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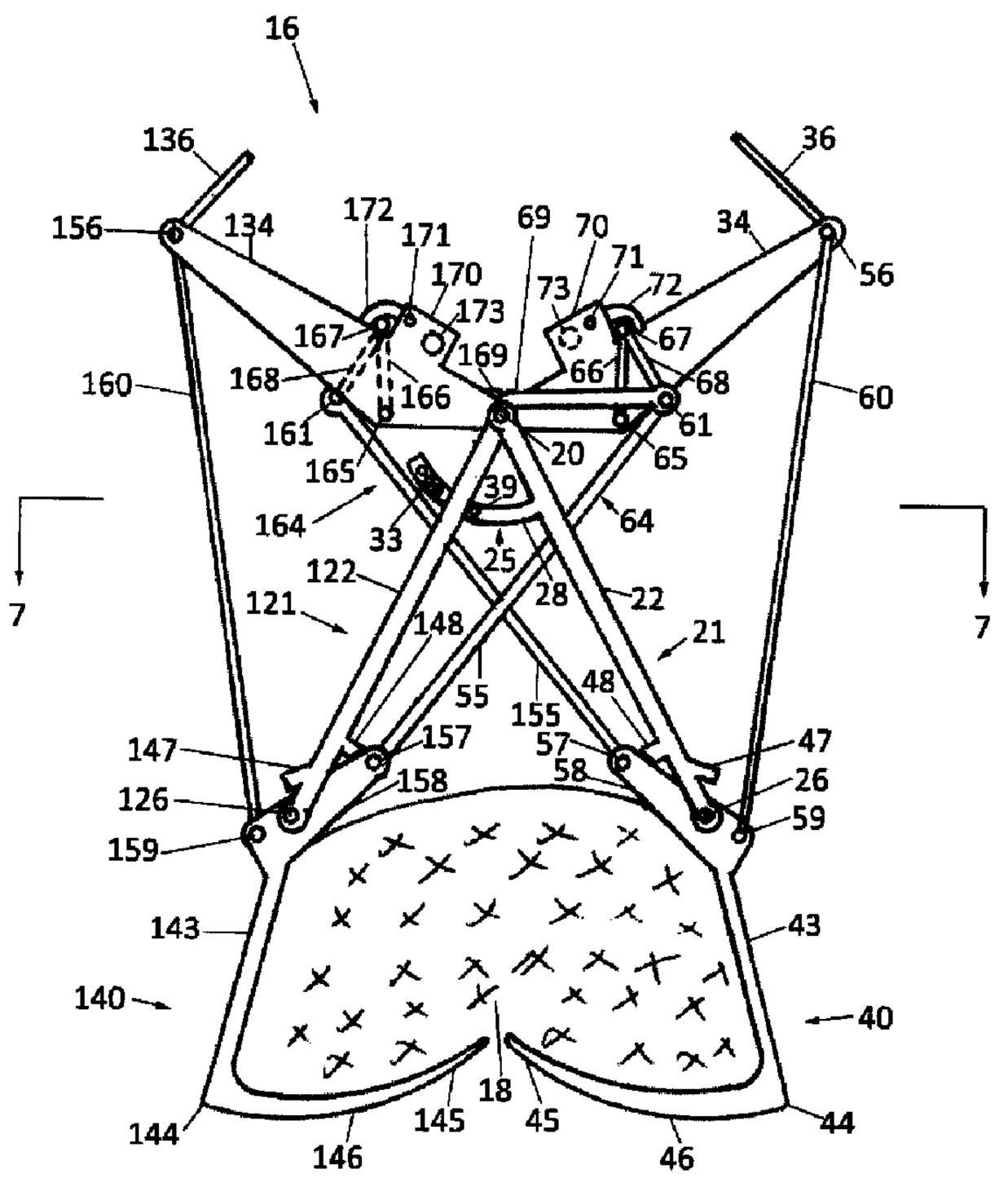

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ABSTRACT

A grapple, designed to grab, ferry, and dump loads of loose material such as mulch, comprising left and right frame members and finger assemblies with specially adapted curved fingers. Load arms connect the grapple to a supporting means, typically a helicopter, and also serve as anchors for finger cables and connecting arms cooperating with the finger assemblies to open and close the grapple. The method of grabbing prominently features using the shape of the fingers and the weight of the grapple and load to penetrate into and under the load. A latching mechanism cooperating with the connecting arms ensures stable ferrying until the remote operator, generally the helicopter pilot, activates an electrical control switch to release the latch and dump the load.

AERIAL GRAPPLE APPARATUS AND METHOD FOR HANDLING LOOSE MATERIAL

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CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATION

[0001] This application claims the priority filing date benefit of U.S. Provisional Patent Application Ser. No. 61/134,547, filed Jul. 11, 2008.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0002] The invention relates to a grapple apparatus for grasping, lifting, and releasing loads, particularly adapted for handling loose material such as hay or mulch, and the method of operation of the apparatus.

[0003] Grappling devices are common in a number of agricultural and industrial fields and there is a steady demand for improved material-handling apparatus and methods. One fairly recent application for which a well adapted grapple would be useful is the practice of helimulching, i.e. spreading mulch and related materials over large land areas by dropping the material from a helicopter at an altitude suitable to gain the dispersal required. While this is not

the only intended application of the present invention, it points out several directions which, individually or in combination, could present goals for improvement over prior art grapples. Specifically, a device used for helimulching must be efficient in its use of people, time, and weight, as many aerial grappling applications take place in wilderness areas where ground-based options are not safe or practical to pursue, and the cost of helicopter time, fuel, and labor is high. An effective grapple for this purpose must also be robust in its ability to manage shock loading, to which helicopters are especially sensitive.

[0004] There is no prior art device known to the inventors that combines all of the above strengths. However, an inventory of a few selected prior art grapples will identify the problems traditionally encountered in the development of related machines.

[0005] U.S. Patent 52,134, issued Jan. 23, 1866 to Buckman, discloses the semi-automatic operation of a horse hay-fork having fork tines or fingers at the lower ends of its frame halves which are guided, through a combination of levers and hinges, to an essentially horizontal position when retaining a load and an essentially vertical position when releasing a load. The release control requires only the pulling of a rope. However, the rope must be pulled manually, making such a grapple ineffective for working at altitude or in heavily sloped and wooded areas where human access is limited.

[0006] U.S. Patent 1,462,787, issued Dec. 19, 1921 to Degendorfer, offers an example of an agricultural fork which explicitly eliminates the need for direct manual intervention with the machine itself; the machine can be controlled remotely by a derrick operator. In this machine the weight of the load even provides some advantage in that it exerts forces on the machine causing it to retain its closed position more firmly. However, the operation still requires multiple cables and therefore some operator skill, and the machine is still confined to ground-based operation.

[0007] U.S. Patent 2,815,242, issued Dec. 3, 1957 to Kenyon, discloses a tongs-like device also featuring the intelligent use of weight to help grasp a load, but the weight in this case takes the form of a counterweight, which would dramatically reduce efficiency in a force- and fuel-critical helicopter-towed operation.

[0008] Another effective ground-based use of weight is found in U.S. Patent 4,943,099, issued Jul. 24, 1990 to Gabriel, for a magnetic cargo hook that automatically releases when it hits the ground, due to its weight being transferred from a load cable to the ground. However, for aerial operations, the ground-based release would severely limit available altitude and likely applications.

[0009] More recently, U.S. Patent 5,653,489, issued Aug. 5, 1997 to present co-inventor Fandrich, provides the best prior art reference as it takes several steps in the right direction while still leaving ample room for improvement. The grapple disclosed in that patent is specifically designed for aerial operation and as such is both lightweight and strong, so that helicopter payload can be maximized. The grapple features shock damping devices to reduce operator risk and fingers capable of squeezing tightly and releasing slowly. However, this earlier grapple is best suited for certain types of materials, particularly for logs, as they are able to be grasped firmly when sufficient clamping force is available. Other materials, especially loose materials such as mulch, do not submit as readily to this type of grabbing action. Minimally, a series of improvements to the existing machine would be required, none of which would be obvious at first.

BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0010] The apparatus and method of this disclosure provide substantial improvements to the aerial grappling of loose materials, including a method featuring substantially automatic operation.

[0011] A grapple apparatus according to the main embodiment of the invention comprises right and left main frame members hinged together at a main hinge, and right and left finger assemblies each hinged to a respective frame member at a respective finger hinge. Each finger assembly comprises a finger frame and plural fingers mounted on the frame. The fingers are designed to penetrate a pile of loose material such as mulch. The finger assemblies rotate relative to the frame members in order to grab and dump loads, and their rotation is limited by inward and outward stops cooperating with the main frame.

[0012] The grapple further comprises right and left load arms hinged together at the main hinge. The ends of the load arms are also connected to load cables which in turn are connected by a main cable to a supporting means such as a helicopter. Connecting arms connect each load arm to the finger assembly on the opposite side of the grapple, and finger cables connect each load arm to the finger assembly on the same side of the grapple. The connecting arms therefore assist in holding the grapple closed, while the finger cables assist in holding the grapple open.

[0013] Latches on the load arms control the connection between the connecting arms and load arms. The latches are normally engaged but can be disengaged by means of a solenoid connected by power wires to a control switch used by the operator, typically the pilot of the towing helicopter.

[0014] The drawings and detailed description following further disclose the main embodiment of the apparatus and its method of operation, followed by a series of options and

alternatives, as well as an additional embodiment of the apparatus and its related method of operation, all of which are intended to enable a person having ordinary skill in the art to make and use the invention without limiting the scope thereof to the embodiments particularly described and illustrated herein.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0015] FIG. **1** is a front orthogonal view of the grapple in its closed position while ferrying a load.

[0016] FIG. **2** is a front orthogonal view of the grapple in its open position after releasing a load.

[0017] FIG. **3** is a front orthogonal view featuring the right half of the grapple during its reset operation, the left half being essentially a mirror image of the same.

[0018] FIG. **4** is a front orthogonal view of the grapple after completing its reset operation and ready to grasp a load.

[0019] FIG. **5** is a front orthogonal view of the grapple showing optional damping mechanisms and an optional spring on the right half of the grapple, the left half being essentially a mirror image of the same.

[0020] FIG. **6** is a simplified perspective view showing optional netting enclosure and an advantageous arrangement of fingers on one half of the grapple frame, the other half being essentially a mirror image of the same.

[0021] FIG. **7** is a simplified top sectional view of an advantageous arrangement of the main frame stop assembly, the sectioning plane being shown in FIG. 1.

