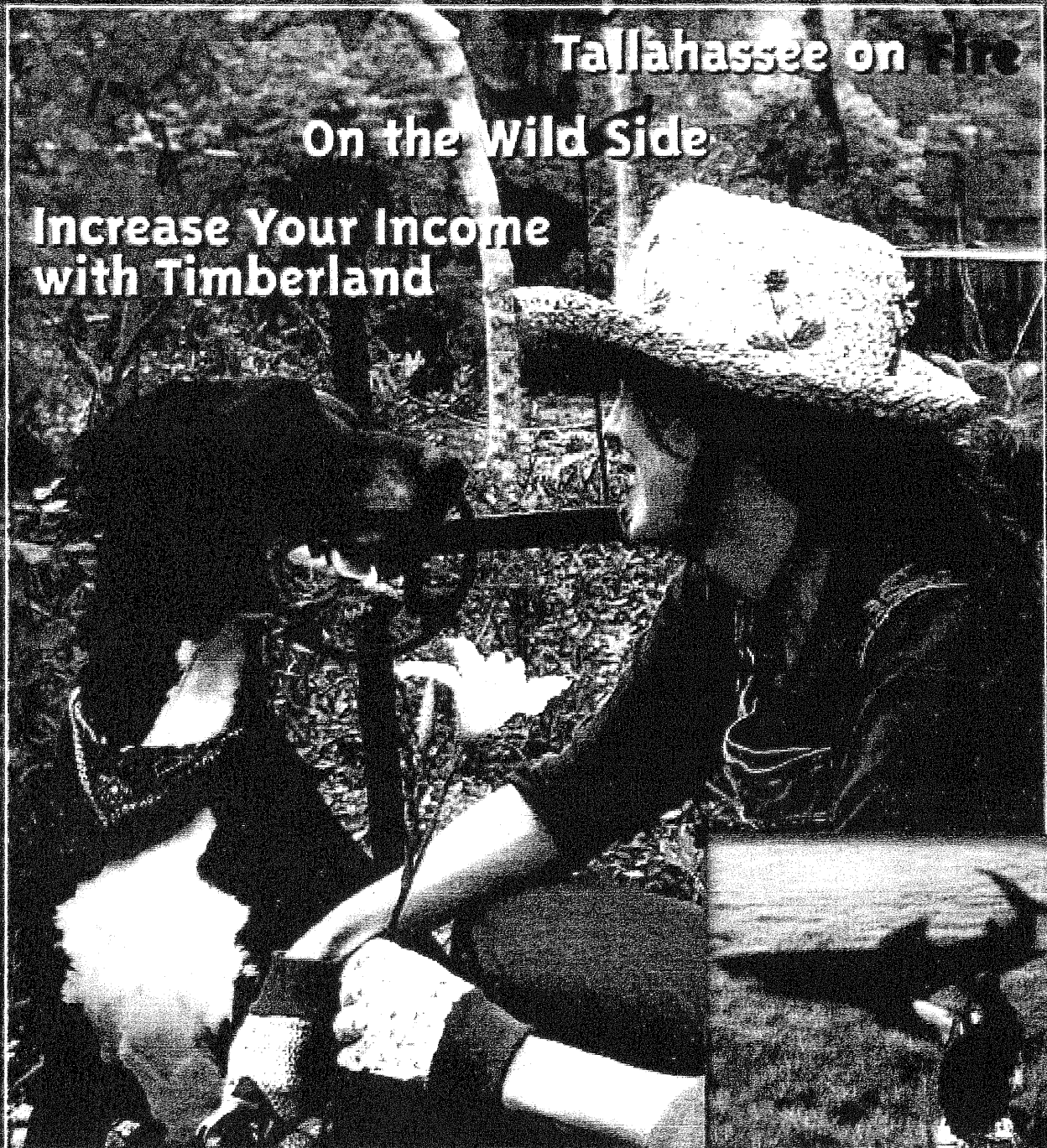


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On the Wild Side!

