

“GEE” AND “HAW’ GUIDED LOGGING HORSES AT WORK 10/31/95

I have long been an admirer of logging horses and the men who worked them.

Growing up in the 30s and 40s in a farming community, I gained a general knowledge of the farm horse. My first exposure to logging horses came about in 1950. It was on a Ranger School field trip to a logging job near Tupper Lake.

I witnessed that day a demonstration of teamwork between man and horse that I have never forgotten.

The crews consisted of two men and a horse. The men were French Canadians, who spoke little English, and a roan mare that understood French.

They were cutting spruce on 30+ degree slopes. Tools consisted of crosscut, bucksaw, ax and peavey. The horse wore a collar, tugs and a whiffletree to which was connected a short piece of choker chain. She wore no halter or reins and was directed by commands of “gee” and “haw” – gee for a turn to the right and haw to the left.

One man remained in the woods limbing the trees and hooking them one at a hitch to the horse. The horse made her way down to the landing adjacent to a truck road. The other man stayed on the landing, bucking the tree into four-foot lengths after unhooking the hitch. He would then place the harness over the horse’s rump and send her on her way back up the slope for another hitch.

All went well until one particularly large stem started picking up speed on the slope and began gaining on the mare’s heels.

Suddenly, the butt rolled in behind a stump and the horse was thrown headfirst on her side. As she struggled to gain her footing, the lumberjack hurried to her side, pouring out words of encouragement in French.

As soon as she heard him, she lay her head back on the ground and relaxed. The logger sent one of our group for a peavey which was used to roll the tree and relax the tension on the tugs. The horse was then gently coaxed, trembling in fright, to her feet.

After she had completely settled down, her master pretended to hook her back to the tree. On command, she bolted ahead obviously afraid of a repeat of the incident.

She was scolded with a sharp rebuke and after she had settled back down again, the process was repeated with the same results.

Finally, on the third try, she actually was hitched to the tree and moved off smoothly down the slope and to the landing.

The remarkable teamwork between teamster and horse becomes all the more remarkable when you realize both man and horse are in a temporary partnership. In most cases, they work together for only one season.

In many instances, the horses were better trained than their masters.

C.J. Strife was once heard to remark about a teamster who was having difficulty with a horse, "The horse was smarter than he was."

I gained a real measure of respect for both man and horse that day in 1950. I was to learn later that not all mishaps ended as well for man or beast.