

Carroll Yesteryears

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Back to the Days When Hay Was For Horses, Not Tractors

By Helen Shriver Riley

When I was a child growing up in Union Mills, Maryland, I had a great love of horses. It started I think before I could walk. Some of my earliest recollections involved being placed on a pony's back and riding around with support from my parents. Back then my dad still used Percheron horses for farming. I often watched with great excitement as local farmers worked with those big draft horses in the fields.

My best pal was my brother Jimmie. In the hot summer days of the 1930s, Jimmie and I were turned loose on our own for most of the day and enjoyed shadowing along as farmhands worked near our home. We had loads of fun playing that we were farmers, too!

To my great pleasure, one day when still very small I was tossed up on one of the work horses and told to take her to the blacksmith's shop for shoes. What a pleasure that was, riding that big horse down along the road into the town of Union Mills where the blacksmith was located.

The blacksmith's name was Mr. Shuhart, although locals called him "Shuey." When I first started riding those big horses, someone had to lift me off the horse's back so I could get to the ground. I remember one time Shuey handed me something to chase the flies while I waited. It was so heavy, I could hardly lift it. Later I learned it was a horse's tail and I was disgusted! But I got to ride the horse home and that was a treat. Those were truly special memories from my childhood.

Even more fun—getting a ride on a big, horse-drawn hay wagon back and forth from the barn to the fields. Hot summer days meant that hay would have to be cut and gathered, and that meant wagon rides!

In those days, hay was not baled. Instead, after hay was cut, farmers raked the hay into rows of piles. Then horses pulled a hay wagon slowly through the field. As the wagon passed the along the row, men used big pitchforks to toss the hay up to another man on the wagon who would level it on the wagon's bed. When the wagon was full, sometimes the men would toss me and Jimmie up on top to ride to the barn.

When we reached the barn, someone lowered a big hay fork from the top of the barn that would grab onto the loose hay and then move it up into the barn. There someone would release the load into the hay mow, where someone else with a pitchfork would level the pile. It was a lot of hard work, and we were always in the way, and in trouble!

Empty hay wagons were a different experience. When the men drove the wagons, they stood up as they went. But that was too bumpy for us, so we sat cross-legged and bounced all over the wagon's bed. But we tried to stand. We would hold onto one of the men or onto the front of the wagon and eventually learned to stand, too. We were real farmers!

We gradually learned to drive the horses ourselves. What a dream to be given a team of horses and to drive a wagon. Eventually that dream came true! Unfortunately, things did not end well, and I was never allowed to drive a hay wagon again.

One day we were moving a load of hay to Cousin Lou Shriver's barn, a big barn located right about where visitors now eat loaded plates of corn at the Union Mills Homestead's Corn Roast in early August each year. Improvements to the highway (Littlestown Pike) put the entrance to the upper part of the barn on a slope off the road. Driving the wagon off that hill into the barn was a bit tricky, as I soon found out.

The wagons had a brake, but they were far from modern! These were ancient wagons, with no rubber tires either. Stopping required a man at the rear of the wagon to set the brake as we headed down the slope.

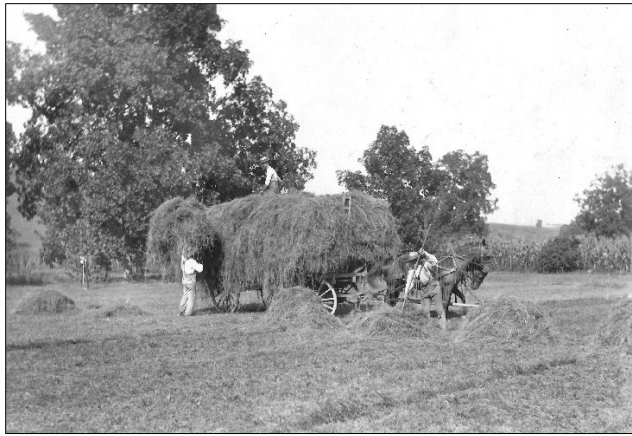
I was driving that day and turned the horses toward the big open doors of the barn, down the steep slope off the highway. The man who was supposed to brake the wagon missed the brake lever as the wagon went by and suddenly the horses were fighting against the full weight of the load, which was pushing from behind. We dashed into that barn so fast, I knew we couldn't stop! I pulled back on the reins as far as I could.

I heard a big crash and then the horses stopped. The tongue of the wagon knocked the front off the barn, with the horses looking into the barnyard below. One more step and we would have gone over! Lady and Della, my two favorite horses, never got upset and just stood there looking down.

As I crawled down from the wagon, I heard some of the most colorful curses in my lifetime! And someone was getting yelled at, loud and clear. The boss's daughter was on the wagon, and it didn't turn out well. I was never allowed to drive a team again after that.

Change soon came to local farming, with tractors replacing horses for most farmers. But I will never forget the days when horses helped make hay in Carroll County.

*Helen Shriver Riley is a community volunteer and life member of the Union Mills Homestead Foundation and the Historical Society of Carroll County. A native of Union Mills, she lives at Fairhaven in Sykesville, Maryland. Her father, James M. Shriver, was President of the B.F. Shriver Canning Company.*



*Image 1 caption: Farmers collecting hay in fields around Union Mills, Maryland. (Union Mills Homestead Foundation collection)*



*Image 3 caption: The author on left with her brother, Jimmie, in a family photograph from the mid-1930s in Union Mills. (Shriver family collection)*



*Image 2 caption: 1930s view of the barn at the Union Mills Homestead. (Union Mills Homestead Foundation collection)*