

SUCCESS STORY — IN — Cotton Country

(Georgia National Draft Horse Show)

by
Miles R. McCarty

Kim and Lawana Smith flank judge, Dick Sparrow, at the first Georgia National Draft Horse Show in 1995. Lawana, then as now, was show chairman.

Is it true what they say about Dixie? Conventional wisdom, so called, is that good drafters are strictly Yankee critters, almost as few and far between as penguins and polar bears in the Cotton Belt. Or at least that's what "they" say until Lawana Smith chimes in with an oh-so-Southern-ladylike "Whoa!" And let me hurry to add that I came away from the Georgia National Draft Horse Show at Perry last October 15 and 16 totally convinced that Lawana knows what she's talking about when it comes to big horses, Southern style.

She's been chairing the show since Day One. That was in 1994, shortly after her late husband, Carlton "Kim" Smith squeezed that "National" into its title by spearheading a successful campaign to blend into the truly huge (390,000 paid attendance last year) Georgia National Fair. Eleven exhibitors brought 21 horses to Perry that first year. Over the eleven years since, the show has grown to Class C All-American status. Forty exhibitors and 108 draft horses and ponies from seven states competed for no less than \$12,000 in premium money in 2004.

Those 2004 exhibitors and entry numbers both set new all-time highs.

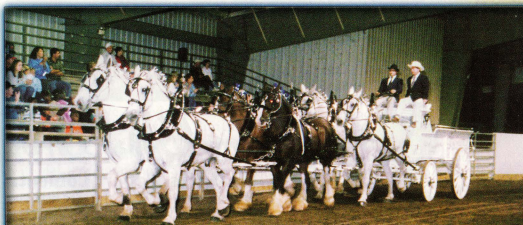
They unfold into 32 Percherons, 22 Clydesdales, 18 Belgians and six Shires, plus a Spotted Draft, a Friesian and 28 draft ponies. But the big story isn't numbers. In the words of Richard "Rich" Lee, a Percheron man who flew down from Hilbert, Wisconsin, to judge at Perry for the second time, "The impressive thing is that quality has improved even more than quantity since I judged here in 1998." He had something there.

Veteran Georgia horseman Charley Lee was currying one of his 18 hh, snow white Percheron wheel-

ers when he caught me looking impressed. "Biggest trouble I've had with folks who say there are no good draft horses here in the Deep South is that they used to come pretty darn close to being right," he deadpanned. "But that's changing pretty fast. Look how this show of ours keeps growing, for example."

Bear down on that "of ours." Kim Smith, who bred Clydesdales, was president of the Georgia Draft Horse Association when he engineered the move to Perry. The show has been high on the organization's priority

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"Hybrid" winner of the Six-Horse-Hitch class with Chris Davison on the lines and Tom Johnson riding shotgun.

Leslie Whitstead photo



Joyce Hutchinson of Palm View, Georgia, is starting with Spotted Drafts.



Judge Rich Lee checks out Cindy's Major Deal—Nancy Ruth Sander's 1st place Yearling Belgian Stallion.

Georgia National Draft Horse Show continued list ever since. And Lawana, who just might be Georgia's most organized and dynamic lady since Scarlett O'Hara rebuilt that plantation in "Gone With The Wind," is quick to point out that her highly effective chairmanship style has roots in the interest and cooperation of the entire membership.

"Enthusiastic pride" fits like a hame strap. Pete Lippitt, a trans-

planted Wisconsinite who brought his Percherons along when he moved to Georgia in 1985, all but bubbled it when he said, "Look around you! World class facilities! That covered judging area is big enough for football. And if push came to shove, we could stable six hundred horses here. That's right! Six hundred box stalls!"

Pete, like Charley Lee, home-stables in Woodstock, Georgia. Both families were recognized in 2003 for

supporting, as in exhibiting at, the show in every one of its first ten years in Perry. Both were also very much in the thick of things again in 2004. Make that "in the thick of things and helpful." Charley and Pete, you could say, "saved" the Six-Horse Hitch Class, each of them going at it in his own way.