[0022] FIG. **8** is a front orthogonal view of an alternative arrangement of the load cables.

[0023] FIG. **9** is a front orthogonal view of an additional embodiment of the grapple apparatus showing an alternative connecting arm on the right half of the grapple, the other connecting arm being essentially a mirror image of the same.

[0024] The drawings and specification employ the following reference numerals. Paired reference numerals (e.g. "21, 121") indicate functionally identical pairs of elements, one appearing in each of the two halves of the grapple apparatus. Such paired elements will typically be mirror images of each other.

[0025] The following reference numerals first appear in the description of the main embodiment, which corresponds to FIGS. **1** through **4**:

16	grapple apparatus	39	frame inward stop hole
18	load	40, 140	finger assembly
20	main hinge	43, 143	finger frame
21, 121	frame assembly	44, 144	finger mounts
22, 122	main frame	45, 145	finger tips
25	main stop assembly	46, 146	fingers
26, 126	finger hinge	47, 147	finger open limit stop
28	main frame limit rod	48, 148	finger closed limit stop
29	main stop pin	50	load cable mount
33	main stop hole(s)	54	main cable
34, 134	load arms	55, 155	pull arm rods
36, 136	load cables	56, 156	finger cable arm mount
38	frame inward stop pin	57, 157	pull arm hinge

58, 158	lower arm mount	69, 169	guide lever
59, 159	finger cable mount	70, 170	latch
60, 160	finger cable	71, 171	latch pin
61, 161	guide hinge	72, 172	latch hook
64, 164	connecting arm	73, 173	solenoid
65, 165	lever arm hinge	75, 175	power wire
66, 166	pull arm upper lever	76	main power wire
67, 167	lever hinge	90	load arm movement arrow
68, 168	pull arm lower lever	92	lever movement arrow

[**0026**] The following reference numerals first appear in the description of the options and alternatives, which corresponds to FIGS. **5** through **8**:

27	main stop hinge	74, 174	spring
31	main stop slider	77, 177	spring frame mount
32	main stop resilient bushing	78, 178	spring arm mount
35	frame inward stop bushing	95	netting enclosure
41	frame damper	96-99	netting mounting springs
49, 149	finger cable damper rod		
51, 151	finger cable damper mount	236	alt. load cable
52, 152	finger cable damper	247, 347	alt. finger open limit stop
53, 153	finger cable damper cylinder	250	alt. load cable mount
62, 162	lower finger cable	253	cable pulley
63, 163	upper finger cable	260, 360	alt. finger cable assembly

[0027] The following reference numerals first appear in the description of the additional embodiment, which corresponds to FIG. **9**:

434, 534	alt. load arm	460, 560	alt. finger cable
448, 548	alt. finger closed limit stop	461, 561	alt. guide hinge
455, 555	push arm rod	464, 564	alt. connecting arm
456, 556	alt. finger cable arm mount	465, 565	alt. lever arm hinge
457, 557	push arm lower hinge	467, 567	push arm pin
458, 558	alt. lower arm mount	469, 569	alt. guide lever
459, 559	alt. finger cable mount		

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

[0028] The grapple apparatus **16** described herein comprises right and left halves connected at a main hinge **20**. When description is given for only one half of the grapple, and additional reference numerals are given in parentheses, it is to be understood that the opposite half of the grapple acts simultaneously with the half described and in a similar way thereto, generally as a mirror image thereof. This practice shall be employed selectively in order to optimize clarity and, where possible, simplicity.

FIG. 1

Description of the main embodiment

[0029] As seen in FIG. **1**, a grapple apparatus **16** according to the invention comprises right and left frame assemblies **21** and **121** having inner portions, here designated as right and left

main frame members **22** and **122** respectively, hinged together at main hinge **20**. The frame assemblies **21** and **121** also have outer portions, here designated as right and left finger assemblies **40** and **140** respectively, joined to respective main frame members **22** and **122** by right and left finger hinges **26** and **126** respectively.

[**0030**] The main frame members **22** and **122** are also bridged by a main stop assembly **25** which cooperates with main frame members **22** and **122** to limit outward rotational movement of frame assemblies **21** and **121** with respect to the main hinge **20**. Main stop assembly **25** comprises main frame limit rod **28**, which is attached to main frame **22**, and one or more main stop holes **33** into which main stop pin **29** (shown in FIG. **7**) may be placed to fix an outer limit to the rotation of frame assemblies **21** and **121** about main hinge **20** and thereby limit the extent to which the grapple is able to open. Similarly, main stop assembly **25** may further comprise one or more frame inward stop holes **39** into which frame inward stop pin **38** (shown in FIG. **7**) may be placed to fix an inner limit to the rotation of frame assemblies **21** and **121** about main hinge **20** and thereby limit the extent to which the grapple is able to close.

[**0031**] Finger assembly **40 (140)** comprises a finger frame **43 (143)** to which plural fingers **46 (146)** are fastened, said fingers having inner portions fastened to finger frame **43 (143)** at finger mounts **44 (144)** and outer portions, here designated as finger tips **45 (145)**, designed to penetrate a pile of loose material (not shown) such as, but not limited to, mulch.

[**0032**] Finger frame **43 (143)** is hinged to rotate with respect to main frame **22 (122)** about finger hinge **26 (126)**, said rotation being limited by finger open limit stop **47 (147)** and finger closed limit stop **48 (148)** which are fastened to main frame **22 (122)**. Finger open limit stop **47 (147)** is adapted to contact finger assembly **40 (140)** to limit its outward rotation relative to main

frame **22** (**122**). Finger closed limit stop **48** (**148**) is adapted to contact finger assembly **40** (**140**) to limit its inward rotation relative to main frame **22** (**122**).

[0033] When the grapple is fully closed, as seen in FIG. **1**, fingers **46** (**146**) extend in a generally horizontal direction. When the grapple is fully open, as seen in FIG. **2**, fingers **46** (**146**) extend in a generally vertical direction.

[0034] Returning to FIG. **1**, the grapple further comprises right and left load arms **34** and **134** having inner portions hinged together at the main hinge **20**, and outer portions cooperating with right and left load cables **36** and **136** respectively. Load cables **36** and **136** are connected at load cable mount **50** (shown in FIG. **4**) to main cable **54** (shown in FIG. **4**) which is typically suspended from a helicopter.

[0035] Load arms **34** and **134** are disposed symmetrically on opposite sides of a vertical plane of symmetry passing through main hinge **20** and parallel to load arms **34** and **134**. Likewise, right and left connecting arms **64** and **164**, as well as right and left latches **70** and **170**, are disposed symmetrically on opposite sides of the same vertical plane.

[0036] Connecting arms **64** and **164** are connected at their respective upper termini to load arms **34** and **134**, respectively. The lower terminus of right connecting arm **64** is connected to left finger assembly **140**, and the lower terminus of left connecting arm **164** is connected to right finger assembly **40**.

[0037] Connecting arm **64** (**164**) comprises pull arm upper lever **66** (**166**), pull arm lower lever **68** (**168**), pull arm rod **55** (**155**), and a series of hinges. The upper portion of pull arm upper lever **66** (**166**) is hinged to load arm **34** (**134**) by lever arm hinge **65** (**165**). The lower portion of pull arm upper lever **66** (**166**) is hinged to the upper portion of pull arm lower lever **68** (**168**) by lever hinge **67** (**167**). The lower portion of pull arm lower lever **68** (**168**) is hinged to

the upper portion of pull arm rod **55** (**155**) by guide hinge **61** (**161**). The lower portion of pull arm rod **55** (**155**) is hinged to the upper portion of lower arm mount **158** (**58**) by pull arm hinge **157** (**57**). The lower portion of lower arm mount **158** (**58**) is connected to finger frame **143** (**43**).

[**0038**] Right and left guide levers **69** and **169** are hinged at their inner portions to main hinge **20**, about which guide levers **69** and **169** rotate. The other end of guide lever **69** (**169**) is hinged to pull arm lower lever **68** (**168**) and pull arm rod **55** (**155**) at guide hinge **61** (**161**).

[**0039**] Right and left latches **70** and **170** are connected to load arms **34** and **134** respectively. Latch **70** (**170**) has a latch hook **72** (**172**) designed to engage automatically with lever hinge **67** (**167**) and to disengage upon operator control. Latch hook **72** (**172**) is capable of articulation about latch pin **71** (**171**).

[**0040**] Right and left solenoids **73** and **173** are connected to latches **70** and **170** respectively, and disengage said latches when energized by the operator (not shown), who sends an electrical current to main power wire **76** (shown in FIG. **4**) and thence to right and left power wires **75** (shown in FIG. **4**) and **175**, which in turn energize solenoids **73** and **173** respectively. It is desirable that the latches disengage simultaneously.

[**0041**] Right and left finger cables **60** and **160** serve as flexible tensile links connecting respective load arms **34** and **134** to respective finger assemblies **40** and **140**. Finger cable **60** (**160**) has an upper portion connected to finger cable arm mount **56** (**156**) on the outer portion of load arm **34** (**134**) and a lower portion connected to finger cable mount **59** (**159**) on finger frame **43** (**143**).

Operation – General

[**0042**] The grapple's operation is characterized by a cycle of (a) grabbing and lifting a load, (b) ferrying the load to a desired location, (c) dumping the load, and (d) resetting the mechanism in preparation for grabbing the next load. For greatest clarity this cycle will be described beginning and ending with the ferrying stage as seen in FIG. **1**.

[**0043**] It will be assumed in this description that the grapple is suspended from a helicopter (not shown) and that "the operator" refers to said helicopter's pilot (not shown). However, this assumption is not intended to limit the scope of conditions in which the grapple may be operated. The operation as described can be easily extended to include other means by which the grapple may be supported (e.g. by a ground-based crane) and/or controlled (e.g. by wireless remote control).

[**0044**] It will also be assumed, for the illustrative purposes of this description, that the load being manipulated comprises loose material such as mulch; however, this single example of particularly advantageous material is not intended to provide or suggest any limitation as to other types of loads the invention, in various expressions, could effectively manipulate.

Operation – Ferrying

[**0045**] FIG. 1 shows the grapple apparatus **16** in the condition of ferrying a load **18**.

[**0046**] When the grapple is supported by a helicopter or other load-carrying device, main cable **54** (shown in FIG. **4**) supports load cables **36** and **136**, which in turn support the outer portions of load arms **34** and **134** hinged about main hinge **20**. Finger cable **60** (**160**) connects load arm **34** (**134**) to finger assembly **40** (**140**). The solenoid **73** (**173**) on latch **70** (**170**) is normally de-energized, so latch hook **72** (**172**) holds lever hinge **67** (**167**), maintaining the

upward and inward pulling force of connecting arm **64** (**164**) acting on finger assembly **140** (**40**) on the opposite half of the grapple. Finger assemblies **40** and **140** enclose the load, which generally sits on top of fingers **46** and **146**.