Re-opening the Florida National Scenic Trail and Juniper Run in Juniper Prairie Wilderness

by Susan Jenkins, USDA Forest Service, Nez Perce National Forest

Foreword by Michelle Mitchell, USDA Forest Service, National Forests in Florida

Readers of LandViews learned about the monumental hurricane recovery efforts underway on the 1,400-mile Florida National Scenic Trail in the January 2005 issue. At the time the article was written, hundreds of miles of trail were closed due to heavy downfall and flooding. Since that time, volunteers working with the National Forests in Florida and the Florida Trail Association have donated over 16,000 hours of labor to the effort. Working in conjunction with Forest Service crews, these volunteers have re-opened all but approximately 40 miles of trail located on or near Gulf Islands National Seashore. Most of the recovery work was completed along sections of the trail where the use of chainsaws and other mechanized equipment is appropriate, but some work took place in Juniper Prairie Wilderness where special protection measures designed to safeguard Wilderness values such as solitude, primitive recreation opportunities,

and natural processes make mechanized equipment inappropriate.

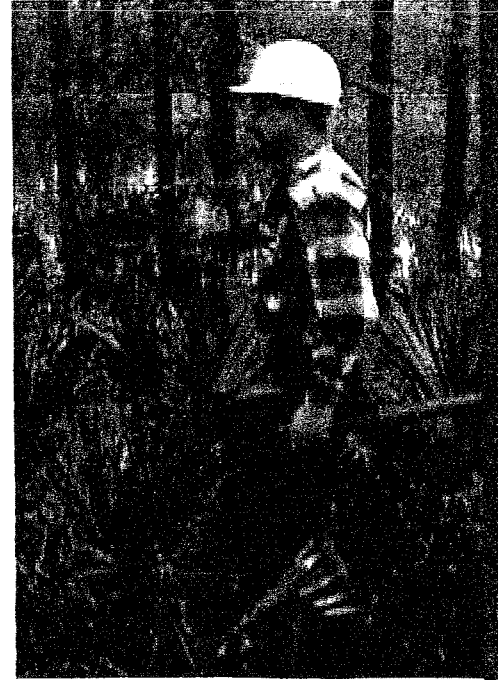
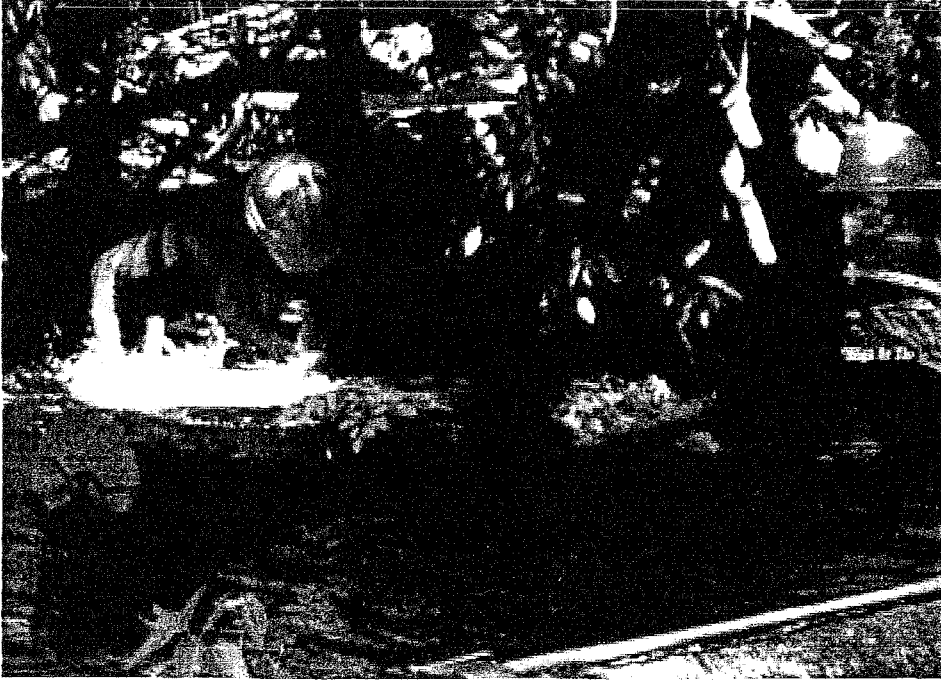
Juniper Prairie Wilderness is located in the Ocala National Forest just east of the city of Ocala, Florida. Visitors experience the area by hiking approximately nine miles of the Florida National Scenic Trail through pine flatwoods, prairie and scrub habitats and then enjoying a cool canoe trip down the seven mile section of Juniper Run that flows through semi-tropical forest. Unfortunately, hurricanes Charley, Frances and Jeanne each caused severe damage to both the trail and run within the Wilderness.

