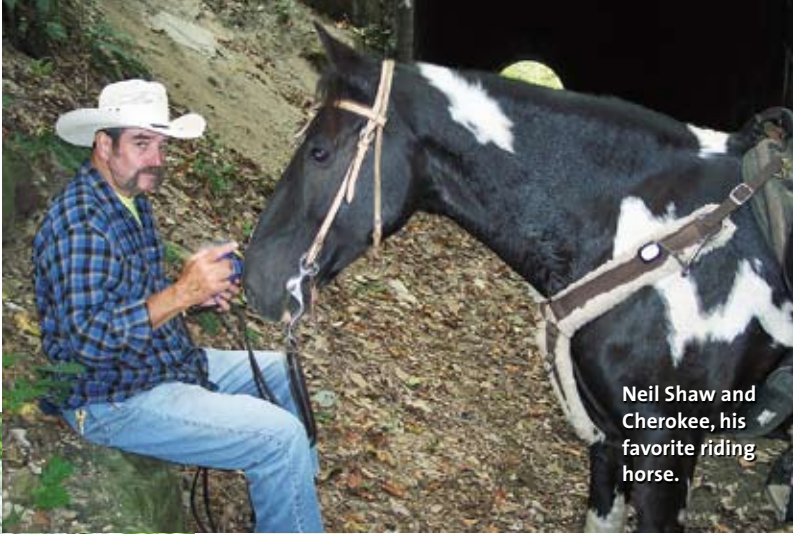




A Horse-High View:

By Neil Shaw

Spring Riding on Ohio's Moonville Rail Trail



Neil Shaw and Cherokee, his favorite riding horse.

On a beautiful sunny day in late spring, I decide to head 24 miles from my farm in Hocking Hills for a ride in southeast Ohio, arguably the most scenic region in the state. I'm planning to take my horse Cherokee on the 16-mile Moonville Rail Trail.

As I back up the horse trailer to his stable, Cherokee is standing and whinnying at the gate. I have seven horses, but Cherokee is my preferred mount. He knows he isn't going to be left behind. After a good brushing and a hoof check for foreign objects, he is ready to be loaded in the trailer, and we head off to the trail.

Arriving at the trailhead I've used for years in the Zaleski State Forest, I unload and saddle Cherokee. By using a comfortable pad under my Tucker saddle, it's like riding the Cadillac of horses.

My riding buddy arrives as I finish saddling; for safety reasons, I believe you should never ride alone. As a boy growing up, I learned to respect the large animal beneath me. I have always had a way of learning the language of the horse, and we have a special bond between us. If you respect your horse, your horse will respect you in return. Never lose that trust, and never underestimate the animal you love.

As we start out, our pace is a relaxed 4–5 miles per hour, and the rhythmic sound of our easy-gaited walking horses makes us forget everything except the beauty surrounding us. Immediately on our ride, we can hear the music of the woodlands, including the screech of a red-tailed hawk. There are varied habitats along the old railbed, such as a forest, field edges, wetlands and riparian areas that provide homes to many species of wildlife.

We near the calm waters of Raccoon Creek, and I can see bass spawning by the shoreline. Carefully checking around the water's edge, we prepare for a safe crossing with our horses. I can feel the coolness of the creek as Cherokee plunges through. It's no problem for him. He likes to paw in the water and splash it up on his stomach.

On the other side, we notice poles still standing from the old telegraph line that ran along the railroad, and soon a breeze hits us as we approach the 120-foot Moonville Tunnel. Many ghost stories are told about the tunnel, and Cherokee hesitates as we approach, but then he continues on through with his ears perked up. He is

at attention clear through the tunnel, and his hoofbeats echo all around us.

Outside the tunnel, we pass by wetlands and can hear frogs croaking. In the stillness at the water's edge stands a great blue heron, motionless as a statue. Trying not to disturb the wildlife, the only sound we make is the soft thud of hooves on the trail. I think to myself, "Have you ever seen so many different species of birds?"

At a farm, two quarter horses watch us as we ride by, and a turkey hen and her little ones march across the thicket. Just ahead, the roofline of a little white schoolhouse, Hope School, comes into view. The original building, constructed in 1887, was later damaged by fire. The current school was rebuilt on the same site in 1937. Daily life in that one-room schoolhouse was quite a test for the teachers and students. The wood stove, which was the only heat source during the winter, is still standing.

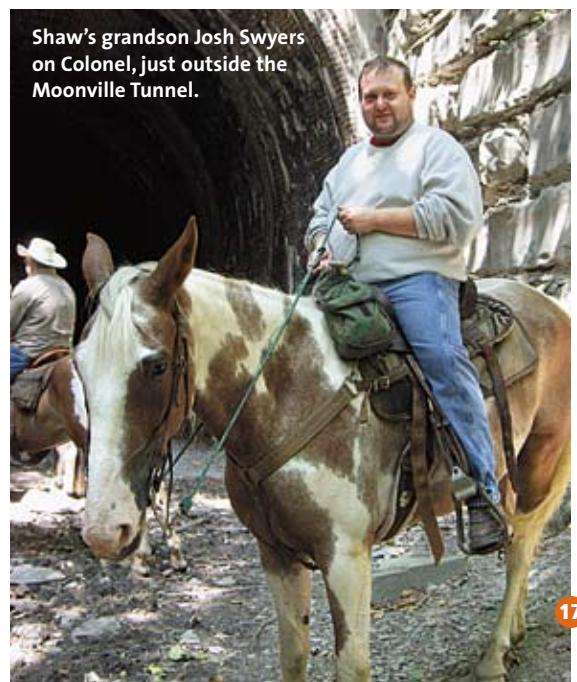
Behind Hope School is a field that attracts birds hard to find elsewhere along the trail, including field sparrows, yellow-breasted chats, barn swallows and prairie warblers. You can see and hear them during the warmer months.

As we turn around for the return trip, I think what a great time we've had enjoying the beautiful scenery from horseback. We've already ridden about 12 miles on forest paths and another six on the Moonville Rail Trail. Our ride back to the trailer will round out a full, memorable day. As President Ronald Reagan once said, "The outside of a horse is good for the inside of a man."

Neil Shaw is the president and organizer of the Moonville Rail Trail. He has been involved with trail development and maintenance for more than 20 years, and it has always been his dream to develop more and better equine and muscle-powered trails. For more information about the trail, visit www.moonvillerrailtrail.com or call 740.385.5306.

From the soft rhythm of hoofbeats to the music of woodland birdsongs, Shaw says there's no better way to experience a trail than on horseback.

PHOTOS: © COURTESY OF NEIL SHAW



Shaw's grandson Josh Swyers on Colonel, just outside the Moonville Tunnel.