[0047] Generally the grapple is prevented from closing further by one or more of the following conditions being met:

(a) finger cable **60** (**160**) is taut;

(b) finger assembly **40** (**140**) is in contact with finger closed limit stop **48** (**148**) on main frame **22** (**122**); and/or

(c) main frame **122** is in contact with optional frame inward stop pin **38** (shown in FIG. **7**), if pin **38** is present in frame inward stop hole **39**; and/or

(d) the load **18** is such that forces on it are sufficient to keep finger assemblies **40** and **140** apart.

[0048] Condition (a) is particularly advantageous as tension in finger cables **60** and **160** will ensure minimal shock loading when the load is released.

[0049] The precise spatial relationships between parts of the grapple may vary from load to load. However, in all of the above ferrying conditions, the load is securely retained and all parts of the grapple maintain essentially constant positions relative to one another.

FIG. **2**

Operation – Dumping

[0050] The dumping operation may be executed at any altitude suitable for the application, provided that t he loaded grapple is airborne, i.e. the preponderance of its weight is supported by main cable **54**.

[0051] The helicopter or other suspending device may be stationary or in motion at a speed suitable for the application. For example, when aerially spreading thin layers of mulch over large areas, it can be advantageous to release the load from a moving helicopter for broader dispersal and higher efficiency.

[0052] When the load is to be released, the operator activates an electrical control switch (not shown) which energizes solenoid **73 (173)** which, in turn, causes latch **70 (170)** to disengage. As lever hinge **67 (167)** is released from latch hook **72 (172)**, connecting arm **64 (164)** is able to straighten and extend, permitting frame assemblies **21** and **121** to move away from each other by rotating outward about main hinge **20**. Also, the disengagement of connecting arm **64 (164)** from latch **70 (170)** partially relieves load arm **34 (134)** of the weight of the grapple and load, causing the outer portion of said load arm to move upward and inward relative to main hinge **20** due to tension on load cable **36 (136)**. This movement of load arm **34 (134)** also pulls upward on finger cable **60 (160)**, tightening said cable and causing outward rotation of finger assembly **40 (140)** about finger hinge **26 (126)** and of frame assembly **21 (121)** about main hinge **20**. If finger cable **60 (160)** has already been under tension prior to dumping, minimal shock loading will be transferred to the helicopter or other suspending device.

[0053] The grapple will continue to open further until at least one of the following conditions is met:

(a) Finger assembly **40 (140)** contacts finger open limit stop **47 (147)**.

(b) Main frame **122** contacts main stop pin **29** (shown in FIG. 7) in main stop hole **33**.

[0054] With the grapple thus opened, especially with the large distance between finger assemblies **40** and **140** and the generally vertical orientation of fingers **46** and **146**, the load (not shown) drops.

[0055] After dumping, the grapple may be safely ferried in the resulting empty open condition to the subsequent site where a load is to be grabbed.

FIGS. **3** and **4**

Operation – Resetting

[0056] FIG. **3** shows one load arm **34** and related parts at an arbitrary point during the resetting operation; the other load arm **134** (not shown in FIG. **3**) and its related parts act in essentially the same way. FIG. **4** shows the entire grapple when the resetting operation is completed. Simultaneous reference to both drawings is recommended for this portion of the description.

[0057] The resetting operation is executed at the site where the next load is to be grabbed. The operator lowers the grapple to the ground. As main cable **54** (shown in FIG. **4**) lowers and slackens, the weight of load arm **34** (**134**) causes said arm to rotate about main hinge **20**, in the direction of arrow **90**, toward a lowered position.

[0058] Pull arm upper lever **66** rotates about lever arm hinge **65** in the direction of arrow **92** until lever hinge **67** engages latch hook **72** on latch **70**. Likewise, pull arm upper lever **166** rotates about lever arm hinge **165** until lever hinge **167** engages latch hook **172** on latch **170**, the result of which operation is seen in FIG. **4**. The mechanisms in each half of the grapple, though equivalent in function, act essentially independently of each other and may not occur exactly simultaneously, especially on uneven or steeply sloped ground.

[0059] Once latch hooks **72** and **172** are engaged with lever hinges **67** and **167** respectively, the grapple is considered to be "reset" and prepared to grab the next load, which it may do immediately and in the same location where it has just been reset.

[0060] The reset operation requires only the machine's own weight and, like all other steps of the grapple's cycle of operation, can be performed without direct manual intervention. The reset operation also, like all other steps in the grapple's cycle of operation other than dumping the load, can be performed without need for external power.

Operation – Grabbing and lifting

[0061] Continuing with FIG. **4**, the grapple **16** straddles the load **18** and is supported by its fingers **46** and **146** on the load or ground. When main cable **54** is lifted, load cables **36** and **136** lift the outer ends of load arms **34** and **134** respectively, which rotate about main hinge **20**. The top of connecting arm **64** (**164**) is lifted by load arm **34** (**134**), transmitting force to the opposite finger assembly **140** (**40**), which rotates inwardly about finger hinge **126** (**26**) and also causes inward rotation of frame assembly **121** (**21**) about main hinge **20**. As finger assemblies **40** and **140** rotate, fingers **46** and **146** penetrate load **18**. The added weight of the load on fingers **46** and **146** allows a greater upward force to be applied to main cable **54**, which results in a greater torque applied to rotate finger assemblies **40** and **140** and corresponding greater penetrating force on the load.

[0062] When the torque on finger assemblies **40** and **140** is less than that required for fingers **46** and **146** to penetrate the load, the grapple begins to lift. This normally results in a decrease of the force required to penetrate the load, so finger assemblies **40** and **140** will start to rotate again and fingers **46** and **146** will penetrate farther into the load. There is minimal disturbance in the load as fingers **46** (**146**) rotate about finger hinge **26** (**126**).

[0063] Finger assembly **40** (**140**) continues to rotate until at least one of the following conditions is met:

(a) the force required to penetrate the load **18** is greater than that available on fingers **46 (146)**;

(b) finger cable **60 (160)** becomes taut;

(c) finger assembly **40 (140)** contacts finger closed limit stop **48 (148)** on main frame **22 (122)**; and/or

(d) main frame **122** contacts optional frame inward stop pin **38** (shown in FIG. **7**), if pin **38** is present in frame inward stop hole **39**.

[0064] If condition (c) is the first to be met, frame assembly **21 (121)**, which comprises main frame **22 (122)** and finger assembly **40 (140)**, may continue to rotate as a single unit about main hinge **20** until condition (a), (b), and/or (d) is met.

[0065] As the upward force on main cable **54** increases, the loaded grapple lifts off. The grapple, once airborne, exhibits the stable closed condition it will retain while being ferried to the dumping site. Thus it may be ferried as already described, and the cycle of grabbing, ferrying, dumping, and resetting can be repeated as many times as desired without interruption.

[0066] The grapple when operated as described offers increased safety and reduced cost, as all stages of its operating cycle can be controlled by the remote operator and therefore no ground crew is required. Further, no specialized skills are required of the operator as most load-handling is performed automatically by the grapple; for example, the operator need only lift the grapple in order to make it grab, and need only activate a switch in order to make the grapple dump.

Options and alternatives

[0067] The description thus far has disclosed a main embodiment of the grapple apparatus and of the method used to operate it. What follows is a discussion of some optional components

that may be added to the main embodiment, some particularly advantageous expressions of certain structures therein, and some alternatives to components of the main embodiment, including a second embodiment of the grapple featuring an alternative connecting arm.

FIG. **5**

Optional damping mechanisms

[0068] Shock absorption is most critical at the dumping stage of the grapple's operation. At this point, large forces are being transferred instantaneously, and helicopters are particularly sensitive to shock loading. While for most applications the tension in finger cables **60** and **160** (such as in FIGS. **1** and **2**) prior to dumping minimizes shock loading, it is sometimes desirable to add additional damping capability at key places on the grapple. This is especially true when grasping unusually shaped loads that leave finger assemblies **40** and **140** further apart and finger cables **60** and **160** more slack than would otherwise be considered optimal behavior. In such a case, the rapid tightening of finger cables **60** and **160** would generate a larger-than-usual shock load.

[0069] This potential problem can be alleviated with one or more of the following modifications, all seen in FIG. **5**.

[0070] A first possible modification involves attaching an optional frame damper **41** bridging main frame members **22** and **122** so that resistance in frame damper **41** will retard its extension and thus reduce the speed of frame opening.

[0071] A second possible modification involves replacing finger cable **60** (**160**) from the main embodiment (as seen in FIGS. **1** through **4**) with alternative finger cable assembly **260**

(**360**) as seen in FIG. **5**. Finger cable assembly **260** (**360**) includes a finger cable damper **52** (**152**) having

(a) a fixed upper cylinder **53** (**153**) attached to finger cable damper mount **51** (**151**), which is attached to finger cable arm mount **56** (**156**) on load arm **34** (**134**), and

(b) a movable lower rod **49** (**149**) attached to the upper end of lower finger cable **62** (**162**), the lower end of which is attached to finger cable mount **59** (**159**).

[**0072**] Finger cable assembly **260** (**360**) further comprises upper finger cable **63** (**163**), the upper end of which is attached to finger cable damper mount **51** (**151**), and the lower end of which is clamped to lower finger cable **62** (**162**) at a point such that upper finger cable **63** (**163**) becomes taut just before finger cable damper **52** (**152**) is fully extended.

[**0073**] Thus, upper finger cable **63** (**163**) will be slack at first, allowing the pace at which finger cable assembly **260** (**360**) extends to be largely controlled and partially retarded by the extension of finger cable damper **52** (**152**). When finger cable damper rod **49** (**149**) has extended sufficiently for upper finger cable **63** (**163**) to become taut, finger cable assembly **260** (**360**) will behave similarly to finger cable **60** (**160**) in the main embodiment previously described.

[**0074**] A third possible modification involves replacing finger open limit stops **47** and **147** from the main embodiment (as seen in FIGS. **1** through **4**) with alternative finger open limit stops **247** and **347** (seen in FIG. **5**), comprising resilient material such as urethane placed where the stop would normally contact finger assemblies **40** and **140** respectively. The resilient material in stop **247** (**347**) will deform upon contact with finger assembly **40** (**140**) and absorb some of its kinetic energy.