Six-ups are traditionally the grand finale at Perry. And since the class offers \$2,200 in prize money, including a cool \$1,000 for first place, it has grown into a crowd-drawing big deal, a favorite with exhibitors and railbirds alike. But last October, thanks at least in part to devastating hurricanes across much of the Southeast, there were enough close-to-last minute drop-outs to worry usually unflappable chairlady Lawana Smith.

Charley and Pete all but galloped to the rescue. Never mind that neither one of them had six horses at the show! Pete, who placed first with a beautifully matched black four-up, ganged up with the Jerry Hancock family, fellow Percheron fans who came down from Winston-Salem, North Carolina, with just enough black horses to win the Unicorn Hitch Class.

Charley Lee, meanwhile, joined forces with a pair of sisters from Tennessee, Rebecca Cannon from Cleveland and Lynn Johnson of Ooltewah. Two of their Clydesdales became the swing team, sandwiched between Charley's tall, white and great-moving lead and wheel Percheron pairs. Farrier Chris Davison, helpful all over the place throughout the show, did the driving. You could say he drove well as

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GDHA President Debbie Weidemann winning the Ladies Belgian Cart Class with Knepp's Betty Sue.

the Clyde-Percheron "hybrid hitch" high-stepped its way to first place. John Wiggins' well-matched Clydes, over from Southside, Alabama, and driven by Tim Meyer, placed second. The Lippitt-Hancock Percherons, virtually "out of it" after a minor, one-of-those-things mishap in the ring, took the third place award.

Even so, the Hancock "traveling party," three Hancocks and three Percherons, had a memorable and enjoyable visit to Georgia. Son Jeremy, a fourth generation Percheron breeder by the way, won the Men's Team Class with Carson and Storm. Then he added Bob to place first in the Unicorn Hitch Class. His mother, Robin, who might well be the straightest-backed teamster in the business, did it as well. She won both the Percheron and the All-Breed Ladies Cart Classes and the Ladies Team Hitch Class.

Meantime, the entries just mentioned, make it clear that the Georgia National emphatically isn't a strictly-from-Georgia thing. Anything but! As previously mentioned there were entries from Tennessee, Alabama and North Carolina as well as Florida, Ohio and South Carolina, in addition to Georgia in 2004. "Entries from other states make our show stronger and much more competitive," is Lawana Smith's answer to the obvious question.

"We always have welcomed them," she continues, "and we hope their numbers will continue to grow. In the past, we've had exhibitors from as far away as Maryland, Pennsylvania and even New Hampshire. And we keep growing year after year, even though several of the older established shows, sales and so forth up North routinely hap-

pen on or near our dates here in Georgia."

Clydesdale lady Lass Thompkins probably would shy away from being tabbed as a typical out-of-state exhibitor. But she has exhibited at Perry in ten of the eleven years the show has been there. Only a barn fire at her Briar Patch Farm near Micanopy, Florida, a few years back kept her from going "11 for 11" like Charley Lee and Pete

Lippitt. Ask why and you get "Premium money is real good. Box stalls are readily available. And Lawana and the others go out of their way to be accommodating and helpful. You get the impression that they really want you to be here. Exhibitor friendly!"

Lass, no stranger to big league Clydesdale circles, is still very much "into" draft horses. But the "must add" footnote is that the Clydes she brought to Perry this time were ponies, not horses. That's right! Clydesdale draft ponies! The lady had been experimenting with them for years. In the process, she has become an A.I. expert of sorts as a way around obvious problems in breeding her tall and leggy Clyde mares to Hackney and Shetland ponies and miniature horses.

End products look like miniature Clydesdales. They're well feathered. But like the "horse branch" of the family, not all are flashily white-legged. Lass has been thinking and breeding toward a four-pony hitch for a long time and in 2004 she had one. She also had a unicorn and enough good ones to keep Haflinger and Welsh pony exhibitors thinking during harness and halter classes alike. Even the wise guy who wondered if Lass was gearing up to haul wagonloads of light—or is that lite?—beer was silenced.

