

Dreams Do Come True



Two teams of Percherons provide an integral role in connecting area children with the outdoors.

Sharing the Great Outdoors with Children

by Cappy Tosetti

Imagine being a child and getting to spend the day cross-country skiing and snowshoeing through the woods in the beautiful Adirondacks region of New York State, and then returning in the spring and fall to jump on a brightly-colored mountain bike that takes you over hill and dale. Sounds like great fun, especially following along as the youngsters venture out on miles of trails through the forest and meadows, stopping to spot owls in the trees and tadpoles, turtles and salamanders in the pond, or venture down to the pastures beyond the barn to meet the menagerie of alpacas, goats, donkeys, Welsh black mountain sheep, Highland cattle and the two popu-

lar teams of Percheron draft horses: Pierre & Louis and Jacques & Jean.

When the snow flies, you can bundle up under cozy woolen blankets for a sleigh ride through the woods, or when the weather warms up, you can hop up on one of two vintage pioneer wagons to wander the property, learning more about draft horses and working with animals. Along the way, there's time to stop and investigate a bit of history about local canals, locks, barges and water transportation at a most interesting museum nearby.

What child or grown-up wouldn't want to spend a day like this, espe-

cially when it doesn't cost a dime? It's a dream-come-true adventure that's available to school children in seven counties surrounding the village of Boonville, New York. Not only are all the activities free, but transportation costs covering fuel and bus driver wages are also included, so every child has an opportunity to enjoy the experience.

Where and how is this possible one might ask? Who's footing the bill and why would anyone open their door to so many children? "We're asked this a lot," says Elaine Hage, Activities Director at the Potato Hill Farm Outdoor Education Center (PHFOEC) where such dreams do indeed come true.



Adventures in the Adirondacks

If ever you're in up-state New York, give Elaine Hage a call. She'll be happy to show you around Potato Hill Farm Outdoor Education Center. You'll be wishing you were a kid again!

Potato Hill Farm Outdoor Education Center

11908 Potato Hill Road

Boonville, NY 13309

315-942-2299

Elaine@potatohillfarmoec.com

Potato Hill Farm provides kids with a safe place to go and explore and to reconnect with nature.



Winter activities include cross-country skiing and snow shoeing.

PHFOEC is funded by a private family trust as a "gift to the children of Central New York." The program began in 2008 with 2,800 students participating in field trips during the months of May and June. In 2009 attendance blossomed to 10,000 during the school year and followed up with 15,000 more visitors in 2010.

Elaine explains that their mission statement at the center is to reconnect children to nature in a peaceful, picturesque and educational environment. With all of today's modern technology—computers, cell phones, iPods and more—even children in rural areas are disconnected with the outdoors.

When making plans for PHFOEC, one important item was added to this list of educational materials used in the program—a copy of the book, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*, by Rich Louv. Copies of the book were purchased and given to school teachers in the area, hoping to begin a dialogue about the seriousness of the situation today. Although Louv realizes this isn't

an actual medical disorder, he believes there is a modern disconnect between children and nature that seems to be a contributing factor to ADHD, childhood obesity, lack of creativity, a loss of respect for nature and the living world and a number of other social ills.

Elaine continues by saying, "It's our hope that each child will be inspired and interested in nature as a lifelong learner, and that a respect for the environment and the animals inhabiting our world will continue to grow. We hire instructors, mostly retired teachers, to share their knowledge and passion about botany, birds, mammals, geology via the lifetime aerobic activities of hiking, biking, snowshoeing and cross-country skiing—something we like to call "education on the move." It's never a canned speech or lecture, but instead



Potato Hill's hiking program provides students with trekking poles and rain gear.

a lively discussion as each group ventures through the woods, around the ponds and over the farm. It's an eye-opening experience watching how some children arrive with an attitude or perhaps are a bit bored or disinterested in the idea of learning

about the outdoors. Thirty minutes later they're wide-eyed and full of enthusiasm because of the surroundings and the amazing way our instructors bring things to life. It's a real treat listening to them talk about Mallards and Buffleheads along

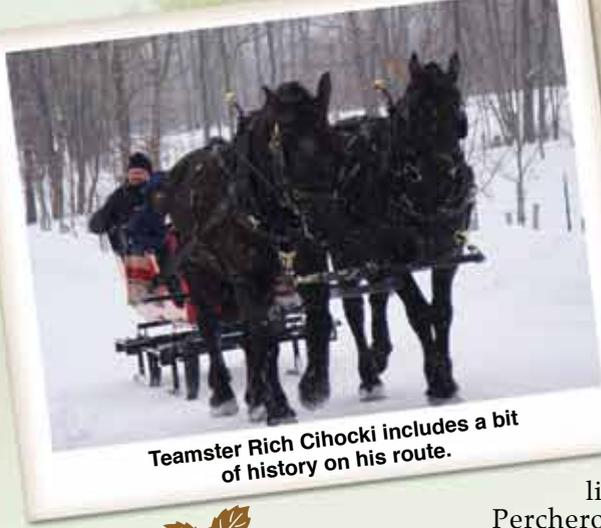
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All activities at Potato Hill are educational and physical.



Snow doesn't keep the horses from the action.



Teamster Rich Cihocki includes a bit of history on his route.