[**0075**] A fourth possible modification involves introducing an optional resilient bushing **32** to travel over main frame limit rod **28** between main frame **122** and the main stop hole **33** in

which main stop pin **29** is placed. Main stop resilient bushing **32** comprises resilient material in order to absorb shocks when rapid outward rotation of main frame members **22** and **122** is halted by main stop assembly **25**. (FIG. **5** also depicts an optional frame inward stop bushing **35** which could serve a similar function by absorbing energy from inward rotation of main frame members **22** and **122**.)

[**0076**] The above modifications may be employed individually or in combination as the application requires. Whichever combination of modifications is implemented, the operating cycle of the grapple remains essentially the same as that described for the main embodiment.

Optional springs

[**0077**] The resetting operation described as part of the main embodiment (and seen in FIGS. **3** and **4**) is already simple and effective, relying as it does only on the weight of load arm **34 (134)** to reset latch **70 (170)**. However, in some cases it may be desirable to have downwardly and inwardly directed force acting on load arm **34 (134)** in addition to its weight. One example of such a case could involve attempting to reset the grapple while it is positioned on a steep hillside such that the right half of the grapple, including load arm **34**, stands much lower than the left half. Resetting latch **70** on load arm **34** in this case would require some inward force, which could be provided by the introduction of an extension spring. As seen in FIG. **5**, spring **74**, mounted between spring frame mount **177** on main frame **122** and spring arm mount **78** on load arm **34**, is positioned advantageously to exert sufficient pulling force to supplement the weight of load arm **34** in order to complete the resetting operation.

[0078] Likewise, though not explicitly shown in FIG. **5**, the equivalent spring **174**, mounted between spring frame mount **77** on main frame **22** and spring arm mount **178** on load arm **134**, would provide similar function.

[0079] Apart from a possible increase in the efficiency and effectiveness of the resetting operation provided by the springs, the operating cycle of the grapple remains essentially the same as that described for the main embodiment.

FIG. **6**

Optional netting enclosure

[0080] The ability of the grapple to retain certain types of loads can be improved if the preponderance of the grapple's frame **21** (and **121**, not shown in FIG. **6**) is enclosed with netting material **95** as seen in FIG. **6**. Further, the effectiveness of netting material **95** in enclosing the load being grabbed, lifted, or ferried can be improved by installing netting mounting springs **96**, **97**, **98**, and **99** on the edges of finger frames **43** and **143** not already joined by finger mounts **44** or **144** or finger hinges **26** or **126** to other components.

[0081] The operating cycle of the grapple with netting is the same as that described for the main embodiment.

Advantageous arrangement of fingers

[0082] In an advantageous arrangement, seen in FIG. **6**, the shape of each finger **46** (**146**) is based on an arc with radius approximately equal to the perpendicular distance from its respective finger mount **44** (**144**) to finger hinge **26** (**126**) where main frame **22** (**122**) meets finger

assembly **40 (140)**. Thus, the distance from finger mount **44 (144)** to finger hinge **26 (126)** is approximately equal to the distance from finger tip **45 (145)** to finger hinge **26 (126)**.

[0083] The spacing and number of fingers **46 (146)** on finger frame **43 (143)** are variable. Fingers **46 (146)** may be detached from finger frame **43 (143)** at finger mounts **44 (144)** in order to vary their spacing and/or number, and/or to interchangeably install fingers of various sizes and types (not shown) to accommodate particular characteristics of a load to be handled. It is not necessary that fingers are uniform.

[0084] Generally, changes to the spacing, number, size, and/or type of fingers will change the effectiveness of the grapple for certain types of loads, but will not change the operating cycle as described for the main embodiment, which remains essentially the same.

FIG. 7

Advantageous arrangement of main stop assembly

[0085] In an advantageous arrangement of main stop assembly **25**, seen in FIG. 7 as a simplified top sectional view (the sectioning plane being shown in FIG. **1**), main frame limit rod **28** is hinged at its proximal end to main frame **22** by main stop hinge **27**. The intermediate portion of main frame limit rod **28** is encircled by main stop slider **31**, which includes a bolt that attaches to main frame **122** in such a way that main stop slider **31** is free to partially rotate about the axis of the bolt. As the frame opens, main stop slider **31** travels toward the distal end of main frame limit rod **28** until stopped by contact with main stop pin **29** placed in a main stop hole **33** located on main frame limit rod **28**.

[0086] Likewise, if frame inward stop pin **38** (not shown) is present in frame inward stop hole **39**, main stop slider **31** will travel toward the proximal end of main frame limit rod **28**, as the frame closes, until stopped by contact with frame inward stop pin **38**.

[0087] This arrangement of main stop assembly **25** accommodates a wide range of realistic conditions for controlling the opening and closing of the grapple, as main frame limit rod **28** can rotate freely with respect to main frame **22** about main stop hinge **27**, and can also move freely back and forth within slider **31**, which itself can rotate freely with respect to main frame **122**.

[0088] In the operation of the grapple using this arrangement, unlike the operating cycle described for the main embodiment, it is main stop slider **31** (rather than main frame **122** directly) that contacts main stop pin **29** at the dumping stage, and frame inward stop pin **38** (if present) at the grabbing stage. All other elements of the operating cycle remain essentially the same.

FIG. **8**

Alternative arrangement of load cables

[0089] As seen in FIG. **8**, load cables **36** and **136** can be replaced by an alternative load cable **236** which is a single piece of cable joined at each end to a load arm **34** or **134** (see FIG. **4**) and passing over a cable pulley **253** attached to alternative load cable mount **250**, which in turn is attached to main cable **54** (see FIG. **4**). The rolling action of load cable **236** over cable pulley **253** allows the forces on the two ends of load cable **236** to equalize and thereby essentially equalize the forces on the two load arms **34** and **134**.

[0090] Apart from possibly improved performance with certain types of loads, the operating cycle with this arrangement of load cables remains essentially the same as that described for the main embodiment.

FIG. **9**

Additional embodiment featuring alternative connecting arm

[0091] Many systems in this additional embodiment are unchanged from the main embodiment as seen in FIGS. **1** through **4**:

(a) right and left frame assemblies **21** and **121** are still hinged together at main hinge **20**, and frame assembly **21 (121)** still comprises main frame **22 (122)** and finger assembly **40 (140)** hinged together at finger hinge **26 (126)**;

(b) main frame stop assembly **25** still bridges main frame members **22** and **122** and still comprises main frame limit rod **28**, main stop pin **29**, and main stop hole **33**, as well as frame inward stop hole **39** and frame inward stop pin **38** (if present);

(c) finger assembly **40 (140)** still comprises finger frame **43 (143)** and fingers **46 (146)**, the fingers still being mounted to finger frame **43 (143)** at finger mounts **44 (144)** and having finger tips **45 (145)**;

(d) finger open limit stop **47 (147)** on main frame **22 (122)** still limits inward rotational movement of finger assembly **40 (140)**;

(e) the grapple is still connected to a helicopter or other supporting apparatus by load cables **36** and **136**, which are connected to main cable **54** at load cable mount **50**;

(f) latch **70 (170)** still comprises latch pin **71 (171)** and latch hook **72 (172)**, and is still released by momentary power to solenoid **73 (173)**, which is still connected to a power

source and control switch (not shown) by power wires **75** and **175** and main power wire **76**.

[0092] The additional embodiment further comprises several components that are substantially altered with respect to the main embodiment, which are described as follows with reference to FIG. **9**. Where only one half of a pair of components is shown, it is to be understood that the other half generally acts as a mirror image of the same.

[0093] Right and left alternative load arms **434** (not shown) and **534** are hinged together at main hinge **20**. Load arm **534** (**434**) is arranged so that it has a longer portion on one side of main hinge **20** that cooperates with load cable **136** (**36**) and a shorter portion on the opposite side of main hinge **20** that cooperates with alternative connecting arm **464** (and **564**, not shown).

[0094] Alternative connecting arm **464** (**564**) comprises push arm rod **455** (and **555**, partially shown), the lower portion of which is connected to push arm lower hinge **457** (**557**) on alternative lower arm mount **458** (**558**), and the upper portion of which, terminating with push arm pin **467** (and **567**, not shown), is angled to engage with latch hook **72** (**172**) on latch **70** (**170**).

[0095] The movement of connecting arm **464** (**564**) is guided by alternative guide lever **469** (and **569**, not shown), which is mounted at one end to load arm **534** (**434**) at alternative lever arm hinge **465** (and **565**, not shown) and at the other end to push arm rod **455** (**555**) at alternative guide hinge **461** (and **561**, not shown).

[0096] The embodiment further comprises finger cables similar to those in the main embodiment. Alternative finger cable **560** (and **460**, partially shown) is connected between alternative finger cable arm mount **556** (and **456**, not shown) on load arm **534** (**434**) and alternative finger cable mount **559** (**459**) on lower arm mount **558** (**458**).

[0097] The embodiment further comprises right and left alternative finger closed limit stops **448** and **548** attached to main frame members **22** and **122** respectively. Finger closed limit stop **448 (548)** has an elongated shape relative to corresponding finger closed limit stop **48 (148)** in the main embodiment (see FIGS. **1** through **4**) to accommodate the altered shape of lower arm mounts **458** and **558** (see FIG. **9**) relative to corresponding lower arm mounts **58** and **158** in the main embodiment (see FIGS. **1** through **4**).

Operation of additional embodiment

[0098] The operation of this additional embodiment follows the same cycle as the main embodiment. As with the main embodiment, the operating cycle will be described beginning and ending with the ferrying stage. Where deviations from the operation of the main embodiment are not explicitly mentioned, it is to be understood that the operation of the additional embodiment is essentially the same with respect to the point not mentioned.

[0099] Similarly, all components common to the two embodiments function identically in each embodiment, except where specifically noted in the operational description below. It is further noted that, with respect to function, the following components may be treated as identical between embodiments:

(a) finger cable **460 (560)** in the additional embodiment is functionally identical to finger cable **60 (160)** in the main embodiment;

(b) finger closed limit stop **448 (548)** in the additional embodiment is functionally identical to finger closed limit stop **48 (148)** in the main embodiment; and

(c) the outer portion of load arm **534 (434)**, that is, the portion between main hinge **20** and finger cable arm mount **556 (456)** inclusively, in the additional embodiment is

functionally identical to the outer portion of load arm **134 (34)**, that is, the portion between main hinge **20** and finger cable arm mount **156 (56)** inclusively, in the main embodiment.

