

# THINGS IN MOTION...

*All things are in motion and nothing is at rest ... you cannot go into the same (river) twice. –Heraclitus (540? – 480?)B.C.*

## THE HARNESS HOUSE

DURING THE years when mules were the primary source of power on a farm, it was not uncommon on the larger plantations to find a building designated as the harness house (or the gear shed). This building was usually small in relation to other farm buildings, perhaps only 150 square feet in size and often without a window. Pegs lined the walls at shoulder height and there were shelves along one wall. Each peg held a set of harness for one mule, including its bridle, collar, hames, breast chains, etc. and there were designated spaces for trace chains and a variety of heavier gear along with a workbench for repairing harness. Plow-line rope and spare singletrees along with bins of small parts for both harness and plows were tucked under shelves. Most harness repair was done on rainy days and it was a favorite time for me to huddle in a corner and listen to the tales that were swapped among the workers as they mended their gear. I have visited a number of plantations that date far back in history and note that the gear shed was sometimes a part of the blacksmith shops or even the old carriage houses. Also I noted that leather was not used as extensively in my part of the South as it was in, for instance, Virginia. Common plow line rope was used extensively as reins, rather than the more expensive leather. Amos Battle was the “lot man” on the Burnett Place; he saw to the care and feeding of all the livestock—and he

could plait a leather whip from strips of leather cut from worn-out shoes and boots. Amos was a former cavalryman whose voice had worn out, leaving him to speak in a husky whisper. That husky voice tried in vain to explain to me, when I was just seven, how to crack a whip. Nor was he successful in teaching by example; I usually managed to wrap the small whip he plaited for me around my neck. How he could pop that bit of twine on the end of his long whip alongside the head of Queen, his gray mare, without hitting her was always a great mystery to me. The harness house fell under the care of Amos, and he brooked no carelessness by the workers—they put gear away properly rather than risk a confrontation with the old man.

Almost seventy years later, both Amos and the harness house have passed into history—along with the barns, storage cribs, blacksmith shop, smokehouse, and the houses of the farm workers as well as the overseer. With mechanism comes the capacity to cultivate huge areas without the manpower (or mulepower) of earlier times. Thus, whatever romance may have once been a part of farm life was swept away in the exhaust of tractors.



No. 9, Spring 2007  
Published by Hugh  
Singleton at 102 Azalea  
Trail, Leesburg, FL  
34748  
htsman1102@aol.com