



Biological woodsman, Chad Vogel, maneuvers Rudy & Ridge in a crossover that would make a ballerina jealous.

# BIOLOGICAL WOODSMEN

## The Future of Forestry

by Lauren Giannini

(previously printed in *In & Around Horse Country*, June/July 2005)

**“W**e’re a grass roots movement of tree gardeners and keepers of the forest, living in a highly technological world,” states Jason Rutledge, founder of the Healing Harvest Forest Foundation. “Yes, we’re loggers, but we’re different.”

They are also a minority. In Virginia, perhaps two dozen practice “silviculture,” as it’s called, to improve wooded tracts. Nationwide, there might be 1,500. Some earn degrees in forestry, others grow up in situations where they follow in ancestral footsteps and learn old-fashioned methods to work the land. Whatever their roots, their numbers grow at about the same rate that cleared land re-forests itself—very slowly.

“Part of our mission is educating people about what it takes to grow

a healthy forest,” says Rutledge. “Horses are vital to our method of logging. They’re part of our past and they definitely belong in our future. But there are many ways to support restorative forestry—you don’t have to cut down trees or drive a team of Suffolk Punches. After people learn to see trees in a whole new way, we’re hoping they realize that their best choice is restorative forestry.”

The basic concept—harvest the worst first so that more valuable, shade intolerant species have a chance to thrive—attracts men and women with strong connections to the land and trees. If they aren’t already horse people, they learn fast. Ditto: techniques that integrate sensitivity and eco-awareness from stump to landing, the point of major impact when

trees are felled. Tree gardening is more than a job. It’s a passion.

“That’s the challenge in the natural resource world—to grow forests as healthy as you can,” says Rutledge. “A lot depends on the biological health of its individual trees. Our method keeps the healthiest trees in the woods. We use horses, because they are most appropriate to our credo of ‘Do no harm.’”

Constant pounding of heavy equipment results in soil taking on the density of hardtop roads. Even using smooth-treaded bubble-tires impacts adversely on the earth.

“Horses apply only one foot at a time to the ground—this is called spot compaction,” he adds. “Horses are easier on the land, compared to con-

*continued on next page*

*Biological Woodsmen continued*

tinuous tracking caused by machinery. It's been scientifically proven."

The passage of a team of Suffolk Punch draft horses, favored for their laid-back temperaments and pulling power, created a narrow path reclaimed quickly by the indomitable forces of Mother Nature. No machine-made logging roads can make that claim; however, biological woodsmen with their old-fashioned horsepower can.

"I am so very happy with what they've done," declares Mrs. D. L. Fleischmann, who persevered for nine years to bring Healing Harvest Forest Foundation to The Plains. Last October, she got her wish. Chad Vogel relocated to Sperryville from upstate New York and began logging with horses at her Over The Grass Farm. The young woodsman had earned his degree in forestry and also graduated with high accolades from Rutledge's apprentice program.

"It was really worth the wait," adds Mrs. Fleischmann. "Jason and Chad take out the worst trees first, and they drop them very carefully so there's minimal damage. When they were all done, Jason used a small tree



"The logging arch is not only easier to operate in an overstocked, overcrowded forested condition," says Rutledge. "But it also makes the horses more powerful to be as close to the load as possible."

shaped like a 'Y' and smoothed out the paths to help the land regenerate more quickly. They put brush and branches in certain places to prevent run-off. Some people told me that it looks a little messy, but that's a forest!"

Restorative forestry blends modern technology with timeless tradi-

tions and, as Rutledge points out, using horses reduces the need for costly fossil fuels. Chainsaws don't use much, but the big machines do. Growing healthy woodland won't ever be found on the list of "how to get rich quick" schemes.

Immediate profits from clear-cutting mean your land won't see

## Biological Woodsmen's Week

Oct. 12-16, 2005



Horseloggers' Playday - Sun. Oct 16

Route 17  
Wildcat Mountain  
north of Warrenton  
and south of The  
Plains, Virginia

Visit actual restorative forestry activities on guided tours of the modern horselogging operations of the Healing Harvest Forest Foundation.

**Saturday morning, October 15 at noon** - Biological woodsmen teams and log archers will join the carriage parade, preceding the running of the International Gold Cup Horse Races at the Great Meadow Field Events Center on Route 17, The Plains, Virginia. Harvesting site tours throughout the day, follow the signs.