[0100] Simultaneous reference to FIGS. **1** through **4** (for the appropriate stages of operation of the main embodiment) and to FIG. **9** (for the additional embodiment) is recommended, especially as the latter is primarily understood in direct comparison to the former.

[0101] The ferrying operation of the additional embodiment is identical to that of the main embodiment, except that

(a) it is push arm pin **467 (567)**, rather than lever hinge **67 (167)**, that remains engaged with latch hook **72 (172)** as long as solenoid **73 (173)** remains de-energized, and

(b) the force from connecting arm **464 (564)** acting on finger assembly **140 (40)** is a downward and inward pushing force in the additional embodiment, in contrast to the upward and inward pulling force from connecting arm **64 (164)** in the main embodiment.

[0102] The dumping and resetting operations show more variation between embodiments.

[0103] In the additional embodiment, when momentary power from the operator's electrical control switch (not shown) energizes solenoid **73 (173)** causing latch **70 (170)** to disengage, push arm pin **467 (567)** is released from latch hook **72 (172)**. Connecting arm **464 (564)** is able to move away from latch **70 (170)**, being limited by movement of arm **469 (569)** about lever arm hinge **465 (565)** and guide hinge **461 (561)**, and being further limited by movement about push arm lower hinge **457 (557)**. Frame assemblies **21** and **121** are permitted to move away from each other by rotating about main hinge **20**. Also, the disengagement of connecting arm **464 (564)** from latch **70 (170)** partially relieves load arm **534 (434)** of the weight of the grapple and load, causing the outer portion of said load arm to move upward and inward relative to main hinge **20**

due to tension on load cable **136 (36)**. This movement of load arm **534 (434)** also pulls upward on finger cable **560 (460)**, tightening said cable and causing outward rotation of finger assembly **140 (40)** about finger hinge **126 (26)** and of frame assembly **121 (21)** about main hinge **20**.

[**0104**] Also, though the two embodiments share a common latch **70 (170)**, the additional embodiment is reset when push arm rod **455 (555)** rotates about push arm lower hinge **457 (557)** and guide lever **469 (569)** rotates about lever arm hinge **465 (565)** and guide hinge **461 (561)** until push arm pin **467 (567)** engages latch hook **72 (172)** on latch **70 (170)**. As in the main embodiment, the resetting operations for the two halves of the grapple, though related to each other, are not necessarily exactly simultaneous.

[**0105**] Finally, the grabbing operation of the additional embodiment is identical to that of the main embodiment, except that the force from connecting arm **464 (564)** acting on finger assembly **140 (40)** is a downward and inward pushing force in the additional embodiment, in contrast to the upward and inward pulling force from connecting arm **64 (164)** in the main embodiment.

[**0106**] Generally, this additional embodiment offers an operational advantage over the main embodiment in cases where it is important to reduce potential interference between the load **18** and the internal components of the grapple that could contact it, specifically lower arm mounts **58 (158)** and connecting arms **64 (164)** in the main embodiment. The additional embodiment has an uncluttered interior cavity and therefore reduces the possibility of interference by or with the load.

[**0107**] However, the main embodiment has the contrasting advantage of more significantly reducing stresses on components and shock loading on the helicopter or other supporting apparatus when the grapple is opened. For example, the force transferred in load arm **34 (134)**

from a pull on lever arm hinge **65** (**165**) to a pull on finger cable arm mount **56** (**156**) is less severe than the force transferred in load arm **534** (**434**) from a push on lever arm hinge **465** (**565**) to a pull on finger cable arm mount **556** (**456**).

[0108] All embodiments described in this disclosure, while illustrative of the essential features of the grapple apparatus and of the method described for its use, shall not be interpreted as limitations on the scope of the invention, which is capable of other expressions than those explicitly described.

CLAIMS

What is claimed is:

1. A grapple apparatus comprising:

(a) left and right frame members having inner portions hinged together at a main hinge,

(b) left and right finger assemblies each comprising plural fingers adapted to grasp a load, each of said finger assemblies being hinged by a respective finger hinge to a respective frame member,

(c) left and right load arms having inner portions hinged together at said main hinge and outer portions cooperating with a load cable,

(d) connecting arms connecting each of said load arms to the finger assembly on the opposite side of the grapple apparatus,

(e) a latching mechanism cooperating with the finger assemblies, load arms, and connecting arms to partially control angular relationships among the same, and

(f) finger cables connecting each of said load arms to the finger assembly on the same side of the grapple apparatus.

2. The grapple apparatus of claim 1, further comprising:

(a) a main stop assembly cooperating with said left and right frame members to limit rotation of the same about said main hinge.

3. The grapple apparatus of claim **2**, wherein said main stop assembly comprises:

(a) a rod flexibly joined to both of said frame members permitting inward and outward rotation of the same about said main hinge,

(b) a plurality of holes in said rod at various points along its length, and

(c) a pin that may be placed in one of said holes to obstruct the motion of one of said frame members.

4. The grapple apparatus of claim **1**, further comprising:

(a) a plurality of finger stops cooperating with said finger assemblies and said frame members to limit angular relationship between each finger assembly and the respective frame member.

5. The grapple apparatus of claim **1**, further comprising:

(a) finger mounts permitting the attachment and detachment of of said fingers, whereby the number, spacing, size, and type of fingers may be readily altered to accommodate different characteristics of loads.

6. The grapple apparatus of claim **1**, in which:

(a) said fingers are curved.

7. The grapple apparatus of claim **6**, in which:

(a) the curvature of said fingers approximately traces an arc of a circle centered at the nearest finger hinge.

8. The grapple apparatus of claim **1**, in which:

(a) said connecting arms are arranged to exert pulling force on the inward-facing portions of said finger assemblies,

whereby said finger assemblies are pulled together to grab or ferry a load.

9. The grapple apparatus of claim **8**, in which:

(a) said connecting arms are articulated so that only a small retaining force on said connecting arms, relative to the weight of the load, is required to hold said finger assemblies together when grabbing or ferrying a load.

10. The grapple apparatus of claim **1**, in which:

(a) said connecting arms are arranged to exert pushing force on the outward-facing portions of said finger assemblies,

whereby said finger assemblies are pushed together to grab or ferry a load.

11. The grapple apparatus of claim **10**, in which:

(a) said connecting arms are articulated so that only a small retaining force on said connecting arms, relative to the weight of the load, is required to hold said finger assemblies together when grabbing or ferrying a load.

12. The grapple apparatus of claim **1**, in which:

(a) said latching mechanism comprises an electrical control switch.

13. The grapple apparatus of claim **1**, in which:

(a) said latching mechanism selectively engages or disengages the connection between each connecting arm and the respective load arm.

14. The grapple apparatus of claim **1**, further comprising:

(a) springs connecting each load arm to the opposing frame member to assist in engaging said latching mechanism.

15. The grapple apparatus of claim **1**, in which:

(a) said finger cables pull said finger assemblies upward and outward to assist in opening the grapple apparatus when releasing a load.

16. The grapple apparatus of claim **15**, in which:

(a) said finger cables are kept under tension prior to releasing the load in order to reduce shock loads transferred along said load cable when the grapple apparatus is opened.

17. The grapple apparatus of claim **1**, further comprising:

(a) damping mechanisms to absorb shock when the grapple apparatus is opened.

18. The grapple apparatus of claim **17**, in which:

(a) said damping mechanisms include a shock absorber cylinder bridging said left and right frame members.

19. The grapple apparatus of claim **17**, in which:

(a) said damping mechanisms include shock absorber cylinders cooperating with said finger cables.

20. The grapple apparatus of claim **17**, in which:

(a) said damping mechanisms include resilient material inserted where each finger assembly contacts a respective frame member.

21. The grapple apparatus of claim **1**, in which:

(a) a netting enclosure surrounding portions of said frame members and finger assemblies to partially enclose the load.

22. The grapple apparatus of claim **1**, in which:

(a) said load cables are connected above the grapple apparatus to a single main cable for towing.

23. The grapple apparatus of claim **22**, in which:

(a) said load cables are connected to each other and allowed to travel freely over a pulley which is connected to said main cable.

24. A method of grasping, lifting, and releasing a load with a grapple, the method comprising the steps of:

(a) supporting the grapple above a load lying on the ground so that a pair of arms of the grapple extend generally outwardly from a centrally placed main hinge, and two sets of fingers of the grapple extend generally downwardly in an open position thereof,

(b) relieving the arms of the grapple from weight of the grapple, so that weight of the arms lowers the arms while the two sets of fingers remain in said open position,

(c) resetting a latching mechanism associated with the arms and fingers as the arms are lowered,

(d) raising the arms so that the reset latching mechanism is subjected to force from the grapple, causing the fingers to penetrate into and under the load, using the weight of the grapple and load to improve grasping and retention of the load, and

(e) releasing the latching mechanism so that force from the grapple causes relative movement between the arms and fingers causing the fingers to at least partially open to release the load, while tension in cables linking the fingers and arms further opens the fingers.

25. The method of claim **24**, further characterized by:

(a) generating the force necessary to execute said steps (a) through (d) of the method from lift applied to the grapple and from the weight of the grapple, its components, and (when present) its load.

26. The method of claim **25**, wherein said step (b) is further characterized by:

(a) relieving the arms of weight by relieving tension in a supporting cable.

27. The method of claim **25**, wherein said step (c) is further characterized by:

(a) resetting said latching mechanism by mechanical forces due to the weight of the arms.

28. The method of claim **24**, wherein said step (e) is further characterized by:

(a) releasing said latching mechanism by an electrical control operable by a remote user.

29. The method of claim **24**, wherein said step (e) is further characterized by:

(a) when releasing said latching mechanism, deliberately retarding opening of the fingers to reduce shock loads that would otherwise be generated during opening of the grapple.

