

A Hungry Man With a Hammer

By Storyteller Don Dillon /Opening By Ben Tennison



Several years ago at Columbia Mule Days in Columbia, Tennessee, as I walked by the many booths at that event, I heard the tell sounds of an anvil and hammer. This fellow was pounding on an anvil, surrounded by things he had made. Studying his work closely I saw these weren't things a man had just pounded out; this was art!

The next time I saw this blacksmith at work he was still pounding away on something, but now he had a crowd of folks around him and was in the middle of some sort of story. I hadn't come to hear a story; I had come to further study this work. What had me so fascinated was his mule heads. They were so unique I couldn't believe a person could make such a thing with a piece of steel and a hammer.

Of course I got to listening to the story he was telling and soon, as all those standing around, he had me right in the palm of his hand.

I don't know if I've talked to Don Dillon hundreds of times since that day, but I'm approaching it, and I've heard hundreds of Don Dillon's stories over the years. Most all of them bring a bright part to my day; some made me think, and some, I'm not sure what the heck he was talking about. Names, places and characters that come through his stories are things of old and reach back into my own growing up a thousand miles away.

I have carried the works of blacksmith, artist, storyteller Don Dillon in the Western Mule Magazine booth for years. Things like his unique mule hooks of various sizes, fireplace pokers with mule heads, fireplace shovels with mule heads and other various odd things by Don Dillon. Many of you own works of art by Don.

While I was intently listening to one of Don's many stories, it hit me this needs to be shared, not only his stories but also his art.

One day after attending a mule show where Don's work was displayed, I saw as I

had seen many, many times, a fellow studying Don's mule hooks. After maybe twenty minutes of turning it this way and that way and looking at the others hanging up, he said, "How does this guy do this?"

I answered as I have hundreds of times,

, "This guy's, not only a blacksmith, he's an artist." As I thought, the fellow trying to figure it out was a blacksmith too. I've had hundreds of blacksmiths mull them over time and again.

"Don," I told him, "You're an artist."

Without hesitation, Don said, "No I'm not. I'm just a hungry man with a hammer. Thus spurred the title "A Hungry Man With A Hammer" by Story Teller Don Dillon. Look for a story from Don monthly. Please read Don Dillon's autobiography.

"A Hungry Man With A Hammer"

As told by Storyteller, Don Dillon

My great grandfather came to this farm in Colfax, North Carolina, in 1882, and I was born here 60 years later. We were tobacco farmers until 1982 when due to labor shortage and rising cost of production, we ceased to grow tobacco. It was that 40 years that shaped my life and that I have the most fond memories of. I was basically raised by my grandpa and uncle; they were the ones responsible for the memories. My uncle farmed and hunted; I followed along beside him on both. Grandpa was a storyteller and a very good conversationalist both creative, and at the same time, analytical.

Grandpa and Uncle Ben, who married my grandma's sister Nell, would sit around on Sunday afternoon and talk. Uncle Ben was a kind old man, not a mean bone in his body; whereas on the other hand, his wife was just the opposite. Uncle Ben was a champion storyteller, which I will cover later.

Tobacco was a way of life and the livelihood of not only my family but of the whole neighborhood. We produced in our area the highest quality, flue cured tobacco in the world; this red land grew it rich, heavy and full of the right flavor. When the tobacco was harvested it was tied on sticks and hung in barns to cure. The barn was heated by wood furnaces and ten-inch flue pipes, which ran through it. Curing would take five or six days and the temperature inside the barn would get as high as 190 degrees.

Grandpa was responsible for most of the curing and since the barns were some distance apart he rode a horse from barn to barn. Old Nell the horse had come from Missouri with a train car of mules in the 1930's and was the horse I learned to ride as well as to plow. Everyone worked; the day started way before day and you were in the field by first light so you could get the work done before the summer heat set in.

All over the neighborhood everyone else was in the fields. You would see pallets under the shade trees at the end of the field

where the young ones would be deposited and watched over by an older sibling. There were no obese kids and most of us had calluses on our hands by the time we were twelve. The thought of not working and doing our part was not a part of us. We also had hogs, chickens, and milk cows all as a part of our existence.

Granny was the champ with butter and Momma was the cottage cheese lady. There could be cake and Granny's light rolls and butter on the table at the same time; the cake would be left.

It was a simple world. You knew that you had better do as you were told or there was a good possibility of getting a switch on the legs. I shot the rooster in the head with a BB gun and Momma set my legs on fire with a switch. It burnt the fact that I was not to shoot the chickens with the BB gun into my mind. All this was before child abuse.

We went to school; I started in 1948 not long after WW11. My teacher had never married and her only boyfriend had been killed in WW1. I could read some when I started. She finished the job and I have been an avid reader ever since. For the greater

part, my family was better educated than the others in the area. Both grannies had brothers who taught in college. One great uncle was head of the European History Department at the University of North Carolina, during the fifties and sixties.

In my mother's extended family, there was a Federal judge, lawyers and journalists. Most of her immediate family were mule and livestock traders. Her father broke, trained, and traded mules and horses and was one of the best. As for the intelligence part setting in on me, I was a little too smart to be dumb and too dumb to be smart, so I did not enjoy the life of an intellect.

It has been a good life. I went to college and taught school for three years of which I looked out the window more than the kids. I spent several years in sales, got divorced and moved back to the farm in 1975 to resume life as a tobacco farmer. My uncle was terminally ill and could no longer work and Dad needed help. He really got help; I was thirty-three and single and had a great fondness for booze and women. I was always at the field on time but sometimes was not really all there. Lots of other stories come out

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Uncle Ben was a tall strong man, so much so that he used a pitchfork handle for a hoe handle. They were hoeing corn in the bottomland and found a huge copper head snake. It just seemed natural to punch at the snake with the hoe handle and watch him coil and strike.

Uncle Ben was not fast enough. The snake hit his handle so hard that it almost knocked the hoe out of his hand. A strange thing happened and the handle started to swell and became a sizable log. It just so happened that there was a sawmill down the road, the log was drug to the mill and sawed into boards. It yielded enough to provide the necessary boards to build a new outhouse.

According to Uncle Ben, when the outhouse was finished his mama wanted it painted. The only paint available was a can of dried up scrap but with lots of turpentine and stirring, there was enough to smear on the outhouse.

Overnight the turpentine drew the snakes venom out of the boards and they began to shrink and shrink and shrink. When the shrinking was all over the outhouse had shrank to the size of a birdhouse; it hung in the walnut tree beside the kitchen window and people from all over would come to look at it and hear the shrinking story, which got bigger every time it was told.

of this, many of which I cannot tell.

In the summer of '75 we were getting ready to start harvesting tobacco and needed some hooks to hook the sleds to the tractor. I went to the local blacksmith, Mr. Charlie Stafford to get them made. It was hot; Charlie was in his 80's and offered to show me how to make them. I got his forge fired up, got the iron hot and started pounding on it with a big hammer. Something happened, in my life I had only run up on one thing that was more fascinating and I will leave that up to your own guess. I knew right then that I wanted to learn to be a blacksmith. That was thirty-five years ago and I am still at it. Until his death in '77, Mr. Charlie would coach me along; he was one more fine fellow. I tried to learn to pick his banjo but he told me that I had a little more talent for blacksmithing and very little for banjo picking. By 1981, I had an established trade as a blacksmith and quit farming in 1982.

Shall I say, the rest is history.

Don



Some of the many faces of Don Dillon's mule hooks.

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