In November of 2004, the National Forests in Florida requested assistance from wilderness and traditional tools experts throughout the Forest Service. An assessment team was assembled to determine the best and most sensitive approach to re-opening the Florida National Scenic Trail and Juniper Run through

some of the most unique and protected habitats in Florida. Despite the dangerous conditions posed by hundreds of downed trees along the trail and in the waters of the run, the team was tasked with devising a safe plan that would not require the use of any motorized or mechanized equipment in accordance with the values detailed in the Wilderness Act of 1964.

The team was highly successful. Not only were the Florida National Scenic Trail and Juniper Run safely reopened, but traditional tool skills that were instrumental in the settlement of Florida long ago were rejuvenated and found to be just as useful and relevant today as they were in our past.

The following article is a first hand account and interpretation of the effort as written by recovery team member Susan Jenkins, a Wilderness Ranger from Idaho who came to Florida to participate in the work.



Idaho

It is July. Every day we work higher into the mountains. Camp is struck at daybreak. Hundreds of trees have uprooted, blown over and rotted following huge wildfires in the 1990's and early 2000's. Logs are sawn, chopped and rolled out of the way as we wind our way up the mountainside and out of the river canyon, gaining altitude with every step. Mules carry our camp and heavy gear; by evening we have gained fifteen hundred feet in elevation. Another three days and we will reach the lookout tower three thousand feet above us. It is 85 degrees, and the air is dry and light. As we saw and chop our way through logs and heavy brush we drink tons of water but scarcely break into a sweat. Our tools are sharp, there are few insects and monotony begins as the crosscut saw swings back and forth in a constant rhythm. Many of us have been fooled into thinking this steep country is tough and hard.

Florida

January comes in cold and damp on the Florida National Scenic Trail and the Juniper Springs Canoe Run. Both are found in the Juniper Prairie Wilderness on the Ocala National Forest. It is a different world here. The mornings are freezing but the day quickly warms. Walking along the tall grasses, we are soaked with sweat. The 75-degree weather feels stifling, and the humidity soaks us as though we are breathing under tepid water. It is not even hot or really humid yet.

Days later we are jumping out of canoes into swamp muck to our chests. We are too cold to rest during the day. Methane gasses bubble up and the stench is ...interesting. Our frustration mounts when saws bind repeatedly as embedded sand in both oak and bay trees dull the cutting teeth. In the middle of the run the tension and binds within the trees change as the current pulls the limbs back and forth as we saw beneath the surface. We can't even saw into the palms as the pith repeatedly pinches the steel. The finely sharpened edges of our axes chip and ring as they strike the downed oaks covering the trail and waterways. At the end of the day we have traveled less than a hundred yards. But this is a unique chance to see the amazingly different country.

There is no doubt that this is a beautiful and unique place. As we travel from one end of the wilderness to the other, we encounter a landscape shifting from small ponds and lakes to swamps, runs, and prairies. Vegetation varies as this complex countryside changes from hardwood to longleaf islands historically shaped by fire. The Juniper Canoe run is canopied by live oaks with Spanish moss hanging from their branches. As we work to clear the waterway, alligators and water moccasins become a daily happening that takes a while to get used to. Tick checks at night and the chiggers and mosquitoes are biting every warm evening.



At top, from the left, beginning on opposite page:

Ian Barlow and Fred West prepare to move heavy materials with rigging equipment while a crosscut saw rests in the foreground.

Historic photo of crosscut saw filer taken in Florida

Ian Barlow and Amy Norton saw underwater to remove a downed tree from Juniper Run.

Clearwater National Forest Animal Packer Jim West enjoys a rare undamaged portion of the trail.

Ian Barlow teaches crosscut saw technique to Florida Trail Association volunteers.

Historic photo of workers reopening Juniper Run after a hurricane.

All historic photographs used with the permission of the State Archives of Florida.

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Different and incredibly beautiful. Many of us work between two large wildernesses encompassing three million acres with one, gravel road between them. But this country becomes more valuable as there is so little left. You have so many visitors and there is not much wild land remaining.... How do you plan and deal with the management decisions needed to preserve something so unique? It is easy for any of us to see why people come from as far away as Venezuela and Germany to be a part of the Florida Trail Association's efforts to work in this wilderness.