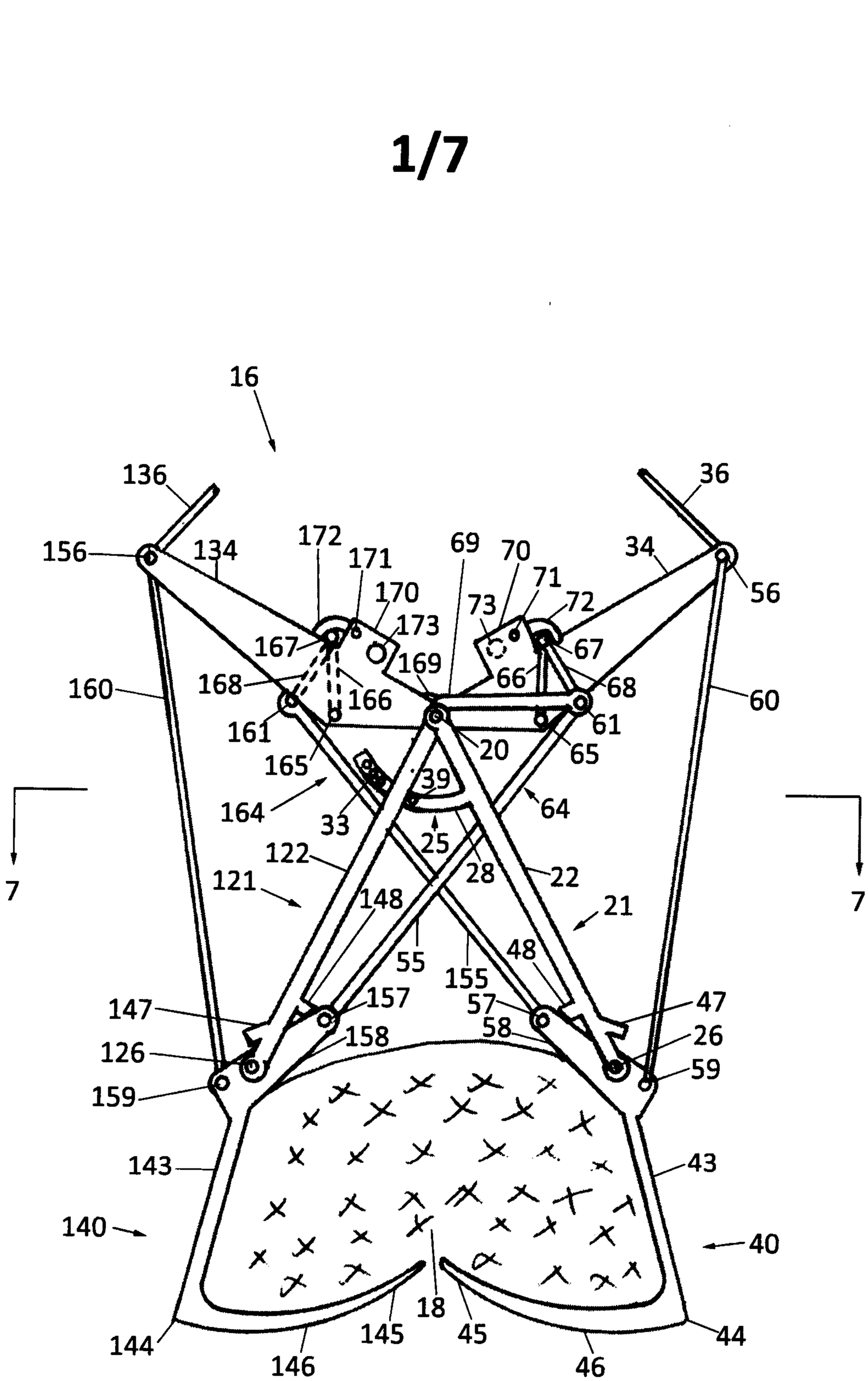
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FIG. 1

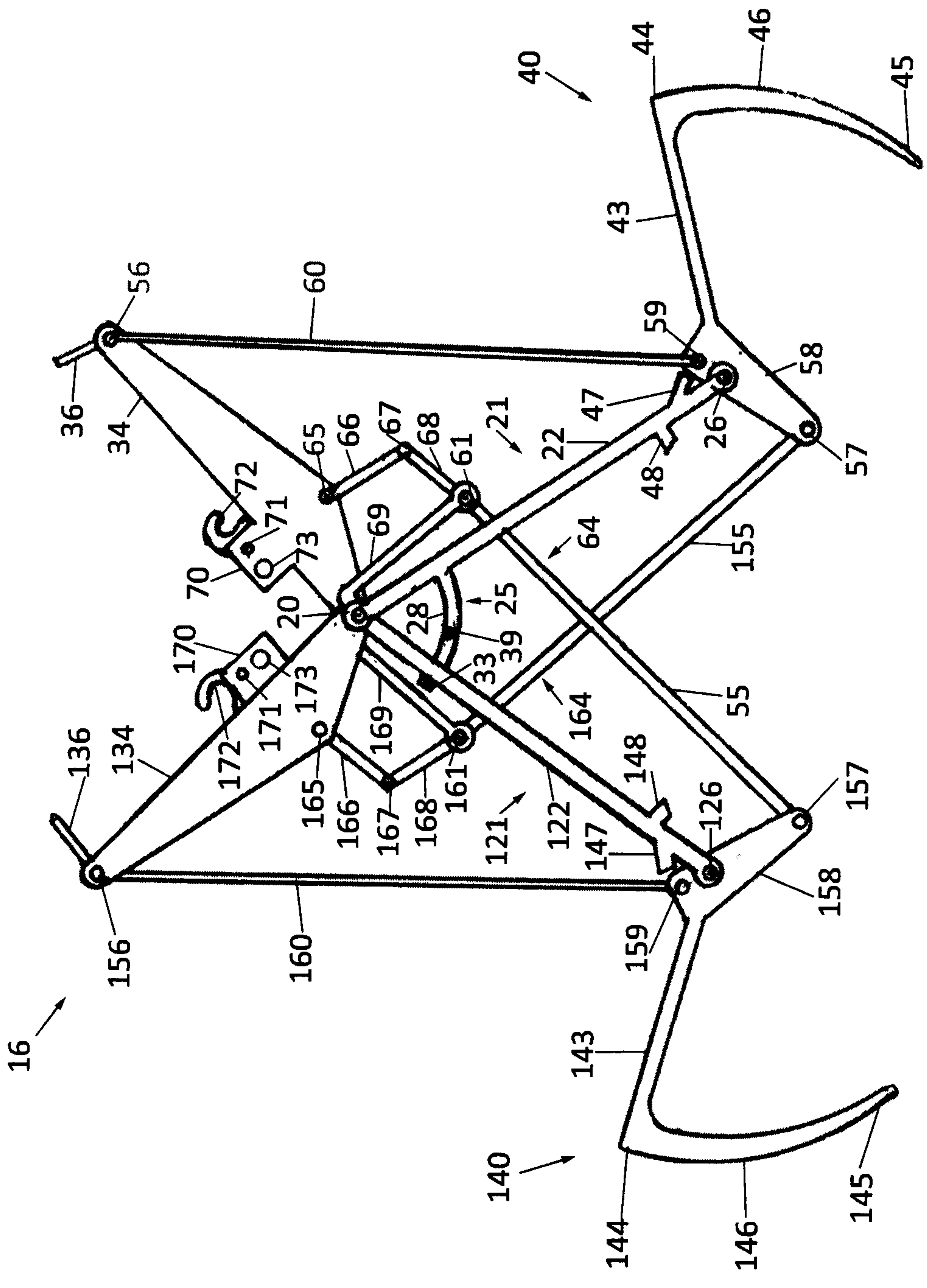
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FIG. 2

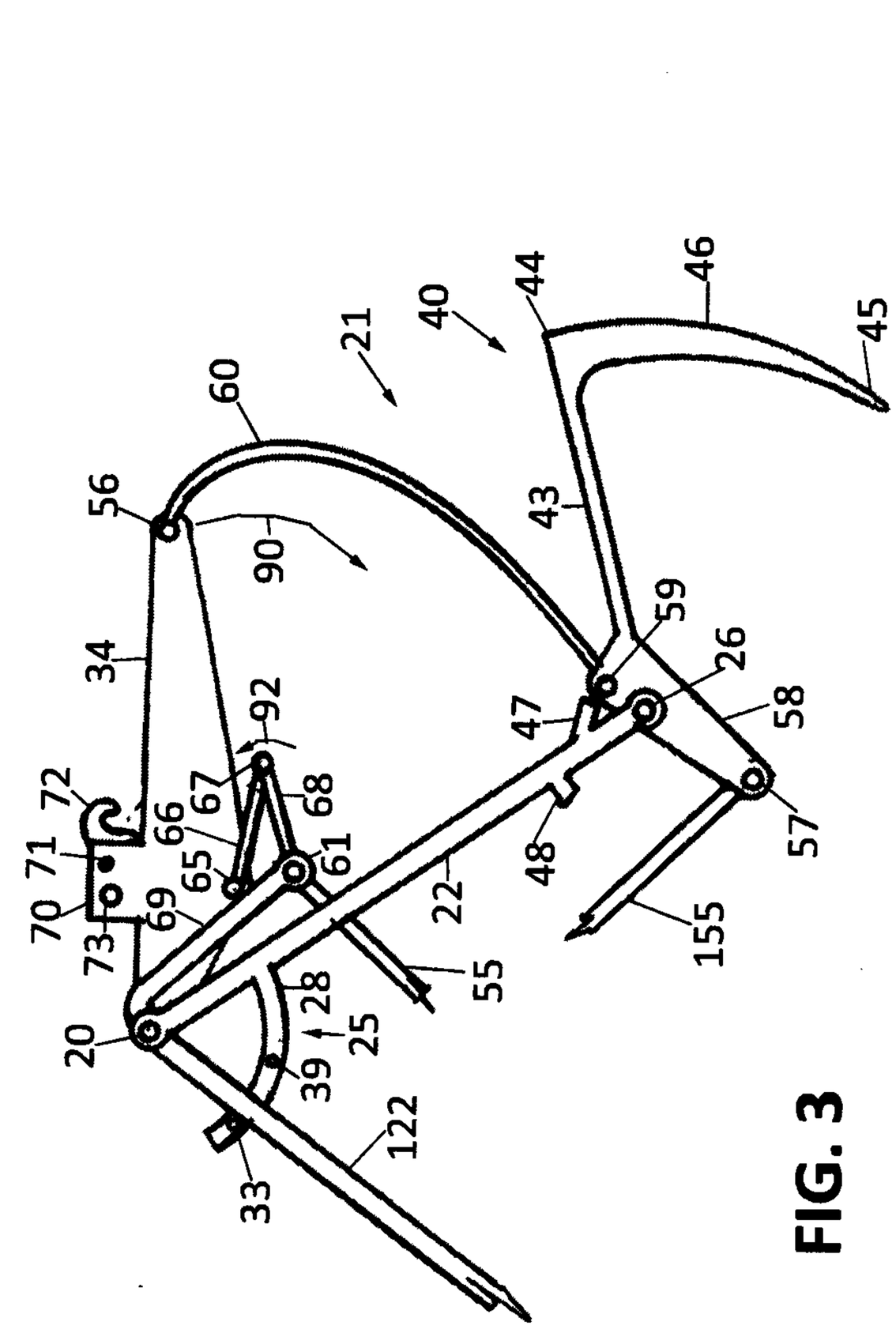
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FIG. 3

