

Pure Horse Power

Date: 11/13/00

Author: Frank Tursi Well known North Carolina Newspaper Writer, tries to help us find a furniture manufacturer with vision

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Woodsman hopes to find niche, profit in his gentler way of clearing and sustaining forests

By Frank Tursi

JOURNAL REPORTER

BENT MOUNTAIN, Va. -- Some people get the wrong idea.

They're fooled by the horses and all this greenspeak about "sustainable forestry," "whole-forest management" and such. They get to thinking that Jason Rutledge is simply some sappy, sentimentalist tree-hugger.

"Yeah, I hug trees," Rutledge said with a grin, holding his arms in front of him in the form of circle as if embracing a mighty oak. "I hug them to see how many board feet I might get out of them."

Standing there, deep in the woods with a scarred Stihl chain saw propped against his shoulder like his trusty rifle, Rutledge looks like a logger.

That would be another misconception. "We're biological woodsmen. We're not loggers," he said.

Woodsmen, according to Rutledge, are loggers with a conscience. Those other guys -- commercial loggers, Rutledge calls them -- invade the forest like an army, scarring it with roads for their trucks and other mechanical equipment.

They remove only the best, most-valuable trees, or worse, strip the forest clean. Decades of clear-cutting and "high-grading," Rutledge says, have left the forests of the Southern Appalachians a sorry mess of trash oaks and pines.

By comparison, Rutledge has a gentle touch. He doesn't own a fleet of trucks and has no need for miles of roads through the woods to get the trees out.

For that, he relies on Wedge and Skidder and others of their kind. The two chestnut draft horses stand nearby in the woods on a mountain outside this small community south of Roanoke. Tethered to their skid, they were peacefully munching on pine needles, their breath coming in torrents of white steam in the cold morning air.

The horses are what people see. They are what put such horse loggers as Rutledge on the front page of the morning newspaper or in a TV special on A&E. The publicity is fine, but it spawns yet another misconception -- that Rutledge is merely a nostalgic throwback to the past, one of those practitioners of "old-timey" ways like the fellow who churns butter at the county fair.

"If I'm an anachronism and we're out of touch with the times, it's because we're in the future," Rutledge said. "We're about modern horse logging, not historical. We're about improving the forest. What we leave is much more important to the future than what we take."

It goes way beyond the horses. Rutledge is among the leaders of a growing movement in forestry that attempts to give landowners an alternative to clear-cutting, high-grading, road-building and other logging practices that critics say degrade the forests, pollute streams and harm wildlife. Rutledge and his son, Jagger, own the Environmentally Sensitive Logging and Lumber Co. in Copper Hill, just a few miles down U.S. 221. He founded the Healing Harvest Forest Foundation, a nonprofit group that educates landowners on benefit of less-intensive logging methods, trains horse loggers and attempts to find markets for their trees.

The concept is more like gardening than logging, Rutledge said. The forests are pruned of their worst trees first -- those that are diseased, damaged by fire or weather, or are crowding more desirable species. Each is selected, marked and then carefully felled to avoid damaging adjacent trees.

"That's why we call what we do restorative forestry," Rutledge said. "If you take the worst trees first, you end up mimicking a virgin forest."

This 80-acre tract is typical of the type of forest Rutledge usually logs. Much of it was once farmed, and the abandoned pastures slowly reverted naturally to woodland. Like a forest that had once been clear-cut or sheared of its best trees, the tract was dominated by scarlet oak and other less desirable species that were crowding out the better trees.

"Like that poplar," Rutledge said, pointing to a tree that was growing arrow straight toward the sky. "Most loggers would take that tree because it's worth something. But that tree is still growing 4 percent a year. What else do you know will give you a 4 percent return a year just sitting there?"

By removing the scarlet oaks that grew around it, Rutledge hopes to give the poplar and its seedlings room to grow. When he comes back in 15 years, the scarlet oaks will be replaced by a stand of more valuable poplars.

Horse logging isn't for landowners who want to make a quick buck, Rutledge said. He will remove only about 30 percent of the trees from the tract. Some will be used by the landowner for a house that he's building. Others will be turned into flooring and sold. The owner will make about \$500 an acre. He could net five times that much if he had hired a commercial logger, Rutledge said.

"It would end up being clear-cut," he said. "He'll have a better forest when we're done."

A clear-cut forest would take decades to naturally regenerate trees large enough to be logged. With horse logging, the owner can expect this tract to generate income every 10 to 30 years, Rutledge said.

Wedge and Skidder were listening to Rutledge's voice, but seemed confused. They kept glancing over their shoulders between nibbles of white pine expecting to hear the familiar commands that tell them to get to work.

"They're not flashy or big, but they're born to work," Rutledge said as he and Jagger hooked a chain around a 50-foot oak log. "They are strictly utilitarian animals."

One of Great Britain's oldest breeds, these Suffolk Punch draft horses were made for this sort of thing. The farmers of England's Norfolk and Suffolk counties wanted a stout horse to plow their heavy clay soils. The Suffolks did the job admirably for centuries, but were nearly pushed to extinction after World War II by tractors and trucks.

Many of these hard-working animals ended up at the slaughterhouse. A few scattered breeders revived the breed in the 1960s, but there aren't many of these horses left in the world. Rutledge owns 12 of the 500 or so Suffolks in America.

Solidly built with thick hind legs, Wedge and Skidder had no trouble snatching the 5,000-pound log out of the woods and hauling it to a clearing with the others. They left in their

wake a few horse prints and the trail of the dragged log.

"No ruts from tire track, nothing that won't soon disappear," a satisfied Rutledge noted.

More satisfaction will come if Rutledge's foundation can attract more young people like 20-year-old Jagger to horse logging.

"If he were just some historical novelty, then he would just be an old man out in the woods bitching," Jagger said. "But if you have your son standing next to you, then you're a lot more influential."

Rutledge knows he would be more successful turning loggers into his biological woodsmen if they could be assured of making a decent living, which means having a steady market for their logs.

"I'm not saying that horse logging will supply all the cellulose of the world. We'll never be able to supply the pulpwood, for instance," Rutledge said. "But it's an important niche and one that can grow."

Wood from trees cut by horse loggers could be certified as having been harvested in an environmentally sensitive manner, Rutledge noted, and could, for instance, be used to make furniture that could then be bought by people who care about the country's forests.

"Let the consumers pay for the restoration of our forests with their purchases," Rutledge said.

That's the dream.

A sawmill in Floyd has agreed to mill the logs from the foundation's horse loggers, but Rutledge has yet to find a furniture-maker willing to turn the lumber into dining tables and bedroom suites.

Even if it all comes true, Rutledge doesn't see himself moving to a big house in Roanoke or buying a condo at Myrtle Beach.

"People ask me all the time why I do this," he said. "I was thinking about it the other night, and the best term I can come up with is the dignity dividend. Somehow you want to feel good about your life. There are a lot of people who want to feel good about what they do."

That's priceless. You're not going to get rich doing this."

Published: December 11, 2000