

Pulling Fence Posts

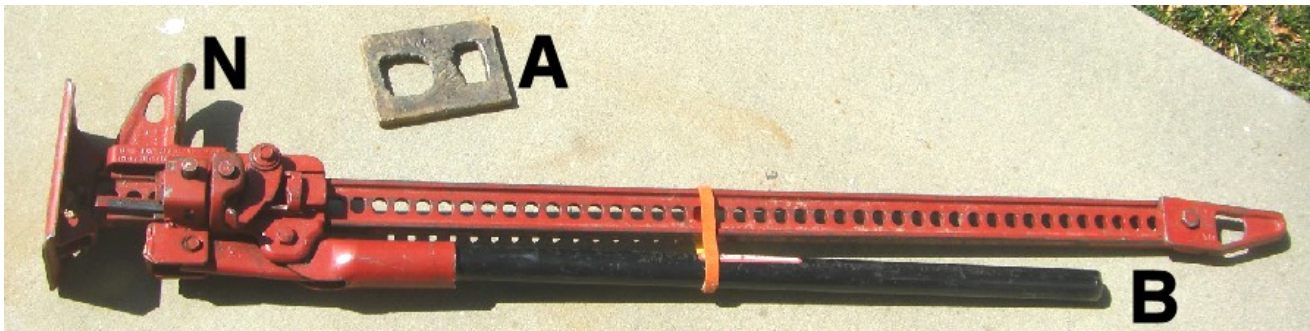
someonesdad1@gmail.com 25 Jul 2012

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I like to use the steel tee fence posts around the yard. They're easy to pound into the ground and hook wire to them to make fences. One or a few can be pounded in with a sledge hammer, but you'll do yourself a favor if you get a post driver. These are a chunk of steel pipe with handles on them and the end welded shut. Farmers commonly made them from scrap, but you can buy them at the local farm supply store:



Pulling these fence posts out, however, is another matter. For years I used the technique of a metal plate and a hi-lift jack:



The left-hand hole in the metal plate A is slipped around the fence post and the nose N of the hi-lift jack B is inserted in the small right-hand hole of the plate. Then the jack is used to lift the post out of the ground. This method works, but you often wind up with a bent post, things can slip, and it can be frustrating on uneven or impossible on muddy ground.

I've sometimes had to tie point B of the jack to a vehicle to keep the jack from tipping inwards when it is lifting; if no vehicle is available, it can be difficult to keep the jack from tipping -- then you're in for lots more work, as you have to pull the top of the jack back from the post, which pulls it out of the ground, but without the leverage you get from this lever method. If you don't understand what I'm complaining about, then you'll just have to use a jack to pull a few posts out and it'll be clearer.

If you want to spend some money, there's a tool called a "post popper" or tee post jack that will do the job. It's the same technique as what I present below except it uses a class 1 lever instead. Harbor Freight sells one for \$25 and other brands appear to be \$50-\$60. Unfortunately, it's a one-trick pony and unless you need to pull lots of posts or your time is precious, why not use other things you already have around the house? For more ideas, do a web search on "tee post puller". It also can't pull larger diameter round steel posts or 4x4 posts (which the chain mentioned below can do just fine).

The easiest way to to pull such things out is with a chain and a a front end loader or the 3-point hitch of a tractor that can be lifted hydraulically. But most of us don't have such tools (I recently used a Bobcat skid-steer to grade my mother-in-law's property and her son and I pulled out a number of rose bushes and small trees using the above chain).

In the summer of 2012, I had to get a heavy chain link fence post out of the ground that had a cylinder of concrete around it about 0.7 m long and around 30 cm wide (it was heavy enough to make it hard to lift). I had installed it the previous summer in anticipation of building a fence (we were reusing an old fence post), but my wife decided she wanted the post somewhere else. I was dreading the task of getting this thing out of the ground, as the tee post pulling plate above wouldn't work and the concrete cylinder had too large of a diameter to use the Hi-lift jack. I figured I would have to dig the post out and this would have been a lot of work in hard, dry ground.

Then it occurred to me to try a lever to pull the fence posts out. I grabbed a saw horse, a chunk of steel pipe, and a chunk of chain. **It was surprisingly effective.** In fact, it's so effective that I've not used the jack method since then. The pipe was a 2.1 m chunk of 1-1/4" [32 mm] galvanized steel pipe I had laying around the house. It has a union on one end and is a chunk of scrap I got from a friend when he moved back east.

Here's the chain:



This is a chunk of 5/16" [8 mm] chain about 1.5 m long. A slip hook is at A and a grab hook at B. This chain has seen lots of use over the decades in pulling out shrubs, small trees, and posts. The slip hook is important, as it allows you to get a good grip on whatever you're pulling (some folks call such a chain setup a "logging chain" because you can grab and pull logs with it). This chunk of chain came from a 20 foot long piece of chain I bought 30-40 years ago. The longer piece has two grab hooks on it and is used where I need a longer piece of chain. But this 1.5 m chain gets used around the house more for various pulling tasks. A good 5/16" chain should have a working load limit of around 1700 kgf (17 kN, 3900 lbf).