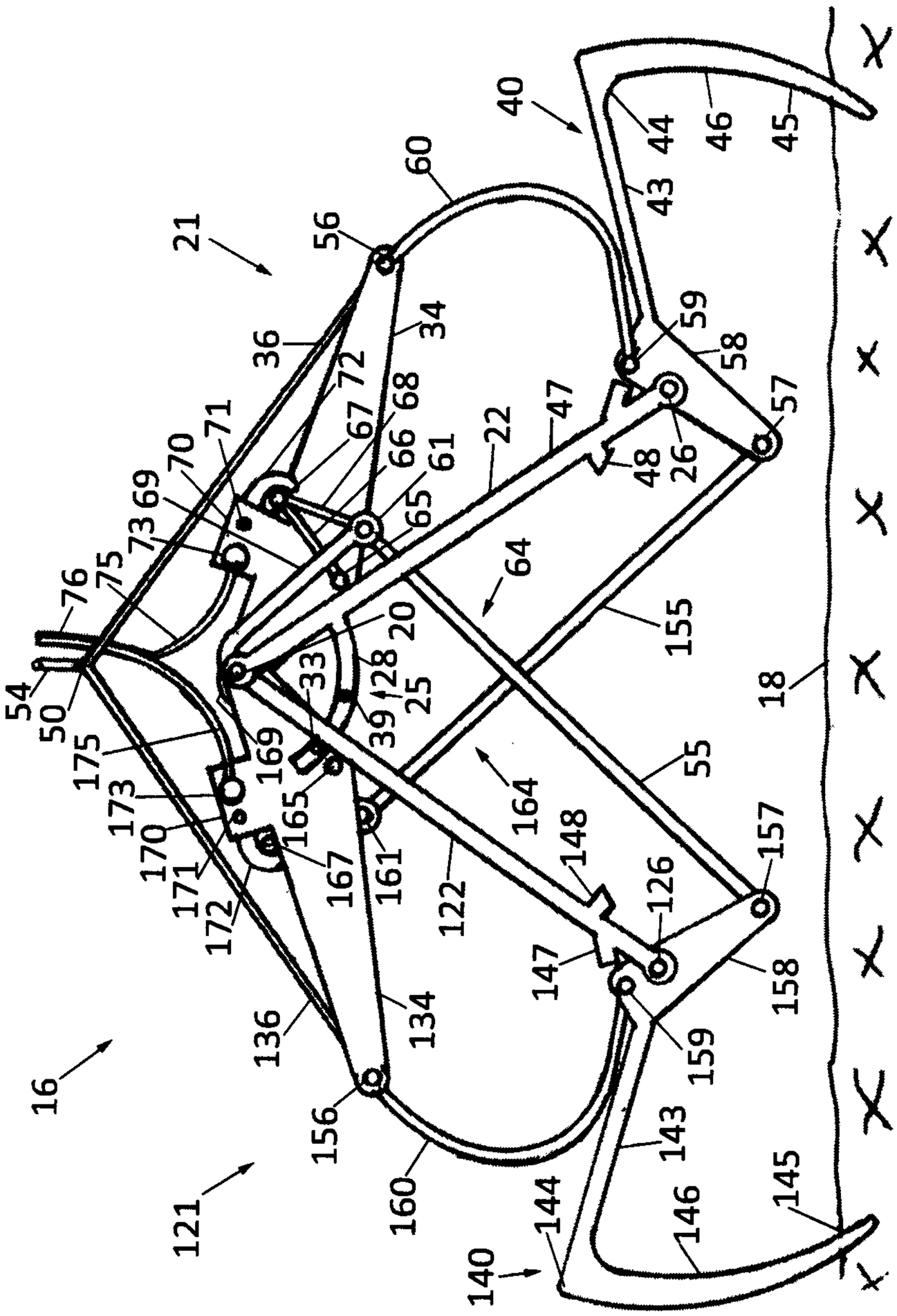
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FIG. 4

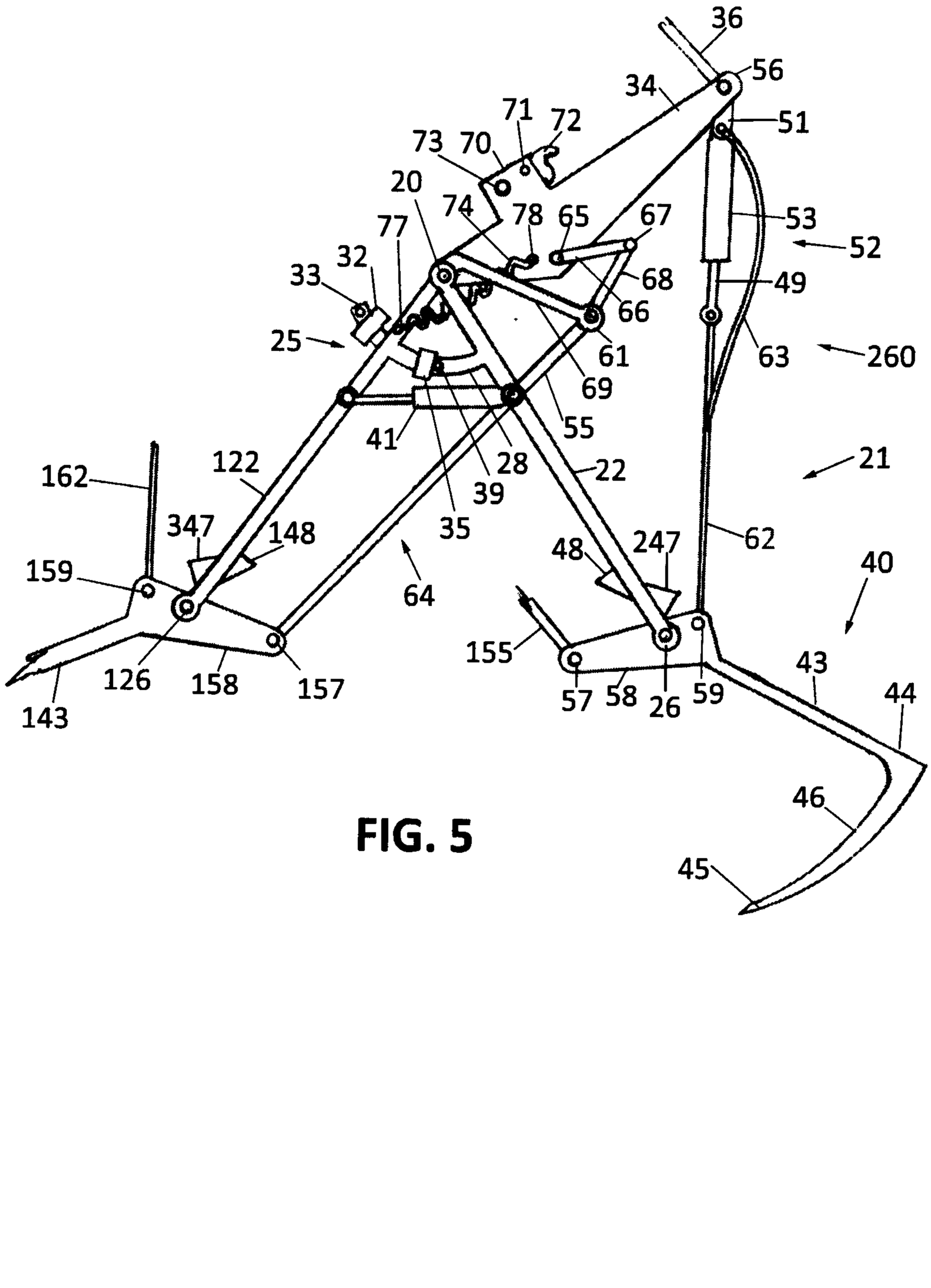
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FIG. 5

