

Biowoodsmen

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By Gabriella Boston

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Their ideas can be considered earthy-crunchy and intellectual, and yet their work is very physical, even macho. They promote cutting-edge ideas on forest management while using horses to log. They care about trees, and yet they use chain saws to cut them down.

Sounds like a contradiction in terms -- a lumberjack and environmentalist rolled into one? Not to horse logger Jason Rutledge.

"What we do restores the forest. We cut the sick trees and leave the healthy ones," Mr. Rutledge says while swatting flies off the backs of geldings Tong, 7, and Wedge, 12. The two Suffolk draft horses are the picture of calm.

He doesn't like the term "horse logger," though.

"We don't use 'logger' because that would indicate we're only interested in the timber, not the forest. ... We call ourselves 'biological woodsmen,' because we manage the woods. Selling the timber is what makes that possible," says Mr. Rutledge, founder of the Copper Hill, Va.-based Healing Harvest Forest Foundation, a nonprofit group that trains biological woodsmen.

"Restoring the forest," means that he and his three business partners, including his 25-year-old son, Jagger, cherry-pick trees to log, says Mr. Rutledge, a trim 55-year-old who on a gorgeous recent afternoon in the woods was wearing a T-shirt with the text, "If a man speaks in the forest where no

woman can hear, he is still wrong."

"We look for disease and overall growth patterns," says Justin Thomas La Mountain, one of the business partners.

"When you see epicormic growth, for example, it's not a good sign," says Mr. La Mountain, who recently earned a master's degree in forestry and environmental management from Duke University. "It means the tree is stressed," he adds while rearranging the harness on one of his mares. He uses two -- Birch, 5, and Cherry, 6, who are both pregnant -- to pull up to 8,000 pounds of logs at a time. "Oh, don't worry. These horses are the happiest when they work," he says.

Epicormic growth refers to when a tree sprouts leaves and branches well below the crown. This often occurs when trees are too crowded and they can't get sufficient sun, water and other nutrients. When Mr. Rutledge and his group see this type of growth pattern, they determine which tree in the general area is the healthiest and of the highest quality. Once that has been decided, others around it are cut to give the "chosen one" enough room to grow.

That all sounds well and good, but it can't be particularly cheap, right?

"We're not doing this for the money," says Bob Armstrong, who together with Sarah Palmer owns a 200-acre parcel of land in Warrenton where Mr. Rutledge and his group are working.

"We're after the health of the trees, and we feel comfortable that they have the best interest of the woods and us in mind," Mr. Armstrong says.

Ms. Palmer, whose late father, Meade Palmer, was the landscape architect behind the Lyndon Baines Johnson Memorial Grove, says Mr. Rutledge's ideas and methods are in line with her own thinking.

"They're very selective about what they cut, and the horses are much less invasive [than mechanized equipment]," she says. Mr. Rutledge and his group are "also sensitive to the needs of the wildlife," she says. "If they find a flying squirrel, for example, they won't disturb the habitat. That's what we want. We want this to be a sanctuary."

Mr. Rutledge estimates that landowners in general could make up to four times as much money if they were to clear-cut using conventional mechanized equipment.

"But then they'd live next to a desert," he adds.

Long-term, horse logging makes sense both ecologically and economically, he says.

"You get a little income every 10 years, and you have beautiful woods," he says. "In other words, you can have your cake and eat it, too."

Terry Lasher, area forester in Fauquier County for the Virginia Department of Forestry, agrees. "If you clear-cut, you won't be able to have another final harvest for 35 years, and that's with pine trees," Mr. Lasher says. "With hardwoods, it will take at least 60 years until they are mature enough to cut."

As it stands, Mr. Rutledge and his group sell on average about \$2,400 worth of logs a week and split the money 70-30 with the landowners. This means Mr. Armstrong and Ms. Palmer receive about \$700 and Mr. Rutledge and his partners split the rest.

"It's not a lot of money," Mr. La Mountain says. "I might make \$20,000 this year.