"We had members with Haflingers, so we added classes for them in 1995," Lawana Smith remembers. "They showed with us for three years. Then the Georgia National Fair gave them a show of their own. We added draft pony classes, open to all breeds, a year ago. They were needing somewhere to show at the time. They're real crowd pleasers. And having them in the ring allows more time for hitch-



Leslie Whitehead photo

Jeremy Hancock winning the Men's Team with Carson and Storm.



Leslie Whitehead photo

Pete Lippitt and Bart winning the Men's All-Breed Cart Class.



Leslie Whitehead photo

Pete Lippitt topping the Four-Horse Hitch Class with Jeremy Hancock riding shotgun.

ing, changing tack and so forth between our draft horse harness classes. Two birds with one stone!"

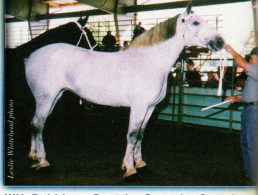
Apply that "two birds" thing to horses and there was an extra added attraction that wasn't billed as such. Roger Hartle of Nashville, Tennessee, brought a dancing, prancing Friesian filly to Perry. He drove her "for experience" in the Pleasure Driving Cart Class—experience for man and horse alike. Rog, still learning, says he's relatively new at such things. And good-looking black "Frieda" was prepping for Friesian breed organization performance tests.

Rog later piloted a flashy grey Percheron owned by Al Stauble of

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Lass Tompkins and her Clydesdale Ponies.



WV Pebbles—Scottie Green's Grand Champion Mare-All Breeds.



Roxanne Janes had 1st place Belgian gelding with Clark's Commander.



The North Carolina Hancocks closing up Rod, Pete Lippitt's Grand Champion gelding (Left to right: Robin, Jerry & Jeremy).

Georgia National Draft Horse Show continued

Lithonia, Georgia, in a competition among novices who had yet to win up in first place in a cart class.

"Moose," one of Charley Lee's great-moving white geldings, was "first horse" in both classes. Sherry Lee was on the lines in Pleasure Driving. Odalie Kromp did the driving and obviously stopped being a

"never-won" novice in the Novice Class. Both gals are among the "maybe 35" the Lees are teaching to drive. No tuition fees involved. Main idea is to get more people in draft horses.

Back-a-step to Al Stauble, owner of the grey Roger Hartle drove, and she's a carriage service operator, as well as a "Percheron person"—her term. That's right, Al is one of Georgia's seemingly endless list of "dynamic damsel" draft horse women. Al, not Alice or Alberta or whatever, is her "square" name. And the fact that she welcomed a "pinch" driver gets us to an aspect of showing that seldom gets mentioned these days: the learning experience thing.

Al is no amateur. Anything but! She's been breeding, buying, selling and driving drafters for more than 15 years. Thing is, though, that she purely, simply and totally dislikes showing. "Makes me more nervous than it should," she confesses. But she keeps bringing horses to Perry, frequently but not every year. Big "why?" is that being an insider here provides opportunities to "talk horse" and swap ideas with her fellow exhibitors.

"Educational" is the word she applies. Case-in-point: Al once brought what she regarded as a hard-mouthed horse to a show. That tough mouth was his one big problem. "Let me show how to reset those lines," said another exhibitor. He did just that. The problem disappeared in ten minutes flat and never returned.

Rich Lee, no amateur either, turned in what just about all concerned seemed to regard as a smoothly professional job of judging. Exhibitors and railbirds alike quickly

concluded that the judge was a "man of action." He goes with horses that can move, in other words. Rich subsequently got all of us feeling as smart as a new whip by saying "I like to see clean, flat bone and the smooth action that goes with it."

Rich, as mentioned, was judging at Perry for the second time. He's 100 percent enthusiastic about the show: "Lots of good people. The horses get better every year. And talk about Southern hospitality!" He modestly didn't mention that he's the first, and to date only, judge ever invited back for an encore.

But without getting into predictions, keep an eye on that "only." It's a good bet that will change one of these years since the list of previous judges also includes other major leaguers like Don Castagnasso, Corby Orndorff and Dick Sparrow, to name just a few of those still active.

