



THRESHERS

Jack Macon remembers summers in Randolph County when teams threshed more than 400 bushels of wheat per day.

By Benny Phillips

It was 1928, and Jack Macon, now 81, remembers that his father, John Thomas Macon, unlike many individuals at the time, was optimistic about America.

“Daddy went to Green Street in Greensboro in '28 and bought a Model C Case tractor,” Jack recalled. “It had a four-cylinder engine. You started the engine with gas, and then it ran on kerosene. It was called a 17-27 because it had 17 horsepower at the draw bar and 27 horsepower on the belt. It was a 1927 model.”

Mr. Macon also bought a new threshing machine to go with his new tractor. “I don’t remember exactly what Daddy paid for the tractor and thresher, but it was \$500 and some dollars. I do know that,” Jack said.

Getting the new equipment to the Macon homestead on Little Bean Store Road between Coleridge and Seagrove in Randolph County did not present a problem. Macon simply fired up the engine on the tractor, hooked up the threshing machine and drove the outfit home, a distance of 48 miles.

The tractor had steel wheels, and he ran it on the flat rims. When he arrived home, he bolted cleats on the wheels.

The next year, 1929, the Great Depression began.

“Daddy was too independent to let anything such as a depression slow him down,” Jack said. “He threshed wheat and oats for the public until 1942. There wasn’t much money, but he threshed a lot of wheat and oats for a share of the grain. Farmers couldn’t pay him money, so they gave him a share of their grain, and he would sell it at the roller mill. He would get about five bushels for every 100 bushels he threshed. If a farmer didn’t have enough grain to last him through the winter, Daddy would do his threshing for nothing.”

Even so, John Thomas

Macon raised 10 kids on the family’s 248-acre farm. He found ways to make money.

“We grew a lot of corn and wheat,” Jack said. “We cut our wheat first, and then Daddy would take the equipment and hit the road. He hunted to make extra money. When quail and



turkey season rolled around, all the work stopped. He sold quail for \$1.25 each, and I can't remember what he got for a wild turkey. During the winter months he ran a sawmill with the tractor, and in the spring we planted a big garden. Mother canned everything we grew. We bought sugar, salt and pepper, and that was about all we would get on a trip to town."

Jack's father didn't learn to read and write until he was 21. "But they used to say that when he was 14 or 15 he could look at a tree and tell you exactly how many board feet it would cut."

To operate a threshing machine, Jack remembers that it took at least six workers.

"Two or three men would cut the twine around bundles of wheat or oats and would feed

the thresher. It took one or two at the back of the machine to keep the straw coming out. It also took two people to take care of the grain coming out. It came out in half bushels, and a counter kept track of how much grain was being threshed."

He figures his Daddy and his crew could average 400 to 450 bushels a day, although he remembers once when they threshed 955 bushels in two days.



Photos by Sonny Hedgecock show threshing wheat at the Southeast Old Threshers Reunion, Denton Farm Park and Jack Macon (left).

Jack has restored some of the equipment his father farmed with and is a fixture with the Southeast Old Threshers Reunion in Denton. He can show you two tanks

on the tractor his father owned. One was for gasoline and the other for kerosene. "When you stopped at night or for lunch, you would cut the kerosene off," Jack said. "When you started up, you would turn the gasoline on to crank the engine. Once the engine heated up, then you would cut the gasoline off and turn on the kerosene."

Steam engines also pulled threshing machines. "The steam engine was fired with wood. You had a water wagon you pulled behind the thresher. You put the water

in square tanks on each side of the tractor and hooked pipes to the engine. You pumped water through the engine and turned it to steam."

Jack lived in High Point for several years and recently retired to his homeplace. 📍

Benny Phillips for many years wrote a column for Stock Car Racing magazine. His work soon will be published in a book. He lives in High Point.

WHEN THRESHING WAS A COMMUNITY EVENT

Telephones in rural North Carolina were few at the time, so it was by word of mouth that farmers knew almost to the day when the threshing machine would be in their neighborhood. It was a community happening in June, July and sometimes into August, matched only by corn shuckings in autumn.

Threshing machines and their crews traveled from farm to farm, separating wheat and oats grain from the straw.

Wheat and oats harvested by a reaper produced bundles of grain called shocks that people stacked in the field, 15 to 20 shocks in a circle with more stacked on top providing a straw roof. At one time, teams of mules pulled the reapers. Later, tractors—some powered by steam—pulled reapers through fields of grain. Then gas-powered tractors pulled the reapers and finally the self-propelled combine replaced both.

Putting wheat and oats in shocks and leaving them stacked in the field was a means of drying the grain.

Once dried—and wheat usually dried quicker than oats—farmers hauled the shocks to the barn on wagons to await the threshing machine, although there were occasions when the threshing machine operated in the field.

It took a crowd to get the grain threshed. You helped your neighbors, and your neighbors helped you. All the women in the neighborhood came to wherever the threshing was going on and began preparing lunch at the same time the men would go to work. The men stopped at lunch and ate a meal that would compare to anyone's Christmas dinner, then later stretched out under shade trees in the front yard to sleep off their lunch.

Each spring when school ended, I worked summers at my father's homeplace. My two uncles ran the farm, and my grandmother did a lot of the wonderful cooking. My first job after the school year was to clean the inside of the big barn. I had to prepare for shocks of wheat and oats from the fields.

I still remember the smell of the tack room, the neat's-foot oil, and the coiled long-reach reins hanging from wooden pegs on the left wall. The leather punches and brass rivets in jars stayed pigeonholed along the work bench. From the forward wall, a bleached calendar a yard long showed a girl on a hay bale smiling straight at me when I entered the room. I watched through my boyhood years for her shirt's bottom button to pop loose. It never did. Below the young lady it said: 19 Louisville Roller Mill 41.

Then one afternoon the big old tractor pulling the big old threshing machine would come huffing and puffing down the dirt road. All the men with the machine wore red bandannas to keep chaff from going down their shirts. They began to prepare the machine and tractor for the work that would begin the next morning. The man who owned the outfit would go straight behind the barn and make conversation with the mules and horses. The animals seemed to understand. He would give each a lump of sugar. I guess he was a relic from the time when men ranked men by the way they handled animals. The man charged by how many bushels of grain he threshed.

Soon my uncles bought a combine, one of those you pulled with a tractor. The big ones had not come along yet. The threshing machine never returned to our place.

—Benny Phillips