**Saturday evening at 7 p.m.** a panel discussion on "Restorative Forestry in the Northern Piedmont" will be held in the Federal Room at the Airlie House on Airlie Road in Warrenton, Virginia (limited space available so - RSVP: HHFF, 6029 Wildcat Mountain Rd., Warrenton, VA 20187). The panelists will be: **Wendell Berry, Jason Rutledge, Troy Firth,** and the Biological Woodsmen of the Healing Harvest Forestry Coalition. Contact Jason Rutledge for more information: 540-270-0587  
E-mail: rutledge@swva.net or hhff@blackhawk.net

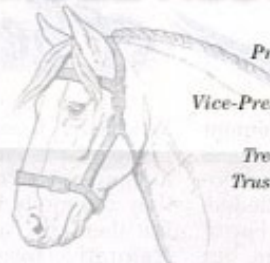
**Sunday, October 16, at 1:30 p.m.** Horselogger's Play Day at the Warrenton Horse Show Grounds, Warrenton, Virginia. Activities include timber felling demonstration and Biological Woodsmen's horsepulling contest and more.

for general information contact: **Jason Rutledge**  
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540-651-6355 H 540-270-0587 during BW Week rutledge@swva.net



Our Thanks to Chesapeake Bay Restoration Fund, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, Sacharuna Foundation, *The Draft Horse Journal* and many community volunteers.

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another harvest for 75 years—about the average life expectancy for most humans. The incentive to practice restorative forestry revolves around greater profit from the development of top value timber that can be harvested every 10 to 20 years. When valuable hardwoods don't compete for canopy space or suffer from overcrowding and exposure to disease, they increase their diameter two or three times faster than untouched stands. This adds greater value to the next harvest, making restorative forestry a win-win situation.

The positive aspects far outweigh the paltry objections. People move to the country all the time because they want some land with trees. With restorative forestry, you get to enjoy the beauty of your "living stock portfolio" and the benefits of sylvan sharecropping. Biological woodsmen do the work and tithe the landowner, whose percentage depends on the value of the timber and how difficult it was to remove.

***When valuable hardwoods don't compete for canopy space or suffer from overcrowding and exposure to disease, they increase their diameter two or three times faster than untouched stands.***

"We're taking the best of the past to make a better future," affirms Rutledge. "It's true that we're not getting rich doing what we do, but we're helping to perpetuate wooded land. The forest doesn't need us. Over a period of 500 years, undisturbed, the forest takes care of itself.

"But people don't leave the forest alone—we need the forest," he adds. "We use wood and all its by-products. The demand for forest products will not decline. Also, there's all this development just razing woodland. Every clear-cut you see along the roadside is a landscape billboard for what we can do."

Clear-cut land imposes side effects that range far beyond the 75 years necessary to cultivate new tracts of mature trees. Sedimentation impacts on everything from drainage to erosion, from fauna to flora. Without cover, most woodland creatures can't survive. Without trees, birds and other mammals lose their natural



Suffolk Punch, of course.

habitats, not to mention vital sources of food and shelter. Trees inspire analogies and lessons, poetry and art.

"Trees battle on top for canopy space—they'll tear each other's limbs off," says Rutledge. "Underground, they fuse and entwine their roots. They share nutrition and help each other fight infection and disease. They're 75 percent standing moisture, and the chemical composition of sap is similar to blood. Trees are very important to us."

Rutledge, of Copper Hill, Virginia, and his son Jagger have spent most of the spring and early summer in horse country to work with Chad Vogel. The tree gardeners are in great demand, and their ranks get a boost from apprentices who join the work party to learn hands-on. They spent several weeks on Mrs. Jacqueline Mars' farm addressing the swath of destruction left by a tornado last September. Steep hillsides provided practical lessons in dealing with treacherous going as they harvested the worst first. They planted some trees and left the site looking greatly improved—like a thriving forest.

"This work is everything I sought after I finished studying forestry in college," says Vogel. "I had the ideas in my head. What Jason has defined as restorative forestry is exactly what I thought it would be. The reasons why were already in me—now I've learned how to do it.

"One of the biggest technical lessons I've learned from Jason is handling the horses," he adds, "and how to best communicate with the horses and give them the confidence to do

the work in a relaxed manner even though it's physically demanding. It's important that the horses are happy. The key is for me to stay calm, not get anxious or tense, because horses pick that up. It's all learned by doing. You can't explain it; you just have to get out there and do it."

