

The Looping Horse

Written by Ron Williams ©2009

Illustrated by D.B. Williams

Copyright © 2009 by Ron Williams

THE LOOPING HORSE

by Ron Williams

Illustrations by Daniel Williams

Printed in the United States of America

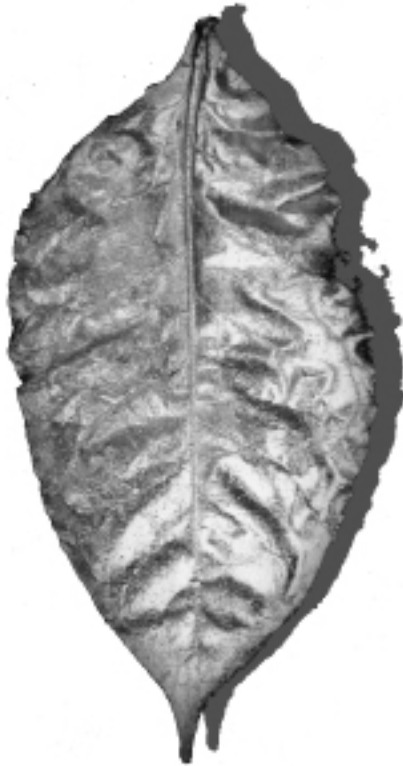
ISBN 978-0-557-07903-2

Notice of Rights: All rights reserved solely by the author. The author quarantees all contents are original and do not infringle upon the legal rights of any other person or work. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form without the permission of the author. The views expressed in the book are not necessarily those of the publisher.

Tobaccoo leaf image from the Patrick Reynolds Collection “The Gilded Leaf”

Dedication

To the hardest working people I ever knew, the small tobacco farmers of eastern North Carolina during the 1950's. Two of these were my parents, Robert and Helen Williams. What they did day in and day out still amazes me. Hopefully a little of their way of life comes through in these words.

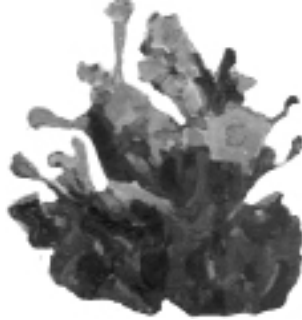


CHAPTERS

| | |
|------------------------------------|-----|
| 1. The Summer Begins..... | 9 |
| 2. Divisions of Labor..... | 19 |
| 3. Fishing for Hogs..... | 47 |
| 4. Our Day of the Week..... | 69 |
| 5. TJ's Trial Run..... | 89 |
| 6. Peach Jacks and Sweet Corn..... | 107 |
| 7. Watermelons to Market..... | 135 |
| 8. Fireworks at Mt. Gould..... | 159 |
| 9. It's Not Your Fault..... | 175 |
| 10. Picking up the Pieces..... | 191 |

Chapter 1

The Summer Begins



I felt the voice long before I heard it. “Pete, Pete, it’s time to get up.” It was mom, calling me in her kind but serious voice. It was the kind of voice you knew that you couldn’t get angry with while at the same time annoying the daylights out of you. It wasn’t the way she called, but what it meant- a day in the tobacco fields. It was the first day of summer vacation and I was already dreading what supposedly the 90 days of school break would bring.

The year was 1959 and as the 10 year old son of eastern North Carolina tobacco farmers, Sam and Mary Wilson, it was the only life that I had ever known and would know for much of my early life. There would be a lot going on in the world this year. The Cold War with the Russians was ramping up with Castro and the communists taking control of Cuba. Hugh Hefner would introduce a whole new magazine genre and moral standards with the release of “*Playboy*” and everyone was talking about how funny grandpa was on the “*Real McCoys*.” All of that was just incidental to our life. Here tobacco was king, there were no ifs, ands, or buts about it. Without tobacco you did not eat, you did not pay the bills and you certainly did not buy a new washing machine or pick-up truck. It wasn’t just the tobacco farmers

The Looping Horse

that thought like this, it was the whole community. Everyone, farmer and shopkeeper alike depended on the cash brought in by this one crop.

