

No Bosses, Just Hosses For The Hortons

By BOB HURLEY
Editor At Large

This is not just another story about how two horse-loving farmers plow a living from the Lost Mountain land. Heck no. This one's about two good old boys who know a good deal when they see one.

And to James and Nelson Horton, farming is a good deal.

"Ain't no bosses out here except us," says James. "We work when we want to and rest when we want to. If it gets too

hot, we'll work. If it gets too cold, we don't work. Where else you going to find a deal like that?"

James is 73. Nelson is 76. They talk about how they can take it a little easier now, but they'll also tell you that they've done their share of hard work.

They and their brothers and sisters were raised on a hillside farm between Baileyton and Van Hill. Farming got in their blood from the start, and while James ventured far from it, he

says he came back "because you just can't stay away from something that's in your blood."

Nelson never left the farm. He's been a man of the land ever since he was born on it. The Army was the first to change things for James. It made him a cook and sent to the South Pacific in 1944 to bake bread and dodge Japanese bombs. After the Army, he pulled his time in building trades business. He was brick mason and short-order contractor.

He had married and had a family in the meantime. His wife, Willie, was a cook, too. She's right famous in these parts for some of the meals she has set people down to.

"Now, she can cook good enough to get you through from dinner to supper and a lot of people know it. The trouble with my cooking is that not many folks know about it except Nelson," says James. He stays on the farm during the week where he's the head cook and returns to his

home in Greenville each weekend where he lets Willie show her kitchen stuff.

Both the Horton boys say they love horses, not because they were raised following them and a plow but because "they're just such big old pretty animals." Most of their plowing now is done with a tractor but there are signs of horses all around.

"It's too hot for us and the mares to plow anymore. We just raise colts from

them. People want big, pretty horses like a Belgium-Percheron cross and that's what we raise to sell them," Nelson said.

"We followed them old mules growing up. Back then, it never got too hot to plow. Not for them. Not for us. We had to do it. I remember how I used to think that plowing was all there was to it," he said.

But there was more to farming than plowing and it didn't take the Horton boys all that long to discover it. They discovered the things like being their own boss, holidays whenever they wanted them, unlimited coffee breaks, playing ball with the kids a half day at a time, chatting with the neighbors until there is nothing left to say.

And the neighbors around Campbell Lane are all good, James says. The Hortons live at what is known as the old Campbell place in a huge farmhouse with a wide, sweeping front porch.

They swap a lot of work with the neighbors, especially Glen Dunn and especially when it comes to sweet potatoes.

"All the neighbors out here are good, no bad ones. Everybody knows everybody," Nelson said.

"With Glen, we swap a lot of the sweet tater work. He helps us and we help him. That way, it don't kill any of us."

The Hortons have found that there no secrets to growing and enjoying sweet potatoes, but there are a few things they do that seem to work awful well.

"A lot of folks think you need to put manure on your sweet tater ground. You don't. All you need to do is to spread your fertilizer just like you do on your tobacco ground and then disc it in. The fertilizer don't need to be right in the row with the taters," James says, "too much nitrogen right at the tater will ruin it."

"After you spread your fertilizer, just make you some ridges, set your taters on them and watch them little babies grow. After you dig them, bake you a medium-sized one, butter it down good and lay your ears back and love every bite."

The Hortons aren't the only ones who love the Horton sweet potatoes. Everyone seems to love the Horton sweet potatoes.

"They hauled them off from here last year quicker than we could dig them," Nelson said. "We called one or two families and told them we were going to dig the next day. They called some folks and then them folks called some more folks. We had them lined up all the way back to Caney Creek. You couldn't find a place to park around here anywhere."

They love sweet potatoes, all right, they'll tell you. James says they're just a notch or two below country ham.

"I had some of that (country ham) for breakfast this morning and it went awful well. Tell you what, the next time you're out this way, I'll slice you off a little chunk of it and show you how us country folks have to live."



Nelson Horton

James Horton

The rest of the patch: Nelson, left, and James Horton rest a spell while hoeing in their big sweet potato patch.