FIG. 6

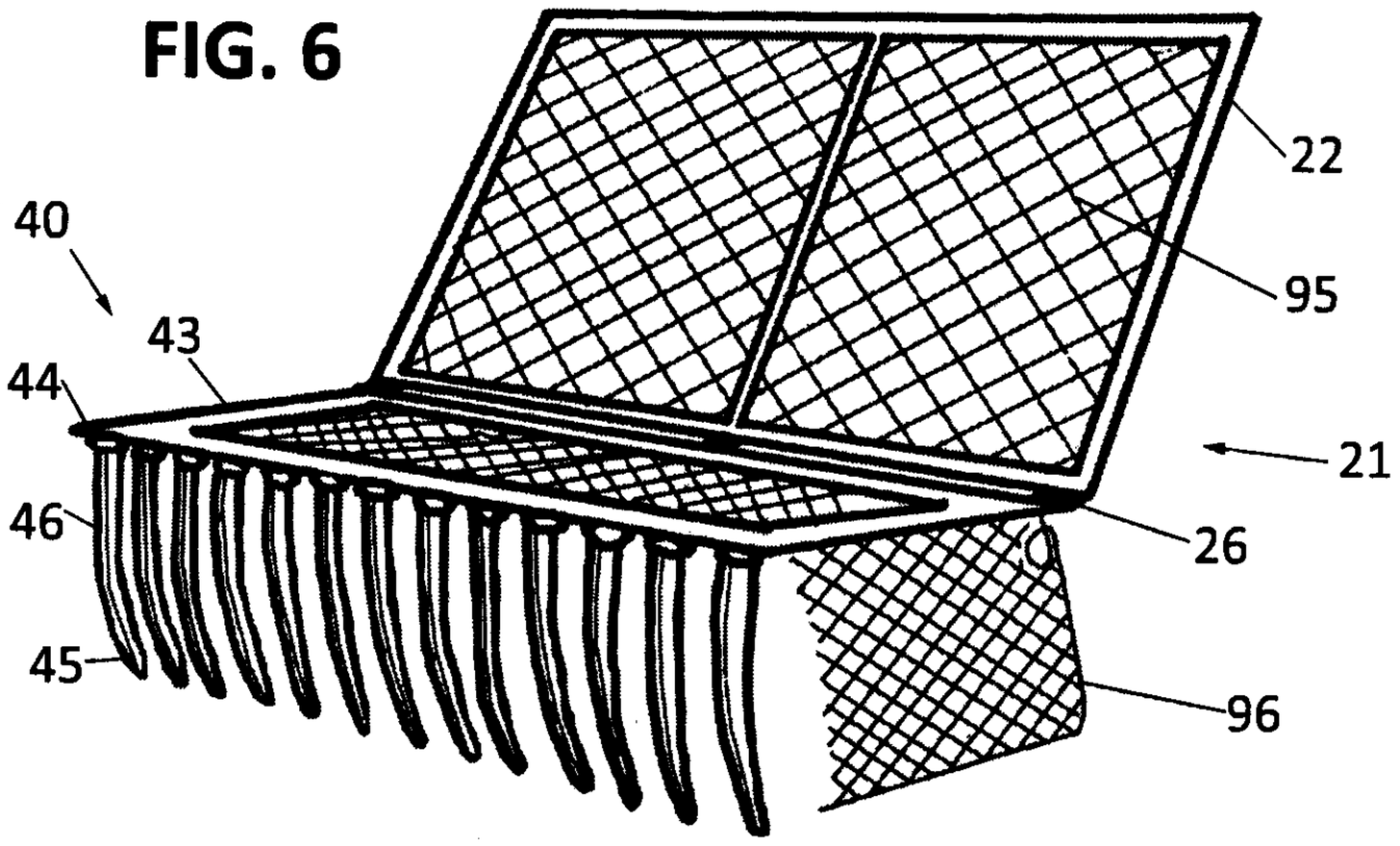

FIG. 7

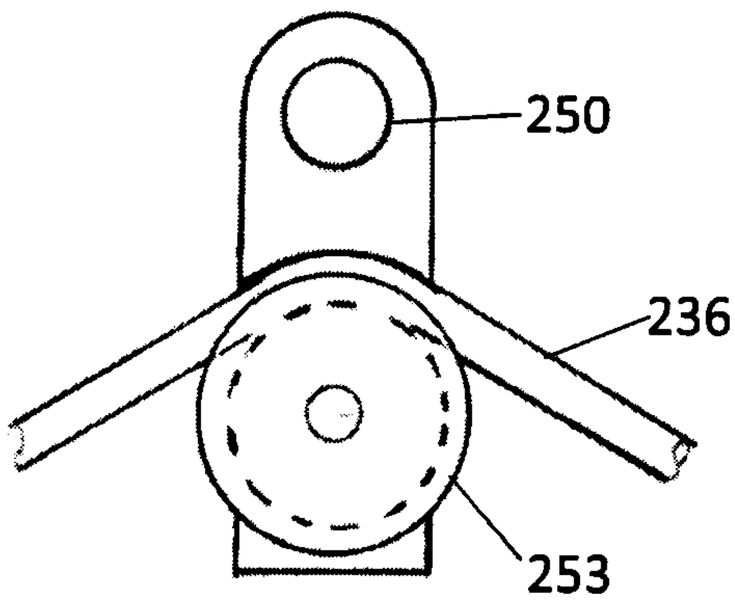

FIG. 8

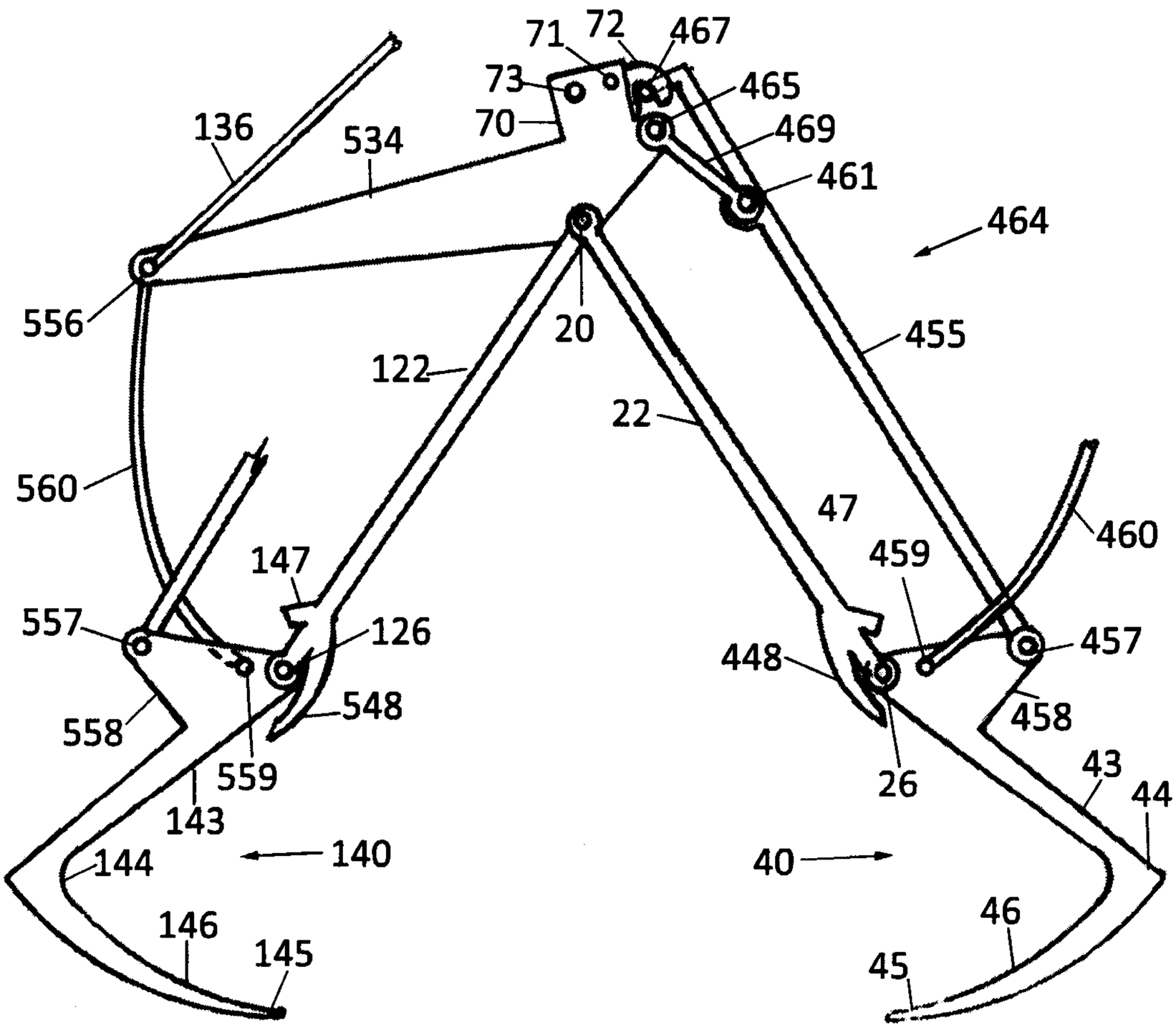
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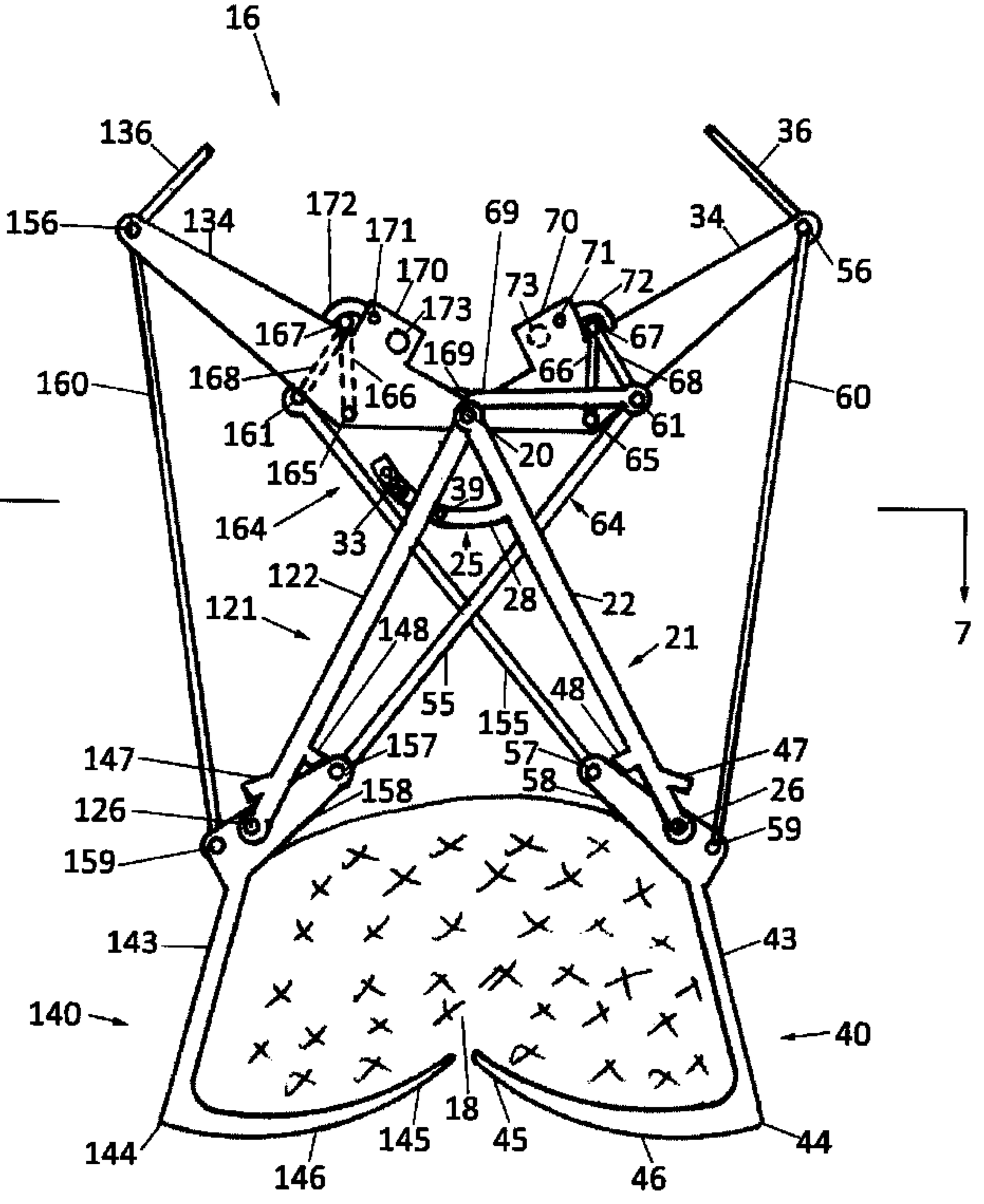
FIG. 9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