

Back Country Horsemen of America Strikes a Balance Between Recreation and Preservation

by Sarah Wynne Jackson

From its inception over 40 years ago, Back Country Horsemen of America established a solid reputation as a service organization. Its members are known as hard-working, knowledgeable folks who turn up when there's a job to be done. Some people wonder why. Why would they spend their free time, weekends, and vacations from their jobs bending their backs, growing blisters, and braving the weather time and time again?

The answer is simple, really. They love the land. They cherish the untouched and scenic landscapes all around us that cannot be accessed by RV or four-wheel drive SUV. They treasure those carefree days when they traverse those lands in what seems like the most natural way: on the back of a horse, like our ancestors who first explored these areas.

Back Country Horsemen of America was created because people like this saw the break-neck speed of development and knew if they didn't take action, future generations wouldn't have places like these to marvel at. They work so hard to keep trails open because someone has to, or those recreation opportunities will be dug up, paved over, or cemented under.

Recreation vs. Preservation

The Big South Fork Chapter of Back Country Horsemen of Tennessee greatly values the natural wonder for which their group is named: the Big South Fork of the Cumberland River, the main feature of the remote Cumberland Plateau. North White Oak Creek, a major tributary that runs all the way to Jamestown, and its accompanying O&W Trail (an abandoned railroad right-of-way) provides many miles of picturesque recreation opportunities for equestrians, hikers, and bicyclists. But each spring, the Creek becomes a raging whitewater, cutting new paths and destroying crossings constructed for use in quieter times of the year.

A joint venture between BSFBCH and the Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area (BSFNRRRA) set out to replace the natural crossing (treacherous basketball-sized rocks) with a hard surface that would also protect the stream banks at the Zenith Day Use Area. Since this is one of the few developed places inside the legislatively protected gorge area of the park, this seemed like a sound compromise between recreation and preservation.

Where There's a Will...

Back Country Horsemen volunteers purchased the necessary materials, built the structure off-site to federal environmental standards, accomplished the monumental task of transporting the 16 two-ton concrete slabs into the creek gorge, and installed them from bank-to-bank across North White Oak Creek.

This project was funded through numerous BSF Back Country Horsemen events, including trail rides, campouts, raffles, and auctions, and from their own pockets. BSFNRRRA restored the Zenith Day Use Area through a National Park Service Centennial Challenge Grant, a federal fund-matching program.

This Land is Your Land

Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area encompasses 125,000 acres of the Cumberland Plateau in Kentucky and Tennessee, where the free-flowing Big South Fork of the Cumberland River meanders and rushes between magnificent bluffs, high arches, and other amazing natural formations. Nearly 200 miles of horse trails, many commercial camps and resorts, and three National Park Service camps provide equestrian visitors with a back country adventure unique in the eastern United States.

When you visit, you'll see the hard work of Back Country Horsemen all around you – passable trails, safe water crossings, maintained trailheads, and America's awe-inspiring landscape unspoiled for your enjoyment.

About Back Country Horsemen of America

BCHA is a non-profit corporation made up of state organizations, affiliates, and at-large members. Their efforts have brought about positive changes regarding the use of horses and stock in wilderness and public lands.

If you want to know more about Back Country Horsemen of America or become a member, visit their website: www.bcha.org; call 888-893-5161; or write 342 North Main Street, West Hartford, CT 06117. The future of horse use on public lands is in our hands!

###