There's lots to do in the area, including canoeing, hiking, fishing and poking along the river and canal. One place definitely worth a stop is:

Boonville Black River Canal Museum

520 Main Street
Boonville, NY 13309
315-942-6763
www.blackrivercanalmuseum.com
contactus@blackrivercanalmuseum.com

Dreams Do Come True continued

the trails, or watching them scamper to identify hemlock, balsam poplar or hophornbeam trees in the woods. Their vocabulary is filled with new words like thickets, burrows and dobsonflies. This is a classroom full of wonder."

Everyone agrees it's also an opportunity to be outdoors in the fresh air, hiking, skiing, biking and just being a kid without realizing they're getting plenty of exercise that's obviously good for the brain and the body. At the end of the day, rosy-cheeked children return to home base to board buses, full of wonder and excitement. It's a win-win situation that brings great joy and satisfaction to everyone.

An Equine Education

"Some of our best instructors here on the farm are the horses," says Ed Bullis, one of the teamsters at Potato Hill, "and it's amazing how the children respond to them, especially our four black Percherons. Whether we're hitching up the wagons or the sleigh, every child is intrigued and curious about draft horses. As we mosey along, it's great fun sharing stories about this particular breed, their history in France and America,

about farming and other ways draft horses and mules work together with humans. It's especially interesting down at the barn, talking about their care, looking at the harness, their shoes and what's involved in feeding and caring for all the animals.

"Books are great, but there's nothing

like looking in the eye of a Percheron, feeling the softness of an alpaca's fur, or watching 'Little Step,' the baby donkey frolic in the field. Each day brings such delight; answering each child's questions and watching their worlds expand in the presence of these amazing animals."

Ed finds himself equally intrigued every day he's at work. "This is better than any job I've ever had, especially at my age when some friends are retiring and wondering what to do. I didn't really get involved with draft horses until later in life when a present for my wife changed everything. I thought buying her a snazzy little sports car might be fun for our retirement, but she said she'd rather have a horse. So, like a good husband, I listened to her and brought home a nice Canadian horse and cart that we enjoyed driving about the coun-

tryside. Then we found an elegant Arabian for our granddaughter to ride and later we bought two Shires, but soon learned they were more than we could handle. I sold them to an experienced teamster, promising myself to learn more about these larger breeds.

"Thanks to our local North Country Draft Horse Club here in upper state New York, I've been able to get out there in the field and work with a variety of draft horses. I've been able to immerse myself in discovering more, thanks to the generosity of our members who enjoy sharing information and knowledge. I'm especially grateful to longtime member Erin Lundy, who has shown me the ropes in buying and training horses. Many of our members work with horses on their farms, so it's been a wonderful opportunity soaking in valuable knowledge. It's been the best experience and a wonderful way of making lifelong friends, especially sharing good times at different events like the annual New York State Woodsmen Field Days Lumberman Contest where we compete in the log skidding finals. That's some of the best training one could ever have. I highly recommend joining a local draft horse club for anyone new to horses.

"Eventually I felt more at ease and ready to purchase a pair of

NORTH COUNTRY DRAFT HORSE CLUB

You might find Ed working with his buddies out in the field or honing his skills for the lumber man contest. He'll be happy to share the good times with his favorite group and event.

For more information:

North Country Draft Horse Club

Robin Rozanski, Secretary
robin@lawmanhc.com

New York State Woodsmen Field Days Lumberman Contest

August 19, 20, 21, 2011
P.O. Box 123
Boonville, NY 13309
Fielddays@aol.com



Percherons that have brought such joy and excitement to our lives. It's been more fun working with these horses, trying our luck at various competitions, participating in parades and taking folks for sleigh rides in the winter. Draft horses can certainly add spark to one's life and open all sorts of doors."

That door opened one day when a friend working in maintenance at Potato Hill Farm called with news about a job opening for a teamster to drive the wagons and sleigh. One thing led to another and before Ed knew it, he was on the payroll and loving every minute of it. He still can't believe he gets paid for having such a good time.

History is something that head teamster Terry Fitch and the PHFOEC staff relish, so it's especially interesting taking the children on hikes to the nearby Boonville Black River Canal Museum to learn more about this short stretch of water that connects to the Erie Canal. Even though the Black River Canal is only 35 miles long with a depth of four feet, it had 109 locks at one time that opened and closed the waterway that ran uphill. (A bit of trivia—a group of locks is known as a combine.)

In Terry's back pocket is a worn copy of the popular book, *Canal Boatman—My Life on Upstate Waters*, by Richard Garrity (published in 1977). Terry enjoys sharing some of the author's adventures with the children, especially the chapter about the mules that used to pull the barges on the canal. Evidently, each boat had two teams of mules—one to pull the load while the other rested in their quarters down below. This always brings smiles and giggles to the children, but Terry shows them the photos, proving the tale is true. Sure enough, under the galley and main room above, the mules enjoyed the ride with side windows to look out. The floor was tarred and covered with straw to absorb their urine, and they had handy troughs with plenty of feed and water. When it was time to switch teams, a gangplank was dropped on the canal bank so the fresh mules could take over. The entire process was quick and easy thanks to the nimbleness of these obliging creatures.

As the day ends and it's time to go home, memories will linger on in this special part of the world. Hopefully, each child will remember the call

of the Loons bidding them farewell and how four Percherons took them on a journey like no other—Forests and meadows, lakes and the canal; skis, snowshoes and bicycles. What an adventure! Perhaps when the last bus pulls out as the sun goes down, everyone will look back and wave with gratitude in their hearts with a new appreciation for the beauty of this natural world.

It is the marriage of the soul with Nature that makes the intellect fruitful, and gives birth to imagination

— Henry David Thoreau (1817-62)

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