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## The Last Horse Team in the Pemi: Fulfilling Federal Wilderness Policy

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# The Last Horse Team in the Pemi

*Fulfilling federal Wilderness policy, timber  
removal the old-fashioned way*

**Mike Foster**



*Editor's note: This story is about a project to remove timber left after the White Mountain National Forest, following federal Wilderness policy, dismantled the remains of a large footbridge that had crossed Black Brook on the former Wilderness Trail, in the Pemigewasset Wilderness. The removal of it and a suspension bridge near the junction of the Cedar Brook Trail and Wilderness Trail, both removed in 2009, created controversy among hikers and skiers who'd used these bridges to form a loop route. The U.S. Forest Service waited three years for the funding to take in the horse teams because officials wanted to avoid using all-terrain vehicles—something also prohibited in Wilderness areas.*

IT'S HALF PAST 5 IN THE MORNING ON A LONELY STATE HIGHWAY in Wentworth, New Hampshire. The temperature is hovering just above zero and the road is white with salt. An empty log truck appears in the predawn light. Its big wheels whine as we pass each other. The stakes of the empty trailer reach up into the gray sky and rattle back and forth as the truck speeds along. I watch in my rearview as the taillights disappear into the rapidly fading darkness. Its driver is off to drag things out of the woods, and so am I.

When I get to Lincoln Woods, I see them for the first time. There are some big Ford trucks parked by the enclosure where the Dumpsters usually stand. Today, instead of the usual pair of Dumpsters I see two pair of draft horses happily munching hay. If you didn't know better you might think they had built the little pen just for the animals. We are, after all, in the White Mountain National Forest, the "land of many uses."

We meet in the little log cabin, the teamsters, Forest Service personnel, and me. Most of the teamsters don't quite understand this thing called Wilderness, and most of the rangers don't know much about draft animals. While I'm waiting, I take a stone out of my red wool pants, spit on it, and touch up the edges on my ax. I get a few odd looks from both sides.

No one really knows how or if all the pieces will fit together, but they are all there. We go over the plan for the project. Everyone knows the objective. Five miles back from the road, 15,000 pounds of creosote-soaked timber and

*Specialty hauling, federal Wilderness style: A horse team hauls out pieces of a dismantled bridge from the Pemigewasset Wilderness.* MIKE FOSTER

steel I-beams sit. Two of those miles lie past the Wilderness boundary. There is the rub: it's Wilderness with a capital W, federally designated Wilderness, which means a lot of things to a lot of people, but to us today, it means no motors.

We are in the same place where, 100 years ago, J.E. Henry and his sons stripped most of what is now the Pemigewasset Wilderness bare without benefit of the internal combustion engine. Sure they used steam power, but steam engines were the last step in the process. By the time the logs rolled onto the railcars, the hard part was over. The horses did the real work. Each winter hundreds of men and animals worked together in the snow to get those logs off the mountains. It was a symphony composed in spruce wood, peaveys, and manure. Anyone can cut a tree down. The trick is moving that tree through ten or twenty miles of rugged godforsaken wilderness and making a profit doing it. The hills were alive with the spectacle, but now there are only the rapidly fading scars in the mountainsides. Most of them can only be seen with a squinted eye and an active imagination.

Today, the past will be revived, if only for a day or two, because of what most people would see as a quirk in federal law. The teamsters have entered into a cost-sharing agreement with the Forest Service for the project. In a time of shrinking budgets, the Forest Service can only pay them just enough so they won't lose their shirts. It's a fraction of what they usually get for a specialty logging job. But they aren't here for the money. If it were about money for them, they would have gone out and financed a skidder like everyone else. Their payoff is practicing their ancient craft in spectacular fashion. For my part, I get to see something I have imagined many times but never thought I would see; a horse team at work in the Pemi.

So we stand in the dirty parking lot and discuss safety procedures and seating arrangements for the ride in. We wait, a lot. The whole morning is an inexplicable nexus between government bureaucracy and the most exciting thing I've ever done. Cars zoom by on the highway while we wait. The horses look around, indifferent. Finally, we begin our ride in on a pack of snowmobiles and a six-wheeled ATV. We gave the horses a head start, pulling sleds loaded down with people and equipment.