Understanding Traditional Tools

Outdoor enthusiasts and winter hikers are aware of the destruction hurricanes Charley, Frances, Jean and Ivan inflicted on nearly all segments of the Florida National Scenic Trail (Florida Trail). In October, after the last of the storms had passed, it was estimated that 80% of the 1,400-mile Trail was either closed or under assessment for damages. But the volunteers and land managers that care for this trail are innovative and dedicated. Despite having to deal with repairs to their own homes and property as a result of the storms, people came out in force to rebuild sections of the trail and remove blow-

down that blocked trail access. In four months, volunteers from the many different chapters of the Florida Trail Association (FTA) had cleared most of the trail. Bridges, boardwalks, and campsites were cleaned and repaired.

The nine-mile section of the Florida Trail within the Juniper Wilderness called for some creative thinking and problem-solving abilities. This is the only section of the Florida Trail that passes through a designated wilderness affected by the hurricanes. Trail users, volunteers, and land managers realize that the Juniper Prairie is a rare setting in Florida's National Forests. And, like the wilderness areas in the western states, a different type of management approach is called for. The use of traditional (non-motorized) tools has been a keystone for managing wilderness since 1964, when the Wilderness Act was enacted. One of the most positive outcomes of its passage is that certain skills that may have vanished have been kept alive. This is one of the benefits of wilderness.

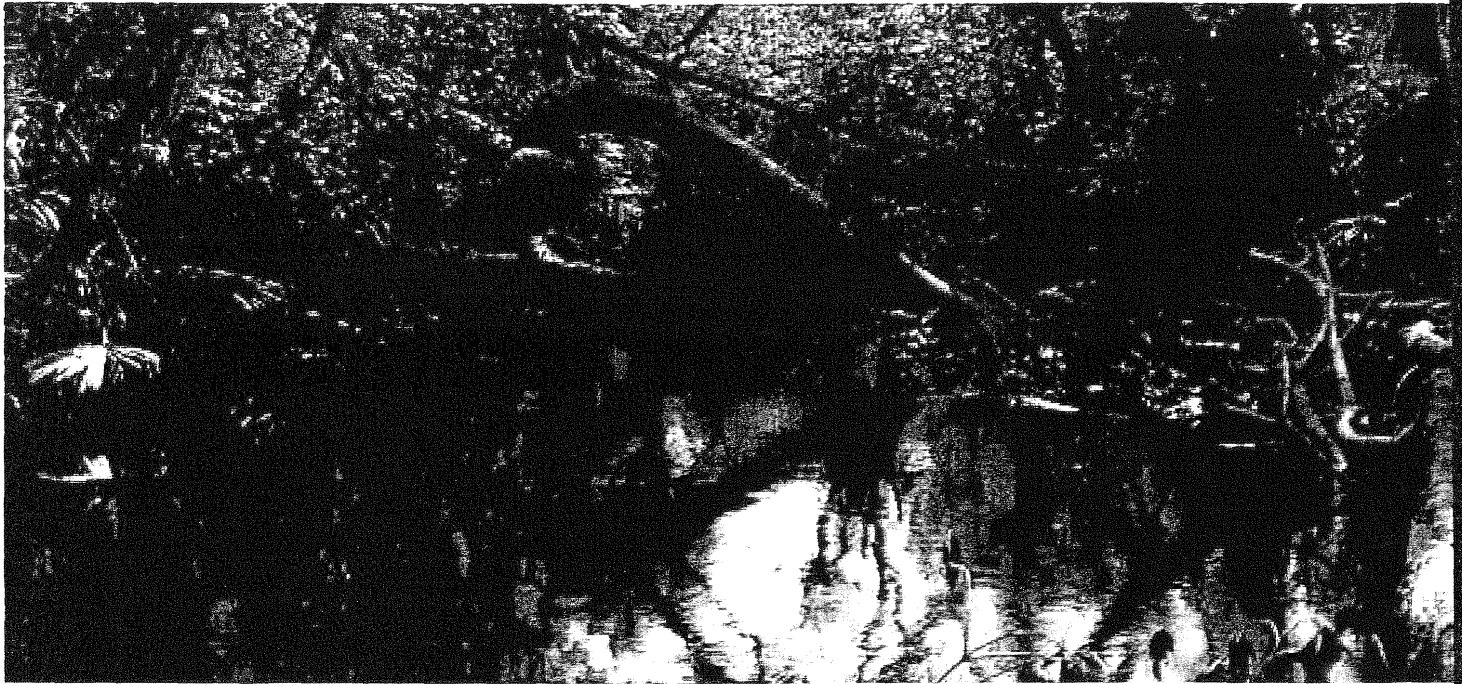
Some individuals believed that using traditional tools would not be a viable alternative when reopening the impacted trails and canoe runs. Others saw the recovery efforts in a different light. This was an opportunity to reopen the trails and canoe runs and to revitalize skills that had not been a part of the maintenance of the Florida Trail for many years. Florida's forest related culture is filled with examples