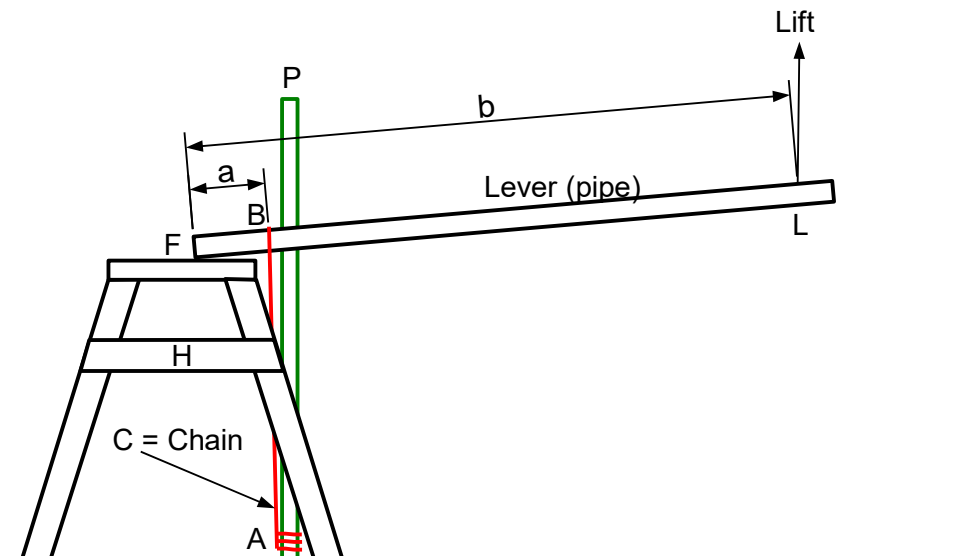
The method I use for grabbing something for pulling is as follows:



Figure 1

When the right-hand end of the chain is pulled to the right and things are snugged up, this grabs whatever you're pulling quite tightly. And it comes loose easily when you're done. This grabbing method allows you to apply a pull parallel to or perpendicular to the pipe's axis or any angle in between. If the thing you're pulling is a chunk of wood, the chain will ding it up, so you may want to wrap it with something to minimize damage. But the wrapped material may mean the chain is more likely to slip.

Here's a diagram of how to pull out a fence post using these tools:



Sawhorse H supports the lever at fulcrum F. The sawhorse is put close to the fence post P to be pulled out (this is needed to make the method effective). Then the chain C is wrapped around the fence post at A as shown in Figure 1. The chain is moved so that point B moves towards point F, **minimizing the dimension a**. The smaller the dimension a is, the more lifting force you can apply to the post.

Once the chain is in place, you lift the pipe at point L (this is a class 2 lever and operates in the same fashion as a wheelbarrow). The lever multiplies your lifting force by the ratio b/a (calculate the torques about the fulcrum to see this). In my case, since b is 2.1 m and a was 75 to 100 mm, this ratio was around 20 to 30. If you can lift 100 units of weight, you can apply a force of 2000 units of weight or more to lift the post out of the ground. A longer lever can produce larger forces.

This task is easier with two people. One person adjusts the chain and the other person lifts on the lever. As soon as you've lifted the lever as high as you can, lower it, reposition the chain for a new purchase, and lift again. Repeat until the post is out of the ground. It usually only takes two or three purchases to get a post out of the ground.

With a bit of adjustment, you can get the chain within about 50 mm of the fulcrum point. This can let a boy pull out a fence post by lifting the lever on the other end (I just verified this, as our neighbor's boy was helping me move some fence posts and he pulled out some of the posts with no help from me).

I've also used this method to pull steel pipe posts and 4x4 wooden fence posts, both in concrete, out of the ground. One of the method's advantages is that you don't need to put the base of a hi-lift jack next to the post. I've had to try to pull fence posts when the ground was muddy and this hi-lift jack method would never work. A three-legged sawhorse will sit stably on nearly any terrain. You can pick where you put the sawhorse's legs -- stick some plywood under them if the ground is wet.

An 8 or 10 foot [2.4 or 3.0 m] 2x4 could make a good temporary lever. You can use rope instead of chain to pull on the fence post, but you'll have to secure things a little more carefully to avoid slipping and the rope may stretch, making it less effective than a chain. I'd try a Prusik hitch first. But the chain works so well, never slips, and doesn't stretch that I recommend a chain over rope.

If you pull out some hard-to-pull fence posts, you may want to rest the fulcrum on a scrap chunk of wood. A strong lift on the lever can easily put a good 10 mm deep ding into the wood of the sawhorse. Or, keep two or three scrap 2x4 chunks 6" long and you can use these for the fulcrum. Instead of readjusting the chain, slip one or two 2x4s under the lever and lift again.