Within a mile, we catch up and pass them on our shiny machines. The horses cast a disinterested glare on us. They seem to say to us "wait 'til you have to play by our rules, then you'll see."

We stop and unpack at the Franconia Brook Bridge. Machines can go no further. There is a chain saw in the six-wheeler, but motorized implements

such as that are forbidden from here on in, so the saw stays behind. I make sure to grab my ax. The horses cross over the bridge and into the Wilderness one by one. The teamsters call their rough, homemade sleds “scoots.” We take the scoots apart and carry them over the river to reassemble on the other side. On the north side of the brook and over the Wilderness boundary, the teams are hooked up. The teamster starts the horses moving, and I have to scurry after the scoot to catch a ride. I’m not as graceful as I had imagined myself being. I manage to secure an uneasy spot and fixate on the giant hooves, kicking up snow in front of me. Seconds later, the team stops anyway.

There is a tree growing in the trail, and the teamsters want it gone. They call for “the ax guy” and I come up to take a look. It’s a frozen sugar maple not quite a foot in diameter, just about the hardest wood I can think of. The teamster is a scruffy man who cuts trees for a living. He asks how long it would take to fell the thing and I say a couple of minutes. The ax comes out. I warm one of the edges with the palms of my hand so the steel won’t shatter in the cold. It looks as if I am praying with a double-bit ax pressed between my hands. I’m a bit concerned because the teamster doesn’t walk the horses back an inch as I get ready to chop. If the tree went over backwards, it would be on top of them and the fifteen or so onlookers gathered there. I never had such an audience for a chop. But I check the tree using the ax as a plumb and find it has a pretty good lean on it, going away from the crowd. The rough old teamster already knows that better than I do, so I don’t say a word and set to work. I hack out a face cut<sup>1</sup> and check my aim by sticking my ax head in it; the handle of the ax then serves to point the direction the cut is aimed. I walk around to the back of the tree and the teamster looks at me again. “You’re going to do a back-cut,” he says in an interested tone. “Yea,” I say. He probably had expected me to hack the tree over and let it fall where it may. I don’t think it had occurred to him that anyone knew how to fell a tree with an ax anymore.

I finish the cut with my ancient tool—as it was intended to be done, as it had been done for centuries before even the hand-powered crosscut saw was invented. These days, the ax is a tool of bargain hardware stores, used mainly by campers gathering firewood after they have had too much to drink. The roar of the chain saw drowned out the ringing of the ax a long time ago, but

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<sup>1</sup> A face cut is the first cut made when felling a tree. It is made on the side of the trunk that the tree is expected to fall toward and provides relief to keep the tree from binding against its stump as it falls.

today my ax sings against maple as I swing it the way my great-grandfather had done. The tree falls with a crash, and the teamster keeps his horses steady, just as his great-grandfather before him. Someone had timed my cut and calls it out. Under five minutes. "Not bad, but not real good either," I think to myself. It would have been a five-minute walk to get the chain saw. No one had suggested it. Now I am sweating and breathing hard in the frigid morning air.

Honestly, I had not envisioned this project going well, though I hoped it would. Did the teamsters really understand how heavy the steel was going to be? Or how long and rough the haul was? Sixteen 800- or 900-pound pieces of steel lay out there, plus the timbers. Maybe they could struggle to get one at a time moved over that distance? I figured in two days they might get half the pile if things went well. And the weather was calling for rain the next day. Welcome to New Hampshire.

We arrive at the pile and hack a turnaround for the teams just above where Black Brook and the East Branch come together. There isn't too much work involved because it happened to be in an open piece of woods. The lack of trees is not a coincidence. The turnaround is clear because 80 years ago there was a logging camp on it, Camp 16 on the East Branch and Lincoln Line. They burnt the camp when they were finished with it, long before I was born, but I have seen a photo of the place. The turnaround we laid out went in through the side of the bunkhouse and came out around about the front door of the old cook's shack. The corner of a rusty old bed frame stuck up through snow to confirm it.

