

Remembering Willie “Horseshoe Man” Smith



Growing up in Giles County in the late 1930's and early 40's with racial tensions as they were, some say he had every good reason not to trust anybody – but Willie Mace Smith, known as “Horseshoe Man”, lived a life that defied reason. And what seems he came to trust was the innate horse sense that moved within him.

Working around barns as a boy, plowing creek bottoms, and the like, Willie's understanding of a good foot on a horse or mule developed naturally. Hired by the Oman Stables on Franklin Road in his teens, he was a groom to some of the finest American Saddlebreds in the South. Those who were there say his respect ran deep for his uncle, Ben Stahl, who was considered one of the best “in the fire” for shoeing Saddlebreds. It was true craftsmanship Willie was beginning to recognize, but he was also beginning to find out where his own talents lay. He gravitated toward the flatshot or natural foot.

Looking back, it seems providential that W.D. Dozier, with his blooming farrier business, would find him. W.D. will say that from the first morning he picked Willie up to make the rounds of his horse clients, Willie showed an amazing work ethic. So pleased with the work of the day, Dozier paid him \$100 and told him he'd pick him up tomorrow, same time. He chuckles to remember that Willie went home with a grin to tell his family, “I got me a regular job.”

A lifetime of stories start here. His regular employer, Dozier, became his mentor, colleague and best friend traveling to client barns, shows at Brownland Farms or events like Iroquois Steeplechase throughout Middle Tennessee. Other farriers added to W.D.'s group also became fast friends with Willie, like Billy Lampley and Jamie Boteler. Field hunters, race horses, polo ponies, brush jumpers – they did it all.

They called it “riding together”, but this wasn't horseback. This “riding” was jumping in W.D. Dozier's white van, starting the day off with breakfast at Toby's, then traveling like a little band from

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stable to stable; arriving to unload and go to work like a well-rehearsed troupe of players. Willie called it "time to tighten up" as he'd step out to open the gate, and everybody would.

W.D. says Willie never got job tired. They put 250,000 miles on each of three white vans over 25 years together before W.D.'s retirement. Every day, every barn, every horse, every foot, every shoe, every nail. . .the little Horseshoe Man, all tucked in, pressed and neat, tightened up to excellent craftsmanship every time. And though this was a mark set by Dozier, Billy Lampley marvels still at Willie, calling him "the hardest working man I've ever seen in my life."

Shoeing day. . .kids running, dogs barking, horses leaning their heads out of stalls as everybody gathers. . .an event you didn't want to miss." This is the description Dabney Thompson gives as she remembers Willie Smith's arrival from the time she was a young girl. Kind and gifted when it came to watching the way a horse's foot would break, Willie could see what that horse needed to be balanced and comfortable on his feet. Not only that, but he could address some behavior problems as well.

The Thompsons tell a story about an ornery steeplechase horse, "Most people couldn't put a bridle on him. But Willie'd go in his stall you know, unafraid, and treat that horse like he thought he should be treated, then bring him out to shoe and he'd be fine." Melissa Crane tells about a horse named York. "We had to twitch his ear to do any work on him, but Willie could shoe him without it."

Though Willie could be stern, he never raised his voice or hand to any animal. Oh, what pleasure and pride he took when his horses excelled. As Ted and Dabney pursued their training career, Ted recalls, "Nothing like coming home from the races with a win and telling Willie. He was happier than anybody."

The Thompson's Gallant Turk was one of Willie's favorites, as well as John R. Neal's Prince Seran whom Willie shod for all three wins as Timber Champion at the Iroquois Steeplechase. Another favorite was Melissa Crain's renowned endurance horse, CharBiele, whom Willie nicknamed "Pretty Head." But no matter the horse, on shoeing day, if Willie said he was coming, he was coming, big grin and all. You could count on it.

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People liked Willie. W.D. says if you dealt straight and didn't blow smoke like you knew something you didn't, then Willie liked you. You'd know by the way he'd joke with you if you rode with him, "egging you on" to do better, more efficient work no matter how many horses needed to be shod; how he'd never back down and you wouldn't dare to if you were shoeing with him. How he'd respect access to your property with his tucked-in, timely arrival and distinctive farrier's box of tools, apron, stool and anvil that looked way too heavy for his slight frame. Who would guess by looking that Willie was so strong? Then discover that the same man had to be blindfolded in the dentist's chair.

He was a man who loved to dance and was good at it. Perhaps his shoeing was a bit like dancing to him anyway. He's described as being a kind of poetry in motion, reaching for his tools with the slightest of movement, head down with the horse's foot resting on his thin aproned legs.


Quietly at work, he'd seem to pay no attention to the talk in the barn. Then raising his head with a quick, funny response or a good piece of advice, everyone listened. Who could have known that the flu he thought he had would mean triple-bypass heart surgery? Or that complications would come after that? It's no surprise to hear that his final farrier job on June 19, 2006 was performed with an oxygen tank beside him on a pony belonging to a client's child he loved. Without knowing this man, one can weep at God's goodness to take him peacefully while surrounded by his adored companion, children and grandchildren.



Those of us raised around Old South traditions note when close friendships develop across racial lines. When a funeral celebration brings black and white together to overfill a church for nearly two hours on a steaming Saturday in August, it's a potent reminder of how color-blind love is. Ask his friends, colleagues and clients – they'll tell you that race was never an issue with Willie. "He was bigger than that . . . bigger and stronger than all of us." For this slight-bodied, big-hearted Horseshoe Man, the only race

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that ever mattered was the one his horse was about to run. . .around a track, across the turf, over some brush jump or with kids around the barnyard.

Willie Mace Smith's race may be over, but his dancing days have just begun. And the strong legacy that he leaves behind is not only emblazoned on a farrier's hammer in his honor, but also summed up by those who knew and loved him best, "They just don't make 'em like that anymore." 

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