"We're probably not a whole lot different from most shows when it comes to selecting judges," says the tireless Lawana Smith. "We ordinarily start in early spring by asking Association members who they would like to see judging our show that year. We go from there to finding a capable nominee whose schedule fits in with our show dates. And, yes, we try to rotate among judges mainly active in one of the three breeds most popular with our membership; Belgians, Clydesdales and Percherons. All this isn't always as easy as it sounds, of course, but it usually works quite well for us."

Big "something different" about the Georgia National is that there are no breed champions. Horses are judged in age group classes, breed by breed. Winners are eligible for All-American. But those same winners show against each other, all breeds together, for grand and reserve grand champion. Grand and reserve, in short, roughly parallel the supreme and reserve supreme champion awards used in some shows.

Problem at Perry in 2004 was that stallions were few and far between. I counted six in all. A fast-stepping Clyde shown by Steve Lofly of Whitwell, Tennessee, was the only one in the bunch that was 2-years-old or older. Judge Lee went with WC Black Prince, a weanling Percheron owned by Judy Hodges of Fort Payne, Alabama, for grand. Dream Come True Cody, a Percheron yearling exhibited by Jack and Carla Beckom of Barnesville, Georgia, was reserve. Cody also was part of Jack's winning get of sire.

Percheron mares kept pace. WV Pebbles, a nicely-put-together grey shown by Scottie Green of Purlair, North Carolina, was grand champion. Big Timbers Jessie, a two-year-old owned by Billy Hodges of Fort Payne, Alabama, was reserve. Scottie's Pebbles mare encored by pairing with one of her offspring to top the mare and foal class.

Percherons, no two ways about it, did better than all right in "against the world" competition. But as several "Percheron persons" graciously pointed out, this could have been partly traceable to the fact that their breed outnumbered Belgians and Clydesdales alike.

Be that as it may, Pete Lippitt had grand champion gelding on Rod, a tall, hitchy and oh-so-black Percheron. I thought Rod moved fantastically well for his size. A fellow railbird, whose name I didn't get, upgraded that to "moves damn well for a horse of any size." The Beckoms had reserve grand champion gelding with yet another Percheron, an up-on-the-bit first place 2-year-old.

Judge Lee actually broke into a trot himself while trying to wrap up evening sessions before horse-spooking fireworks blasted off nearby. Asked to comment on the show, he lead off with "As I said before, there are a lot of good people working to keep things moving in the right direction here. They've made it into a show strong enough to disappoint you if you come expecting to win. Best way to show at Perry, I think, is to come expecting to have a good time. It's a great place to have one."

Debbie Wiedemann, Belgian breeder and president of the Georgia Draft Horse Association (who said this was a man's game?) backs away from taking credit for the continuing success of the show. "Lawana is the one to congratulate," says Deb. "She

works hard and has a way of getting things done. She has a way of getting good people to work with her."

Madame President was talking about good people like John Ayers, who came over from Shelbyville, Tennessee, to ringmaster and kept things flowing Ringling style. The man loves his work. And would our editor ever love him! John says he still has every copy of *The Draft Horse Journal* he's ever owned!

Then there's "Big Ed" Hawkins of

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Georgia National Draft Horse Show continued

Taylor, South Carolina, youngish-looking "old pro" on the ring announcer's microphone. He and organist Harris Blackwood of Gainesville, Georgia, didn't overlap each other even once in two days! They're that good. Likewise, "Mrs. Big Ed"—Barbara, who did the ring-side bookkeeping, and Leslie Whitehead, the "homegrown" photographer who took most of our pictures.

All of which could go on and on. Just about everyone involved seems hell-bent on making the show succeed. The bottom line is that the Georgia National Draft Horse Show, while not Indianapolis or Des Moines yet, is growing and glowing like a Georgia peach tree in full bloom.

"We have worked diligently to provide classes for everyone, from those just getting started to those who've been showing for years," says Lawana. "I guess you could say our goal always has been to be the best draft horse show in the Southeast." And if they're not quite there yet, they sure enough are working at it!

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