of traditional tool use. Crosscut saws, axes, and rigging equipment such as hoists and winches figured strongly into logging operations, road and trail construction, and the building of structures. The Wilderness Act requires the use of non-motorized means in designated Wilderness except in fire emergency, law enforcement and medical emergency situations. We tried to develop an educational context and recovery plan that allowed for the work to be accomplished safely and efficiently while fully meeting the directives of the Act.

In other places, we sometimes encounter resistance to the use of hand tools as a means of accomplishing routine trail maintenance and restoration work. Many people believe that chain saws and motorized rock drills are the only effective means for opening and reconstructing mountain pathways. Our work has been viewed in a different light in Florida.

As we visited with hikers from Florida and all over the world while cutting the hiking trails, we were overwhelmed with the positive responses. People told us how important it was to know that traditional hand tool skills are still alive. Many quickly developed an emotional connection to the project because of the traditional means being used to accomplish the jobs at hand.

As often happens, when complex recovery projects are initially laid out, individuals look at the sheer amount of work to be done. Many compare tool options for the job rather than comparing



the tools within the context of the work to be done.

A chainsaw is definitely faster and easier to use than a crosscut saw. However in the heavy blow-down that we have encountered from high winds we have seen that only a small percentage of the work involves sawing. Most of the job lies in moving the materials after the sawing has been finished. In addition to working within Juniper Prairie Wilderness, our crews were asked to clear downed trees from the non-wilderness portions of Alexander Canoe Run where chainsaws are a viable method for accomplishing work. We brought power saws along but we were unable to use them effectively as most of the sawing had to be performed under water in order to clear the run to a depth allowing for outboard motors. We quickly returned to hand tools and cleared the run in a few days.

Getting the Job Done

Initial examination of the Florida Trail and Juniper Canoe Run showed impacts from the hurricanes that seemed horrendous, with trees piled into huge jackstraws. With a seemingly overwhelming task ahead, a recovery program was put in motion. Land managers from the National Forests in Florida and the Nez Perce and Clearwater National Forests in Idaho designed a plan to promote stronger partnerships between

local forests, historical societies and the FTA in order to complete the work in an economic fashion. Long-term plans were developed to promote these partnerships and cooperation into the future.

Upon arrival in Florida, tool trainers from the western regions of the United States Forest Service met with local land management employees and volunteers to embark on a four-day training program with classroom and practical sessions. Learning about traditional tools is more than just learning how to swing an axe or run a saw in the woods. Good tool usage is part skill and physical ability, but efficient work takes place when planning and layout are present in the working process.

The practical sessions were designed to let everyone involved learn how to use the hand tools and rigging equipment to their full advantage. Participants quickly understood that traditional crosscut saw and axe skills along with skyline logging techniques will continue to play an important part in trail and bridge maintenance and restoration in backcountry areas.

The training was geared toward teaching and reviving skills; however, it was also about learning how these tools, coupled with unlimited imagination, can be used to solve all sorts of trail construction and reconstruction problems in the backcountry. By the end of the training, what began as a four-day session stretched into five and FTA volunteers from around

the state began to reevaluate methods of construction for future Florida National Scenic Trail projects using the traditional tool skills they had learned. ■

Susan Jenkins and other members of the Juniper Prairie recovery team will join the National Forests in Florida and the Florida Trail Association this year at the Florida Folk Festival www.FloridaStateParks.org/folkfest to demonstrate the traditional tools skills that were used in Florida's past and in the Juniper Prairie Wilderness recovery effort. To learn more, contact the Florida Trail Association at 877-HIKE-FLA, or www.FloridaTrail.org.

At top, from the left:

Forest Service employee Nathan Helminiak chops debris along the trail.

Fred West saws a downed tree along the Florida Trail. Panoramic shot of trees blocking Juniper Run.