

ONCE ESSENTIAL, TIRE CHAINS BECAME A THING OF THE PAST

February 4, 2003

Thanks to Jamie Carncross of Jamesville, I was given an idea for this column. It was right here in front of my nose all along, but I had to be reminded of it as a topic. It's the use of tire chains on motor vehicles for traction on icy or snow-covered roads.

The logging community and many farmers do not have to be made aware of the value of tire chains. They are a necessary accessory for both types of operations.

In years past, tire chains were considered essential for anyone who had to make scheduled road trips during winter in much of northern New York. They were as much a part of the motorist's stock of tools as the car jack. They still are included in my inventory of fundamental travel equipment.

I have driven four-wheel drive vehicles for much of my professional life. For the most part I got by without requiring chains. Since most of my winter travel dealt with slick ice-covered logging roads, I still relied on chains under certain conditions along with the four-wheel drive.

Most well traveled woods logging access roads soon become glare ice. If normal weather conditions don't make them that way, the heat generated from heavy loads of logs on the sets of dual wheels does. In fact, dual sets of chains are a necessary and standard accouterment on every winter logging vehicle. Many times at least one set of chains is required as well on the front wheels. Without at least one chain on one front tire it's impossible to steer the vehicle.

Drivers soon become skilled in the process of mounting tire chains. Once the main highway is reached they have to be removed and the process reversed on the return trip. With as many as two or three trips possible in a logger's long day, it can become very tedious.

I had some, but limited, use of chains until starting work for the State as a Ranger in 1958. I was issued a two-wheeled drive 1952 Chevy pickup and soon learned the value and necessity of a good set of chains. Like everything else, there is a difference in tire chains. Those with cross-welded ice grips are much better and worth the added cost.

Rangers for years were issued two-wheeled drive vehicles. The budget director failed to see the necessity for anything else. His reason was the same as for those believing the State shouldn't furnish snowshoes: "When you start fighting fires in the winter they will be furnished."

One old-timer continually badgered the Superintendent of Fire Control about the snowshoes. When the Super ran into him at a meeting he asked the old-timer if he every got the snowshoes. The old-timer chided him by replying that he did, indeed, but the Super just didn't see the tracks.

I drove several two-wheel drive trucks in my personal forestry consulting work. An \$85 set of good chains was every bit as effective as the added expense and maintenance cost of a 4 x 4. Many times (winter and summer) the chains are necessary on the 4 x 4s.

A set of dual truck chains for a tandem or trailer truck will run around \$200. To equip an average log skidder with chains on all four tires will run between \$1,600 and \$2,000.

My present truck is the first four-wheel drive truck I have every owned. My good wife insisted I buy it. She thought I was too old to be lying on the ground throwing on tire chains. I am not, of course, but I bought the truck to humor her. I have not been sorry.

For the most part, chains are a thing of the past. All-wheel drive vehicles, studded tires and radial tires have eliminated their need. They still represent a positive effect under extreme conditions. Before rushing out and buying a set, however, one should be sure the vehicle has room between the wheel wells and tires to accept chains. Most modern vehicles do not.

My son learned at an early age about tire chains and how to mount them. Like most things mechanical, he soon became more proficient than the old mat at installing them. His experience stood him in good stead during his Army training. He and only one other soldier in the company knew anything about the use of chains. There called on to demonstrate mounting procedures to the rest of the company. The instructor was surprised that someone from New York knew how to use them.