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GALLERY REFLECTION

AN ENDURING TECHNOLOGY: THE HORSE LOGGING TRADITION IN MAINE

“Horses, . . . are no more anti-technological than legs on humans.”

—The Draft Horse Journal, 1976¹

ON A cold morning in November I awoke to the sound of horses stirring in their stalls. I was in Unity, Maine, at the farm and headquarters of the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association (MOFGA). It rained hard the night before, and the morning showed signs of continued precipitation. Needless to say, I abandoned my tent for the loft of the horse barn. The next day the Low-Impact Forestry (LIF) wing of MOFGA was holding a workshop. Low-Impact forestry attempts to mitigate the negative effects of logging, while ensuring the long-term health and viability of the resource. An important part of low-impact logging is minimizing the impact on soils; in some instances, this is achieved through the use of draft animals instead of machines, which can decrease erosion and compaction on the forest floor.²

As a historian with more than a little reverence for folk traditions, I found the idea of horses working in the woods both quaint and romantic. My predictable reaction is revealing. Over the past century, decreasing numbers of Americans are directly engaged with the land for their livelihoods. Logging, fishing, ranching, and agriculture have moved from the realm of important occupations to forgotten folkways. Our collective reverence for these traditions obscures their historical reality, but actual practitioners view themselves as uniquely modern, not as artifacts of the past.

In fact, in the Maine woods the horse was always thoroughly modern. The typical beasts of burden for early settlers and loggers alike were oxen. Oxen were cheap and versatile, and they could survive on native forage, making them ideally suited for early lumbering operations that moved big pines short distances. The horse is faster, but it was also more



Loggers working at the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association in Unity Maine. This photo was taken in the winter of 2009 by Jonathan Lipkin.



Photo by Jonathan Lipkin 2009.



Throughout Maine's history draft horses were used to haul logs. By the end of the nineteenth century, large draft horses were commonly used in forest operations. Maine Folklife Center.



In the twentieth century, trucks replaced rivers as the primary conduits for moving wood. This image is from 1980 near Millinocket. Maine Historical Society.

expensive. The initial costs were higher, as were the harnesses and the feed. However, improved agricultural production increased the prevalence of horses in the woods. By the middle of the nineteenth century lumbering in Maine had become heavily capitalized and as accessible timber resources became more scarce, logging operations spread further from streams and rivers. As a result, speed and maneuverability became more important, making horses a better choice than oxen. By the 1870s, north woods loggers were using large draft breeds like Percherons and Clydesdales to haul logs.³

Horses continued to drag pine and spruce through the early twentieth century. However, increasing industrialization and investment led to larger mechanized devices: the log-hauler; the skidder; the feller buncher. These technological transitions were gradual and were not uniform across all geographic locations. However, as the twentieth century progressed, the machinery that accompanied woods workers increased in sheer volume and in sophistication.

Throughout much of the twentieth-century, the prevailing attitude in both forestry and agriculture was that in order to remain competitive, large investments in equipment were necessary. The tools of most woods

operations are large, heavy, and extremely expensive, sometimes costing nearly a half million dollars. The high costs of doing business can have a disastrous affect on both workers and the environment.⁴ Most industrial-scale logging operations in Maine suffer from a severe lack of long-term planning and oversight. This is caused primarily by the pressures of a competitive and global economic system that is based on quarterly profits, not longevity and stability. Recently this trend has only accelerated as the deliberate thirty or forty year growing cycle for timber is subsumed by the short-term goals of timber investment management organizations and real estate investment trusts. The dynamic nature of global markets often has detrimental effects on the environment.⁵

In both southern and northern Maine, the forest is under intense stress. Along river corridors in southern Maine suburban development is converting more and more acres of productive forests and farms into houses.⁶ In northern Maine, Plum Creek's proposed resort development on Moosehead Lake has galvanized opposition from national environmental organizations. It has also raised serious questions about the long-term health of the industrial-scale forest products industry.

During a climate of increased stress and demands on Maine's forests, a small number of loggers and farmers are returning to horse power. In certain instances, particularly on small woodlots, a horse and a teamster can prove more profitable than heavily mechanized operations.⁷ But it is a clear fallacy to call them traditional. Horse loggers are not living in the past, but are individuals negotiating and balancing market forces and personal values. The chainsaw, the forwarder, the peavey, and even the horse are technological implements in their trade. In choosing an alternate path, these loggers avoid the high financial costs of mechanization and the often detrimental consequences for the land.

The forest is an essential part of Maine's cultural identity. Industrial scale technology and continued suburbanization are serious threats to healthy, productive forests. Those pursuing a different model for logging operations should not be labeled traditional or folksy, but admired as prudent and progressive. Their example serves as a reminder that appropriately scaled technology can be utilized in a world lured to the high tech and industrial.

NOTES

1. Taken from Wendell Berry, *Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1978), 203.

2. A logger with a team of horses does not necessarily mean minimal impact to the soil. When loggers use both skidders and horses, the conditions on the ground and the experience of the operator are essential factors. A seasoned skidder operator can cause less impact than an untrained teamster and vice-versa.
3. Richard W. Judd, Aroostook: *A Century of Logging in Northern Maine* (Orono: University of Maine Press, 1989), 117.
4. See David Dobbs and Richard Ober, *The Northern Forest* (White River Junction: Chelsea Green, 1999). Chapter 8 specifically addresses the high costs of operating in today's logging industry.
5. For a thorough critique of industrial logging in Maine, see Mitch Lansky, *Beyond the Beauty Strip: Saving What's Left of Our Forests* (Camden East: Old Bridge Press, 1993).
6. See U.S. Forest Service, "Forests on the Edge," Pacific Northwest Research Station, May 2005; and John Hagan, Lloyd Irland, and Andrew Whitman, "Changing Timberland Ownership in the Northern Forest and Implications for Biodiversity," Manomet Center for Conservation Sciences, 2005.
7. See Sharon Kiley Mack, "Traditional Logging Considered a Cut Above the Rest," *Bangor Daily News*, February 15, 2009.