



United States Department of Agriculture

Forest Service

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Hoosier NF Highlights

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Issue #105

March 17, 2016

Pioneer Skills and Tools Still Benefit Wilderness Management



By Vicki Gullang-Harris, Recreation Program Manager

Have you ever looked at the farmland surrounding our area and wondered how the pioneers who settled this area were able to clear land in order to plant crops? Had you wondered about the hardships settlers faced and the ingenuity displayed by our forefathers in clearing and settling the land?

Here on the Hoosier National Forest, we continue to preserve and use some of the same traditional skills practiced by our forefathers. The tools they used to clear and settle their land, are the same tools used to build and maintain trails in the Charles C. Deam Wilderness. How so, you say?

Well, the Hoosier National Forest is unique in being the only Forest in the Eastern Region of the US Forest Service with a program which uses mules and horses. Established in the late 1990's, with one horse named Soda Pop, a Wilderness Ranger used the horse for wilderness patrol, the program has grown and now consists of four mules and primitive, stock drawn equipment including plows and graders. The four mule string is used within (and occasionally outside of) the wilderness boundaries to perform trail construction and maintenance work and haul project supplies.

Just as horses and mules were vital in the clearing and planting of farm fields, the use of these animals on the Hoosier has been instrumental in maintaining the trail system within the Wilderness without the use of motorized or mechanized equipment, as mandated by the Wilderness Act. The Hoosier National Forest mule team has resurrected the skills and use of tools which have long been abandoned by most of society as a whole in favor of modern, mechanized equipment. While many forests in the western states continue to have stock

programs to accomplish wilderness and backcountry work, a number of these Forests utilize hand crews instead of utilizing animals with stock drawn equipment in constructing and maintaining trails. The Hoosier mule team, along with their handler, Rod Fahl, has even performed wilderness trail work for the Shawnee National Forest in Illinois.

For many employees and visitors to the Hoosier, including summer temporary employees and Youth Conservation Corps enrollees, this may be their only exposure to traditional skills and techniques utilized in building and maintaining trails with mules and stock drawn equipment. So if you happen to be in the Charles C. Deam Wilderness and are lucky enough to come across our crew working with our four-legged employees, stop and take a moment to watch.

Watching the mules work, for me, brings a greater connection to the past, along with an understanding of the hardships faced by early settlers of this area and how their hard work shaped this area into what it is today. That we are able to regularly use some of these same traditional tools and skills to construct and maintain trails on the Hoosier NF and thereby perpetuate wilderness values is truly amazing. That we are also able to teach these values and skills to young people and thereby engender in them a lasting understanding of the importance of wilderness and of retaining these disappearing skills is a gift.

For more information on the use of mules on the Hoosier National Forest contact Vicki Gullang Harris at 812-276-4772 or vgullang@fs.fed.us.



Former Hoosier NF employee Bruce Whittredge on the Forest's first stock animal, Soda Pop.



Historic photo of pioneer plowing a side hill on what is now the Hoosier National Forest.



Mules and their handler hauling gravel out to dump on a trail in the Charles C. Deam Wilderness.