Everything centered on when the tobacco farmer would need money and when he would make money. The whole calendar was earmarked by tobacco. In January farmers prepared new ground for growing the seedlings. February marked the time we sowed the seeds and set the beds. These would be football field lengths of land covered with mesh netting that would allow the sun and rain to come through while keeping the tender plants warm on cold spring nights. The netting would be removed in March to allow the plants to grow straight until they reached a height of about 10 inches. By early April the transplanting of seedlings would take place. What an event this was. Neighbors and hired hands from all around would come to help the local farmers in this process. Women, some white, but mostly middle- and later-aged black women, would have the back-breaking job of bending over for 10 hours a day pulling up the young plants from the beds and placing them in bushel baskets. Stories and gossip would be told from one end of the bed to the other. You could see such talk move down the beds like a wind storm when something juicy was being said.

One of the local men would take the baskets of plants in a pick-up truck and carry them to the field where the young plants would be planted in the growing fields. If you were lucky, he would ask you to ride along on the sideboard or the tailgate as he went back and forth. A boy would do almost anything to get to the field where the men worked. There the men rode a Rube Goldberg-like contraption pulled by mule or small tractor. Two men sat in metal seats resting upon a 100 gallon water tank. As the planter was pulled down the row they would each take turns pulling one of the seedlings out of a tray and placing it a rotating clamping mechanism that placed a plant every foot or so apart in freshly prepared soil with just the right amount of water added for good measure. Only the most trusted men were allowed to work the transplanter. A farmer would get very angry if even one plant was

The Looping Horse

missing from a row or if more than one plant was accidentally planted in the same spot. The whole process seemed almost alive as the combination of mule/tractor and transplanter made this repeating sound of clank, clank, clank, clank as the rotating clamps, water dispenser and rhythm of the men's movement carried on all day long. Nothing was better than walking beside the transplanter and talking to the men as they worked. It made you feel part of the process, part of the land itself watching the transformation that was taking place. Row after row of perfectly spaced and tender green tobacco plants as far as the eye could see. It would only be uphill after this. The work would only get harder.

That was the realization that came upon me again as I rose from bed this June 1st, 1959. You could tell it was going to be a long, hot summer. The tobacco plants had taken root since they were transplanted in April and were now about three feet tall and were blossoming out. In the meantime, we had planted other crops, most notably peanuts, corn and the family garden. Everyone else did the same. If you did not grow it, most likely you did not eat it. It came down to what you could afford and being nearly self-reliant. We raised our own hogs, chickens and had a small number of dairy cows that furnished the family with everything we really needed. Even so, all the other crops and livestock were but a drop in the bucket compared to what a good crop of tobacco meant.

It was 6 am and the temperature inside the house was already 85 degrees. I splashed some water on my face and walked into the kitchen to a plate of fried eggs, country sausage and fresh biscuits. Mom had been up for at least two hours and dad even earlier. They would have gotten me up earlier but even they realized it was my first day out of school. The livestock had to be cared for and mom had to get a jump on meal preparation. She would be expected to work a full day in the fields as well as feed all of us. Concerning the heat, no one had air conditioning. That was something reserved for movie houses and grocery stores in places like Edenton or Windsor, the closest towns around. You might know someone that had a window unit for a

The Looping Horse

bedroom. “Too noisy and expensive,” my dad would say. All I knew is that I was already soaking through my long sleeve shirt with sweat.

What a way to start my vacation. I often heard about what the city kids did during their summers when we returned to school each year at Colerain Elementary. They would mention trips to Nags Head or car trips to visit relatives in the North Carolina mountains. Some would go to church, music or other special interest camps. I would tell others that the only camp I ever went to was “tobacco camp” each summer. I didn’t feel too bad for myself. The city kids were a minority and nearly everyone else went to the same camp as I did. Even if they did not own or work a farm, they went to the tobacco fields to help their neighbors and make what little spending money they would have till the next year.

