, executive vice president of the Virginia Forestry Association, which represents the timber industry and timber owners.

But Rutledge's method might be best suited for the landowner who is "independently wealthy," Howe said.

"It all gets back to what the landowner wants. . . . From my perspective, the interest in it is almost more romantic than practical," he said.

Many conventional loggers are criticized unfairly, Howe said. Clear-cuts are repugnant to some people, but farmers cut their crops, too, "and folks don't seem to get alarmed about that."

A landowner can usually make money more quickly by clear-cutting, said Jim Willis, an extension forester in Southwest Virginia. But Rutledge's method will work if the owner is patient.

"Initially, in the early phases of this, you will not make much money," Willis said. "Now, if you are a fairly young person and you can afford to wait . . . yeah, that's a good way to go."

You don't need horses, however, to manage a forest that way, he said. You also can do it with equipment such as small bulldozers.

"A good horse logger is good. But a bad horse logger can screw up things just as bad" as one with heavy equipment, Willis said. "It's just that they don't do it as fast."

Rutledge learned about working with animals from his grandfather, a sharecropper who farmed with horses and mules in Mecklenburg County.

The selective logging of a decent stand of timber will produce about \$1,500 an acre, Rutledge said. He gets \$1,000 to \$1,200. The owner gets about \$300 to \$500.

Every job is different. At Marengo Plantation, Moore is giving Rutledge the wood and buying back some of the select timber.

In a good year, Rutledge said, he makes about \$25,000 after taxes and expenses. "This is not a get-rich-quick scheme."

About 20 people log with horses in Virginia, most of them west of Roanoke, Rutledge said. He estimated they cut about 1 million board feet of timber a year. That means they produce less than 0.1 percent of Virginia's timber.

"We are talking about establishing a niche option for people who want to maintain a natural-type forest," Rutledge said.

In the woods at Marengo, Jagger Rutledge, 23, worked his team while Ben Harris, 20, of Craig County worked a team of two Belgian draft horses. Anna Karr, 25, of Hot Springs, N.C., worked as an apprentice.

They cut trees with chain saws and hauled them out with the horses.

The horses love to pull, Harris said. "I think they would work so hard they would kill themselves if you let them."

A few Virginia loggers even use mules and oxen. In another of his visions, Jason Rutledge sees the day when out-of-work Asian elephants lift logs and pad the warm forests of the American Southeast.

For now, however, he is sticking with the likes of Rudy and Wedge.

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