

# Memory Lane...

## Tall Tales Unite MSU Graduates



Lowndes County cattleman Tom Wilburn, a 1940 animal husbandry graduate from Mississippi State College, and Jeannine Smith, also an MSU graduate, spend hours exploring the history of farm life long ago near Artesia and Wilburn's experiences in the harness-racing industry. Wilburn and Smith, who is the executive director of the Mississippi Boll Weevil Management Corps, worked together to write a book, "Tales of Tom Wilburn."

### By Linda Brezeale

Tom Wilburn's memories of growing up on an east Mississippi plantation, attending Mississippi State College and plunging headlong into the harness racing industry are the types of tales Jeannine Smith is eager to record.

United by a common passion for local history, these two graduates of Mississippi State University spent a lifetime together in two years. Smith, who received her master's degree from MSU in industrial technology in 1995 and a doctorate in education in 2001, began researching for a book on Artesia, her adopted hometown, in 2005.

"Every time I asked someone about the history of Artesia, they would tell me I needed to talk to Tom Wilburn," Smith said. "So I started going to see him whenever I found a newspaper article that needed more explanation."

With his help, Smith now knows more about the Lowndes County town than her hometown of French Camp. In fact, she probably knows more about Artesia than most of its natives.

After a few of those fact-finding visits, Wilburn called Smith with his own request. A decade earlier, his brother had encouraged him to begin tape recording "family tales" and other stories for posterity. With nearly 20 hours of tape, he needed help to make it into a book. For the next six to eight months,



Lowndes County native Tom Wilburn, a 1940 animal husbandry graduate from Mississippi State College, is pictured many years ago with his harness-race horse, Trotwood Roy. Wilburn cowrote a book of his memories of farm life in the Mississippi prairie lands and the early years of harness racing in the book "Tales of Tom Wilburn."

Smith and Wilburn spent several hours together most Saturdays while he told his tales.

The book, "Tales of Tom Wilburn," compiles personal stories and photos of life in Mississippi's prairie land and of the early days of harness racing across the United States and Mexico. Set largely in the first half of the 20th century, the book records insights into the events and challenges of a member of one of Lowndes County's oldest families. Wilburn's family settled Smith Oaks Plantation in 1837.

"I firmly believe in the old proverb that states, 'When an old man dies, a library burns to the ground,'" Smith said. "Mr. Wilburn has a rare gift for storytelling and a remarkable memory. I'm glad we were able to work together to record them in a book."

The oral history takes readers from Wilburn's initial efforts to manage the family land shortly after he graduated in 1940 from Mississippi State College (now MSU) through the career decisions that took him in his great-uncle's footsteps as a harness-horse trainer. They include stories of exploits that earned him a place in the Illinois Harness Racing Hall of Fame, as well as his "tales" passed down from Civil War veterans and prairie residents from the late 1800s.

After initially attending Mississippi State, Wilburn briefly attended West Point Military Academy before returning to the state college in 1936. His parents believed strongly in higher education, and they hoped a degree in animal husbandry would help their son make a living on the family farm. But his eyes twinkle as he reflects on his college memories in what he described as a "joyful period" of his life.

"I learned survival," he said. "Upperclassmen were really tough on freshmen. We tried to avoid them, and when we couldn't, we tried to come up with ways to retaliate."

One of Wilburn's first paying jobs was picking sweetpotatoes on the college's north farm for 35 cents an hour. The best jobs were working in the cafeteria. After graduation, the struggle to make ends meet raising cattle on the family farm caused him to feel a tug in a different direction. Harness racing offered, he thought, a better return on his effort.

"Having a college education helped me when I got into the harness racing business. I knew how to meet and talk to a variety of people," he said. "But even in the harness business, like in college, when you start out, you entered on the bottom of the pile."

Success came slowly for Wilburn's stables, but it came.

"In 1940, I was the only harness racer in Mississippi, and it stayed that way for about 10 years," Wilburn said. "By 1952, we were starting to get recognition in the industry. The racing money helped keep the farm in business."

Through the 1960s and into the early 1970s, Wilburn hosted free, harness-racing events on Smith Oaks Plantation in an effort to give back to the community he loved. He estimated as many as 5,000 people would attend at the peak of the annual event's popularity.

Smith is also motivated by a love for the community. She brakes her car as she turns onto Smith Oaks Plantation and again

as she tours the city streets of Artesia to draw attention to a point of interest.

"When I look around, I don't see what's here now; I see what was," she said. "I hope people read Tom's tales and get a glimpse into our past and the history of this area."

Smith wants the book to serve as a sort of time capsule for future generations.

"Time capsules help people look back on what was going on at a particular time that no longer exists. The collections also reflect a desire by one generation to be remembered by a future generation," Smith said.

## Horse Park Activities Include Harness Racing



Bob Ratliff

The Mississippi Horse Park, located south of the main MSU campus, is home to a five-eighths-mile, all-weather harness race track.

"Many Mississippians are familiar with harness racing, especially if they have been to the Neshoba County Fair," said Bricklee Miller, facility manager at the horse park. "They may not know, however, that a first-class harness racing facility is available adjacent to Mississippi State University."

A renovation of the Mississippi Horse Park track was completed last year, and it is available for U.S. Trotting Association sanctioned events.

Harness racers from throughout northeast Mississippi practice at the horse park facility. The next race at the track is scheduled for Sunday, Oct. 4, as part of the Horse Park's 10 year anniversary celebration.

Additional information on the Mississippi Horse Park is available on the Web at <http://msucares.com/centers/agricenter/index.html> or by calling (662) 325-9350.