Dad started calling for me from out in the lot yard. He wanted us to get to the field by 6:30 am so that some of the work to be done that day would not be so difficult. The real heat would roll in around 10 am like a sauna and literally drain out your energy. I wolfed down the meal and headed out the screen door. My mom was described as a great cook by many relatives and friends but breakfast was not her specialty. It would only be later in life would I learn that not everything had to be cooked in lard. I laugh now when I think about how she would add lard to hamburger patties before frying them. Fat on top of fat. I think it was the greasiness of her eggs that tarnished her breakfast for me. Even so, no one ever went hungry at mom’s table. Sam Wilson had a saying, “When you put your feet under another man’s table never complain. Even if the food comes out burnt or too salty, tell your host, I like it like that.” That saying served me well over the years.

I saw dad feeding the hogs in the pasture and walked over to where he was. Our rabbit dogs, all beagles, saw me and joined in the walk for a few of the steps. They greeted me with a sniff and a wag of their tails but little else in regard to emotion. These were working dogs. We expected them to produce (hunt) just like dad expected me

The Looping Horse

to work. “Get a bushel of shelled corn from the barn and feed the sows with pigs,” dad yelled as I headed over to where he was. I didn’t mind the physical part of this work but it was going into the corn barn that caused me to pause. Rats, big rats. You could almost always find rats in the corn barn. I am talking cat-size monsters that any ten year old might be wary of confronting. The yard cats didn’t even try to confront these. Mice yes, barn rats, no. I never went inside the barn without at least a good tobacco stick or some other weapon in my hand. I opened the door and looked inside. It was dark and except for the light shining off the corn dust floating in the air all was quiet. No sign of rats or snakes. Yes, snakes. Big six foot long black, king or corn snakes often would hang out in the barns because of the rats. I quickly grabbed a zinc bucket, filled it with corn and took it to the wooden troughs where we fed the sows. On television they show farmers calling their hogs to meal time. They must have stupid hogs. If ours saw you walking across the barn yard with a bucket or anything in your hand they immediately assumed we were going to feed them. You didn’t have to call them. First come, first served. I poured the grain out into the trough as the hogs jostled for position. Just as much of the corn fell on the ground as it did in the trough. In the end it didn’t matter. They would not leave until the last kernel was found and eaten.

Dad and I joined up and headed to the tobacco field. Neither of us spoke. I had learned over the years that he was not much of a talker. I’d ask, “What are we going to do today?” or “How long is this going to take?” and normally get the same response, “Work in the fields” or “I don’t know.” Neither of which resolved the issue for me of if I was going to have any free time to fish, ride bikes or play with anyone. Mom would join us shortly after she had breakfast cleaned up and finished her preparations for lunch. Even so, she would only be delayed a half-hour or so. There was a light dew on the grass and weeds growing in the center of the dirt roads around the fields but I was still able to kick up dust. It was already caking my bare feet with a coating of black dirt. I would have to scrub those tonight to get them clean. Being barefoot on a soft loam dirt road has to be one of life’s simple pleasures. To

The Looping Horse

feel the dirt squish between your toes as you walk just makes you smile. We almost always walked to anywhere we were headed on our 100 acres. You only drove if you needed to carry something really heavy.

Four point five acres of flowering tobacco came in view as we turned the corner around the field toward the bottom land. That was about as much crop as a small family could handle. You always wanted to plant your tobacco in a location with your best soil as it required a lot of nutrients and quickly depleted poor soils. Being the money crop you didn't scrimp on where to place it. Bottom land fit the bill. Dad would rotate where he planted the tobacco as best he could. This year it was down along the river. Even with your eyes closed you could tell you were getting close to this field. It was cooler with some of the edges of the field partially shaded by massive oaks and poplars and protected by black flies. They sprang from the edges of the trees and bit anything that walked past them like fighter planes making a strafing run. It didn't matter, human, mule, dog. Everything had to get past this gauntlet.