Earlier in the spring, with the trees barely in bud, it was easy to observe these skilled tree gardeners move with practiced grace through the woodland. They work with chainsaws and horses, skidding logs out to the edge of the gravel road where the knuckleboom and log truck are parked. Watching them work is better than reality television. Vogel focuses his attention on the tree about to be felled. His cuts with the chainsaw are quick and accurate. He positions himself and pushes the trunk just so: slowly, with a quiet whump, the tree lands without touching any others.

After tending to the upper limbs of the felled tree, Vogel maneuvers his team quietly and with great authority. The chains clank as slack is taken up and the team powers its load down the path. Aspects of the process resemble an al fresco pas de trois ballet.

Their work, for the most part, is so quiet. Their methods provide a radical departure from other worksites where the constant racket from heavy equipment shatters the peace and quiet indigenous to the countryside. Best of all, there's minimal damage to the land.

"What we do makes a big difference," affirms Rutledge. "The greatest

*continued on page 41*

*Biological Woodsmen continued*

impact of logging occurs on the trails and the place where the tree falls. We reclaim old trails and paths, we don't make new ones. Our methods do not contribute to non-sourcepoint pollution. There's even a movement by the EPA to regulate non-sourcepoint pollution by measuring the daily load limit of sedimentation."

Most of them don't look like scholars, but they speak with eloquence and passion about their favorite topic: preserving forests for posterity. They hark back to pioneers who traversed the new world with teams of oxen and covered wagons. They work and play in a world dominated by computers and complex corporations. Some are very old-fashioned; others tap into internet resources. They raise families. Many play musical instruments. Others produce furniture or woodcrafts. Whenever possible, tree gardeners gather to share their knowledge, to display their skills in logging and draft horse competitions, to show their solidarity.

The grass roots movement is gaining recognition. The Chesapeake Bay Restoration Fund, in 2004, awarded a grant to the Healing Harvest Foundation. Part of that money comes from the sale of Virginia's Chesapeake Bay license plates.

Healing Harvest sponsors apprenticeships and learning programs. They recognize the importance of young people in the future scheme of things, especially when it comes to conservation and environmental issues.

Paul Reily, 17, chose a week of horse logging for his senior internship in compliance with the Waldorf School System. "He knows how to use a chainsaw and he has chaps," says Rutledge. "I hope by the end of the week, he'll be able to drive a pair of horses."

What a great way to spend one week towards the end of your senior year in high school! Of course, Reily will tell others about his adventures, and eventually these "verbal seedlings" will sprout into more support for restorative forestry. It all started with one man's vision of what the world will be like if humans allow the whole depletion of one of our greatest natural resources.

"You can't be a woodsman without woods," says Rutledge. "You can't cut down all the trees. We're trying to do the right thing and make a living

doing what we love—growing healthier woodlands."

He tilts back his head and points up at intertwined branches just beginning to show bud. Then he places his hands gently around a young tree.

"We'll clear that one and that one—see the damage to the trunks where they're decaying—so this white oak will have a better chance at survival," he explains, heaping a protective pile of brush around its base. "Deer rub their antlers against trees and strip bark off them. They kill a lot of hardwoods."

"This work has high levels of human dignity," he adds. "You can feel good about what you're doing out here. Nobody can put a price on that."

He walks on through the woods to his team of Suffolk Punches. Even though Vogel and his team pass by, skidding out a log, they stand patiently, not tethered in any way, just hitched to the log arch that looks like a buggy or frontier chariot. The horses are all magnificent examples of this English breed of gentle giants.

Rutledge applies his attention to another "worst first" and fells it so that it, too, lands clear of other

trees. With a few words, the woodsman maneuvers his horses in a most impressive display of working dressage. He hooks the heavy chain around the log, attentive to every detail, and climbs on the log arch with its high seat. Standing there, lines in hand, he utters another quiet command and the Punches step forward with powerful strides down the barely visible path through the forest.


The nearby growl of the chainsaw goes quiet, and all that can be heard is the rustle of little woodland critters. A gentle breeze springs up from nowhere—or perhaps it's a sigh of relief from Mother Earth.

For more information about Healing Harvest Forest Foundation, call 540-651-6355 or e-mail: [rutledge@swva.net](mailto:rutledge@swva.net).


A fellow from Texas stopped into a Los Angeles phone booth to call Disneyland. The operator told him to deposit thirty-five cents. "Thirty-five cents!!!!" the man exclaimed. "Why, in Texas you can call hell and back for a dime." "Yes, sir," the operator answered, "but there it's a local call."


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