

It All Started with a Mower

My reflections on the beginnings of the partnership between Back Country Horsemen and the Corp of Engineers at Big Hill Lake, all began with a mower.

Long before I knew what a Handshake Grant was, my thoughts simply turned to how to address the high grass and weeds keeping people... both hikers and horse riders from using the equestrian trails at Big Hill Lake. At the time, my grandson was a Boy Scout and any attempt to hike there discouraged everyone... and the scouts hated it because the weeds were taller than they were. I met a couple who tried to ride the Timber Hill loop, only to turn back because their daughter, mounted on a pony, cried and were terrorized by weeds towering over her pony.

I believe this research started in 2014. In early 2015 I wrote a grant for \$1000 to Back Country Horseman to buy a trail mower to pull behind my 4 wheeler. My husband had researched trail mowers for months and with the help of Steve and Pricilla Lindsey, we decided to shoot for the Swisher Trail Mower. The cost was nearly \$1800 so two hundred dollars raised at a North American Trail Ride competition was added and the Hayes and Lindsey families split the remaining costs.



We started mowing and the improvement to the trail was immediate. Riders were so complimentary. We could actually see the path in places... but there were problems.

Due to the rough terrain, repairs to the mower were inevitable and costly. Still, volunteer hours increased. The Corps bought a mower, but it suffered from the same issues the Back Country Horseman mower experienced.



In 2016, I considered the idea of finding professional, heavier equipment to assist in the trail work. The first thought was something to clear more trees and downed timber to get the mower into more places. No one wanted to tackle the rough terrain. The Hayes' and the Lindsey's rented a small track hoe with rubber tracks and spent a week on one four mile

section draining the trail and building speed bumps to divert water. Again, usage increased and Corp personnel was extremely supportive of the project, offering to bear the cost of the next rental and aid in transport to the site.

In 2017, Fred Hinkle, a bold, young entrepreneur who had built a business removing cedar and hedge from pastures noticed a high demand from deer hunters who merely wanted trails cut into rough, overgrown land to facilitate the hunting activities. He agreed to at least look at the trails. I hiked with him over part of the trail and asked what his equipment could accomplish to again, make mowing possible. Back Country Horsemen, the Corp Manager Chris Hammerschmidt, and Mr. Hinkle agreed to a one day, \$800 test to determine how much trail could be covered and; if the results warranted the expense. Various donations and fundraising including monies from Back Country Horseman paid for this test.

Admittedly, there were equipment change outs during the test, but it was found a rolling steel mulching tool attached to a large skid loader could easily mulch many of the dead, downed trees blocking the trail and chew small invasive sapling into a pulpy mulch. The trails opened up, and after a good rain and about 30 days, the mulch settled into the trail and appeared to add a stabilizing factor.

Pleased with the test, the Corp funded 16 additional hours of Hinkle work about six months later. Trail usage continued to increase.

While the mowing and clearing was going on, Back Country and other partners were hard at work on the first of two Handshake Grants, installing trail markers every quarter mile and erecting trailhead signage with distances. Throughout the years, Back Country Horseman has worked not only with the Corp of Engineers, but in conjunction with a variety of other partners to continually improve the trails. Back Country Horseman are still the “boots on the ground” on miles of trail that will always be inaccessible to machinery and equipment.

As we enter the work phase of the third successful Handshake Grant at Big Hill Lake, the plans call for the final step in what was a four stage improvement plan. Both horse camps now boast beautiful group shelters for potlucks and group meetings. Trailheads have signs and trails are accurately measured and marked.



With this third grant, professional mapping has begun with the goal of large maps at each trailhead and free downloadable maps online for riders and hikers to print their own maps, or have on their phones for security and trip planning needs.

Many of the local volunteers have been working on the trails for literally decades. Each organization has brought special skills and accomplished a variety of goals. Back Country Horseman certainly has played a major role with their strong monetary support and formal, national, organizational strengths to foster even more cooperation between government and private groups.

The recent finalization of a national Memorandum of Understanding between Back Country Horseman and the Corps of Engineers will enhance this mutually beneficial relationship that has accomplished so much at Big Hill Lake.