The teamster says there is an 8-inch thick apple tree in the way that needs to go. I take a look. It is one of just a half-dozen or so apple trees that I have seen in the White Mountains. They only seem to grow at old logging camps, and with good reason. One-hundred years ago, some logger might have dropped an apple core on the ground, or else maybe a horse dropped some seeds along with a ready supply of fertilizer. Either way, the old camp left a clearing when it burnt and made a decent spot for an apple tree to spring up in an environment where it never should have been able to grow in the first place; a frail Englishman alone in the wilderness, hulking natives now bearing down on him and drowning out his light. I suggest that an adjacent fir tree might be better. He might think I'm a fool for being sentimental about the apple tree, so I say it's because the other tree would be easier to cut, fir being about the consistency of butter. Probably a billion fir trees grow in the Pemi anyway. The little Englishman is saved.

Finally, the team backs in next to the pile of steel, and we start to load. We use peaveys, pry bars, and bare hands to wrestle the steel I-beams onto the scoot. Five people working together can barely manage one piece. We load four. The teamster skeptically eyes the load. He thinks for a moment and says he could probably take five. He figures for a bit longer and says no, that would make an odd load at the end. Once we bind it all down, the teamster gives the signal and the team takes off. It seems to me they move as easily now as they had when the scoot was empty. They are pulling enough weight to overload three full-size pickup trucks.

The team is spectacular as it trots into the distance, past the old logging camp. I think maybe the ghosts of the past have come down off the mountainside to see them, or else rose up out of the rocky soil to have a look. Vaporous figures line the old rail bed, standing silently in the snow-filled woods to see this precious thing pass one more time; the last horse team in the Pemi.

I REMEMBER AN OLD MAN WHO TOLD ME ONCE, “BACK IN THE ’60S we would drive trucks way up in there on those old railroad beds. But the government didn’t maintain the roads and nowadays you can’t do that anymore.” I think there was a time, right around when the trees started to fall in Lincoln, that something important changed. Maybe it was earlier, or later, I can’t say for sure. But the way I see it, for its entire existence, the human race had fought hard to keep from being swallowed up by wilderness. Somewhere along the line, all that changed. The balance tipped. We started winning that fight, dominating it, even.

They cut all the trees almost up to 4,000 feet in a lot of places around here, and turned a profit doing it. Mount Washington is higher than 6,000 feet, and for a very long time, the Abenaki looked up at its summit and thought certainly their gods must reside there. They did not dare climb into the realm of the gods. As things progressed, we came along and built a railroad up there and a toll road too. Nowadays, you can buy a hot dog on the summit if you’re so inclined, and there are public restrooms for your convenience.

So let’s be clear. Wilderness is not rugged or unconquered. It is beaten, defeated, and weak. It is the last survivor of a war that was lost long ago. It is an illusion that we make for ourselves. We make it in our own minds and our own actions. Given permission, there are a number of logging firms around here that could set out with dozers, skidders, and mechanical harvesters and be extracting saw logs from the heart of the Pemi within a few weeks.



If the state were so inclined, it could probably have a highway built from Lincoln up over Mount Garfield and into Bretton Woods within a year or two. The eastern slopes of the Franconia Range would make a fine spot for a ski resort, with lovely slope-side condos in the Lincoln Brook Valley, starting at \$500,000 apiece, all reasonably achievable within five years. Doubtless, all of this would boost the local economy.

But we are stuck with Wilderness. It is arbitrary, flawed, inconvenient, and majestic. It is the little apple tree all alone, being strangled out by things that are more efficient or better adapted to our needs. It is the ax and the horse team, things that were once and are no more. But we can pretend for a day or two. We can take a small piece of land and say we will not shape this place to our needs; we will let it shape us instead. We will leave this one place, this one delicate little place, unbound by log trucks, and salty state highways. And we will call it Wilderness.

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MIKE FOSTER managed backcountry campsites for the Appalachian Mountain Club and the Randolph Mountain Club for many seasons. He lives in Orford, New Hampshire.



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