

#192 FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: July 14, 2011

Dig and doze is not about grooving and sleeping

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—Routine farm work is not usually associated with high-class art. Not many of us mention a painter's Kolinsky sable brush and a logger's bulldozer in the same breath. But in the woods this week, I saw fine art created with a nine-ton, New Holland DC 100 dozer, carrying an oversize six-way blade in front and a heavy-duty winch in back.

I get the urge to touch up our forest roads about once a decade. I use these roads three or four times a week, spring through fall, for cutting firewood and gathering columns. I mow a couple of times each summer and dig out rocks that I have mowed once too often. Some road rocks, however, resist change, and new roads can require more than a pick and shovel.

I try to make these trails safe for horses, vehicles and feet.

Bulldozers are "crawlers" that forsake wheels for continuous steel treads. They have more traction on uneven ground than wheeled vehicles, because their wide tracks spread their weight over a larger ground area.

This wider "footprint" allows dozers to get more useable "horsepower feet" on the ground than tires. A medium-sized bulldozer will have an engine of only 100 horsepower or so, about one-third of a classic muscle car like a 1966 Pontiac GTO.

Small logging outfits in the mountains use dozers for cutting skid roads into hillsides and for winching logs out of hard-to-get-into areas. They work on steep, rocky, dangerous slopes every day.

William, a neighbor who has been logging for decades, was the man for my job.

I wanted him to cut in a few new trails, connect a couple of existing ones, widen some stretches, push out the last-stand rocks that had defied my best assaults, knock down a dead tree that threatened a power line and put in diagonal erosion-control swags across uphill roads to prevent washouts.

This is mishmash work that dozer operators hate. Each little niggly task requires patience, attention to detail and a soft touch. There's no rhythm to the effort, no sense of big accomplishment. It's much more fun to push a big pile of anything from point A to point B.

While I was paying the hourly rate, we both understood that he was doing me a favor by accepting an aggravating job after a full day in the woods.

My role was to say what I wanted and why, then follow along throwing rogue rocks to the side and filling in little holes. His job was to make my objectives workable and do it right.

The Homestead, a luxury resort about an hour away that serves meals the size of malnourished golf balls, grooms its horse trails to Interstate standards of smoothness if only to avoid lawsuits. No dips, no rocks, no trippy tree roots, no intrusive branches whacking a cantering rider, no sun-seeking blackberry brambles clawing toward each other overhead, no mud, no steep places, no single-file squeezes, no twigs in the path, no bears, no rattlesnakes, no skunks, no sex-crazed buck deer, no clouds—just very wide, very manicured trails. The standards set by The Homestead's Jamaican crews humble me.

I didn't want William to get my trails competitive with theirs, just feather out my rougher edges.

Like every painter, a dozer operator in the woods approaches a blank canvas. He has no doze-by-numbers template or even a pencil sketch on linen. It's all freehand within the limits of the possible.

Bulldozer work is mostly about touch and balance, not brute power. While it depends on the operator's eye for design and execution, he rarely can see what he's doing. The front of the machine

and an extra-tall blade make it impossible for him to see what he's pushing. He must feel with the blade what's in front, know what it is, then know how to handle it. This is maneuvering 18,000 pounds within an inch one way or the other, an invisible inch.

A dozer's weight, low center, slow speed and tracks make it stable. But it can slide sideways on a steep slope and even roll over. I've seen one flop on its side when a downslope bank gave way.

Most dozers are comfortable going sideways on a 2:1 slope—two feet of horizontal run for every foot of vertical rise. A 1:1 slope is iffy, and it feels even chancier than that.

Working on steep slopes is a seat-of-your-pants feel about the tipping angle of your particular machine. Some machines feel right, some don't. The closer to that angle, the more the smallest unexpected thing can cause a wreck. Get the dozer's uphill track on an unseen tree root when you're moving sideways on a 45-degree hill, and over you go.

Modern dozers come with Rollover Protection Systems (ROPS) that envelop operators within heavy steel bars. Loggers will drop a tree on their ROPS when that's the only way they can get it down. William crashed a heavy branch on his for lack of an alternative. He laughed; I didn't.

This roadwork is being done with an artist's sense of things fitting and working together. Etched gently into the west-facing side of Devil's Backbone, it balances lines and angles—and should last a century.

The Homestead's trails will always be prettier, but, so far, no one has sued me over mine. So far.

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