

# Lake Oologah – Oklahoma



## AERC Trails Grant, completed 2004

Building a bridge for a popular ride

by Jim Baldwin, DVM



Before



After

Just as No Hands Bridge is necessary to get across the American River at the Tevis Cup ride, the little muddy crossing between an old coal pit and Oologah Lake is necessary to access the equestrian trail for the Indian Territory Ride. Without this crossing the trail would stop half a mile from the trailhead and campgrounds.

The Indian Territory endurance ride has been a popular fall ride in Oklahoma for many years and routinely draws riders from Oklahoma, Missouri, Kansas, Arkansas, Texas and drop-by riders from many of the other regions. Time has not treated the trail well and it has slowly deteriorated for many years. Located on Army Corps of Engineers property around Oologah Lake, it is

an out-and-back trail that is included in the National Trail System but gets very little funding.

Overall it is a very pleasant trail to ride but it is plagued with “gumbo mud” in a few areas. The crossing between the lake and the coal pit was originally wide enough to drive a brush hog tractor across. The constant back-and-forth movement of the water, plus rusting of the supporting corrugated pipes under it, caused the crossing to be dangerous to travel with a tractor. As the years progressed it continued to get narrower and narrower.

Many people attempted to maintain the overall trail by cutting back tree limbs but there had been no effort to repair the dangerous bogs and this one major crossing. When AERC came out with their trails grant program it looked like a heaven-sent chance to get some permanent help with these areas.

Three areas were singled out and a proposal (with pictures) was submitted to the Trails Grant Committee. It was approved!

Now money for the materials was available. The Boy Scouts were contacted and on two of the projects, low water bridges across the bogs were completed early on.

Then Mother Nature and time set in. Oologah Lake is used for flood control and when necessary it backs up a tremendous amount of water. Early in the ride’s history, riders rode through knee- to belly-deep water for a quarter of a mile but the riders endured, laughed or cussed and rode on. In dry years everyone shared stories of the wet years.

Then, the year before last Oklahoma had the wettest year ever recorded. The trail was under an incredible 26 feet of water and the ride had to be moved to another location for that year. When the water went down the low-water bridges were intact but the other area was gone. With a donation of private money, a temporary fix was made so the ride could go on last year.

Then it all came together—time, weather, help, etc.—and in the winter of 2008-09 Bruce Burton, the Gared Dale family and I built a bridge that should last at least 20 years. It will take a little maintenance after the water comes up and erodes the shale on each side of the bridge but once that becomes packed most of the erosion will stop. Shale to apply to each side of the bridge is easily gotten from the hills of shale adjacent to the area.

Working with the Corps, we initiated a long-term trail maintenance program similar to what is seen along the nation’s highways. We have businesses or individuals that sponsor a mile of the trail. The Corps gives them recognition by putting up signs along the trail listing it as the “Ozark County Endurance Riders Mile,” the “Karren Beason/Jane Huff Mile,” the “Troop X, Boy Scouts of America Mile,” etc. This was a new concept but has been very well received.

When we look back after 10 to 15 years it is our wish that trail will improve steadily instead of continuing to decline steadily. Thanks to AERC for providing the financial help necessary to make this a long-term trail!