"But to me this is the endpoint for an environmentalist who is interested in forestry. It's the only way to preserve the ecology," he says.

So, horse logging clearly is not for the make-a-buck-quick demographic.

"This is not a high-production activity," Mr. Lasher says. "In general, it's for landowners with smaller -- 10-acre to 15-acre -- tracts of land. ... A big, mechanized operator can't afford to do 15 acres of land," he says.

The start-up cost for a conventional mechanized operator is more than \$1 million; for a horse logger, it's about \$25,000, says Mr. Rutledge, lighting an American Spirit cigarette.

Another aspect of landownership that can end up being beneficial to Mr. Rutledge's business is what's referred to as "fragmentation" of land tracts.

"The ownership acreages have drastically dropped in the last few decades," says Bob Tjaden, a former forester and current assistant director of agriculture and natural resources programs at the Maryland Cooperative Extension at the University of Maryland at College Park. "This means that bigger tracts are being fragmented, divided into smaller tracts."

An example of a typical land fragmentation would be if an aging landowner with 200 acres decides to give the land to five heirs, creating five 40-acre tracts.

Forty acres is perfect for a horse logger but less desirable for a large, mechanized operator, he says. "But the horse loggers don't own that market," Mr. Tjaden says. "Smaller mechanized operators are another alternative."

He adds that with the technological advances of the past 10 to 15 years, the conventional mechanized operators also have become more environmentally friendly because of improvements such as wider tires that don't compact the soil as much as earlier ones.

One of the criticisms of large-scale, mechanized equipment traditionally has been that it compacts the soil, making it more difficult for plants to regenerate. It also can create flooding problems because rainwater will run off the compacted soil rather than being absorbed, Mr. Tjaden says.

Mr. La Mountain, by contrast, is so careful not to upset the soil that he rolls the log onto its smoothest side before hooking it up to the chain that hitches to the doubletree. The doubletree, in turn, connects to the log arch, which is the contraption between the log and the horse where the operator sits.

"You do all you can not to disturb the soil," he says.

This type of attention to nature is becoming more and more appealing to landowners, Mr. Lasher says.

"I think a lot of people are interested in the lower impact and in the aesthetically pleasing forest," he says. "From what I've seen in the last couple of years, the demand is really growing for it. But unfortunately, not that many people are doing it."

Mr. Rutledge says he's trying to change that. He has trained more than two dozen horse loggers through the Healthy Harvest Forest Foundation. He pays for the training through donations, however,

and he hasn't received any this year, so he won't be able to train future woodsmen in safety, horsemanship and all aspects of forest management. Nationally, he estimates there are about 5,000 horse loggers, maybe more.

"But it's very difficult to estimate because some people do it full time, some do it for their neighbors," he says.

Safety is one of the most important -- vital, in fact -- areas of training, he says.

Case in point: While in the woods on a recent afternoon, Mr. La Mountain felled a tree, forgetting to alert those around him. A few seconds after the tree came thundering down, Mr. Rutledge teased his colleague and former apprentice by shouting "Timber." He then added, in a conversational tone, "This is why we make sure that we work about 300 feet apart. ... The tallest trees are 150 feet, so that gives us a good margin."

It should be noted that when the gut-stirring roar occurs, the horses, which can weigh upward of 2,000 pounds each and drink about 15 gallons of water on a hot day, don't move as much as the tip of an ear.

"Great horses are made from the day they come out," says Jagger Rutledge, who stayed at the family farm, Ridgewind, in Copper Hill for the birth of a colt a few weeks ago. "We train them; we bond with them. ... We're one of them."

"That's why our horses are so exceptional," he says.

The younger Mr. Rutledge -- who also dreams of becoming a rock star -- says his father's work is an inspiration: the Copper Hill farm he built, the horses he trains and the restorative forestry he practices.

"I'm proud of him, and I'm thankful for having inherited all this culture, of being a steward of the land and a horseman," he says. "I hope, if I have kids one day, I'll pass on his legacy."

Must be music to any father's ears on Father's Day.