How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time is what they say. It was the same with what lay before us. It would take all day. In this field there were over 30,000 individual tobacco plants, each needing to have their blooms removed and all but the top most sucker broken off. If you didn't take the blooms off, or "top" the tobacco as everyone called it, the plant would send most of its energy making flowers/seed and the rest of the plant would suffer. In other words, the leaves that would later be harvested would not be as big, which in turn meant less weight, which in turn meant less profit since tobacco was sold by the pound. Suckers would also rob the plant. These offshoots were found between the primary leaves of the plant and its stalk, requiring you to either pinch this growth off if it was small or break it off if it was more than a couple of inches long. It was like a cancer. If the suckers were not controlled they literally would overtake the plant in just a couple of weeks making harvesting nearly impossible. By allowing the top most sucker to grow after the plant was topped out, a farmer was able to literally extend the height of the plant

The Looping Horse

by nearly a foot and therefore increase his yield of harvestable product.

I hated what this day would mean but was resigned like everyone else to what lay before us. Dad told me to take the outer most row and he took the one beside me and we started topping the plants. By doing so, he was being kind as I would not have to immediately walk between two rows of plants and therefore could catch more of the early morning breeze. It also meant I could stay dryer longer. When you had to walk between two rows of plants the leaves from both rows filled the space between them and the dew-dampened leaves would hit you as you walked sideways between them. There would not be enough space to walk straight down the row without breaking off leaves, so you had to zig-zag sideways between the plants as you advanced up each row. You only had to walk about 10 feet up the first row this early in the morning before you were coated with dew causing your shirt to stick tight to your chest. “Break off those tops cleanly”, dad yelled out when he saw that my first couple of attempts were less than satisfactory. If you broke them off at an angle anything less than perfectly flat, they would eventually harden in that shape and literally be like sharpen sticks that would cut your hands if you happened to hit them when you were harvesting the top most leaves later in August. I acknowledged his command and tried to do better. We moved silently down our rows, each of us finding a rhythm to our movements to maximize our speed. Dad working two rows at one time, one with each hand, while I attempted to stay up with just the one row I was working on. Yes, sir, nothing like a day in the tobacco fields to get your head right. I didn’t know when or how but I knew that somewhere in the future something other than topping tobacco would consume my life. My life would not be measured by this skill.

As we neared the end of the first set of rows I saw a broad-billed straw hat occasionally flash into view just barely over the height of plants. Nothing frilly about it, this was a working woman’s hat. Not something to be worn by lady folk from town tending to their roses but one marked by a band of discolored cotton material around the head band from days

The Looping Horse

of sweat. Not perspiration but sweat. It was mom walking down the turn row to meet us. Every fifth row in the field was left empty of plants so that during the harvesting a mule or tractor could pull a cart down it and could “turn down” the next series of rows in a serpentine manner. Without such a row there would be no means of harvesting the leaves in any straightforward fashion. “I left a jar of water in the shade,” she yelled out as she approached. You never wanted to be in the fields without water. Heat exhaustion and even heat stroke were commonplace if you didn’t take precautions. Wives and children were expected to keep the men in the fields with fresh water throughout the day. Husbands had an arguable excuse for divorce if this tenet of survival was not enforced. Even at my young age I had carried many a mason jar of cold water to dad as he plowed the fields.

Some would say that mom was a handsome woman, and that she was especially pretty when she was young. There were so few pictures of her as a young woman that I had no way of confirming that opinion. What I saw on this day was a woman well into her 30’s and already starting to have wrinkles and leathery skin as a result of being out in sun too many days. Never one to wear high fashion or even frilly garments, she was perfectly comfortable in a feed sack dress. She reminded me of a photograph I saw in school of women from the Appalachia. She had the thin features like they had, and piercing eyes as someone who had already experienced a lot of life. I have wondered what impact my birth had upon her. As their only child, some of my cousins had mean-heartedly told me that I was a mistake and that my birth had been extremely hard on her. She never spoke of such things and I knew better than ask. Such talk would have been considered rude and in poor taste with her. Dad on the other hand was a more animated individual who liked an occasional drink (usually out in the barn since mom was a firm tee-totaler and would not allow alcohol in the house). He didn’t mind a dirty joke now and then and had a eye for pretty women, but I, as well as mom, knew he would never be unfaithful. Dad was already experiencing what later would be called male pattern baldness. Even so, the only way anyone would ever know this would be when he took off his hat. That typically

The Looping Horse

only happened inside the house, so that if you saw him on the street or in the fields you would think he had a full head of hair. Dad's height was approaching six feet and he had somewhat of a muscular frame. It wasn't the type of muscles you might see from some weight lifter in a magazine but the types of muscles you knew would be able to tote a 100 lb bag of feed or break a rusty bolt free. I didn't think he was afraid of anything and when he got angry and his face turned red, look out.

Little talk had to be said between mom and dad as we started down the next series of rows. While never open with their affections or words, they obviously completed one another in ways I would not fully understand for many years. They both knew what needed to be done today, the schedule of all the major chores and who was in charge of each. The three of us moved silently down the rows except for the snap, snap, snap of the plants as we broke off the tops. If we were lucky we might finish by late in the afternoon.

Chapter 2

Divisions of Labor



A 10 year old can only stay focused for so long and I would sometime try to engage mom or dad in discussing their childhood or some other topic as a means to help the day go by. You didn't have to pay attention to what you were doing to be fully productive. Talking really didn't hinder you. You would quickly glance at each plant, barely slowing down as you walked. Then sizing up where the suckers were, you would determine which ones needed to be removed. Sometimes you did this entirely by feel as you simply worked your hands from the bottom of the stalk towards the top, your last action being to break off the top. "Dad, will we be able to go fishing this week," I asked? "We'll see" was the reply without him even turning his head to respond. Even so, this was not an act of dismissal. For dad this meant just that. If the peanuts did not have to be weeded or "chopped", if nothing major from the garden had to be picked, and if the livestock just needed food and water, then there was a chance that we might work it into the schedule. It certainly would not be because he did not enjoy the opportunity.

The Looping Horse

Dad was a fisherman par excellence. He knew every honey hole for white perch, stripers, and bream up and down our stretch of the Chowan. Now this was a river as well as a way of life. While some used it as a source of recreation, many individuals fished it full time catching migratory runs of the stripers or the more plentiful Atlantic herring. Most of this commercial fishing was done by the means of nets stretched across strategic locations into which the herring would swim and be trapped. The fish would be so plentiful that you could literally grab them out of the water by hand or dip net as they attempted to lay their eggs around moss-covered cypress trees in shallow water. Even dad had done some commercial herring fishing on the river early in his life to help augment the farm income. Following their collection in nets they were loaded onto boats and carried to shore where scores of local black ladies with strong backs and hands would cut the herring, take out the roe and then salt down the body of the fish in large barrels or vats. Such activity might run 4-6 weeks during the spawning run and to observe the process from start to finish fully captivated me. What boy would not be enthralled with the unloading of boat full of fish, all alive and thrashing upon a dock? There they would be taken to large tables built over the river itself where they would be cleaned, cut and processed. It was poetry in motion as the workers processed literally hundreds of thousands of fish each day. The roe from the spawning herring was sold throughout the world as a delicacy while the body of the herring was also sold for food. Many a local family staved off hunger by having a couple barrels of salted herring to eat when the tobacco money ran low each spring and summer.

All of this did not equate to a flowery atmosphere. Even the guts or “offal” of the herring was put to use. Some local farmers built long wooden vats into which the offal would be placed and left to decay following the annual run of the herring during March and April. It is impossible to fully describe the smell of this process as the smell of fresh fish guts mixed with the residual smell from last year’s product in the hundred foot-long cypress vats. This byproduct resulted in a free and very powerful fertilizer for those farmers that had such vats. It would be dropped by mule and