

RECOLLECTIONS OF ARLINGTON'S LAST DAIRY FARMER

By

NELSON REEVES*

I am Nelson Reeves, last dairy farmer in Arlington County. I've watched Arlington grow from a rural community to the heavily populated area it is today. I remember very vividly the first automobile and the first plane. When the Wright Brothers brought their airplane into Fort Myer to make a test flight for the Federal Government—or the military—my grandfather put a team of horses to an old hay frame we had, and a group of us, my mother, father, brother and sister, and some neighbors rode down to Ft. Myer to see whether the thing would fly, or not. Well, it did fly. You know what we have today. I guess if the Wright Brothers hadn't come along and got the thing started, we wouldn't be as far along as we are now. I haven't made up my mind to get on one yet—I may to get a little older to do it.

The old Southern Railway, later called the Old Dominion, operated a steam train that went right up in front of the farm on its way to Bluemont which was beyond Leesburg on Route 7. The first time I rode the train was when my grandfather went to visit some of his friends in Unison, Virginia, where he was born and raised, and he took me along. We boarded the Southern Railroad train at Bluemont Junction down on Wilson Boulevard. I was young then, and when that train came rolling in, I thought half the world was coming. When the conductor came around to collect the fares, my grandfather said, "I think he is six years old." I piped up and said, "No, I am seven." So, I had to pay. You could ride free if you were six, but you had to pay a fare at seven.

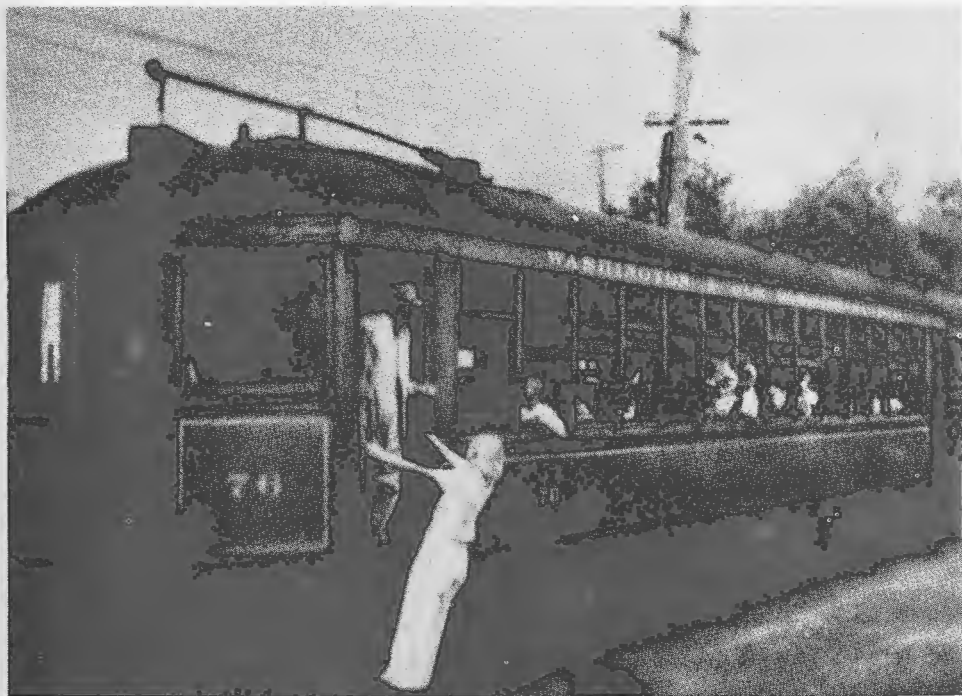
In 1912, the steam railway gave way to the electric train. A spur was built from Bluemont Junction across Rosslyn into Washington. It crossed the old Aqueduct Bridge into 36th and M Streets. The Aqueduct Bridge has been torn down, but two piers remain.

When we heard that train whistle, my brother, sister, and I would run down to Bluemont Junction or, if we missed it there, we'd run to what

* Nelson Reeves was born on August 29, 1900, in the house in which he now lives. His parents, George R. and Lucy T. Reeves, lived at the farm from around 1900 until their deaths in 1949. Mr. Reeves served for forty-six years as a county election official, the latter part of those years as an election judge. When he retired a few years ago, he received commendations from the Arlington County government.

The farm attracted school children from Arlington, Washington, and other nearby communities. The Virginia-Maryland Milk Producers' Association sponsored field trips out to the farm to show the children an operating dairy farm.

This article is based on a talk presented to the Arlington Historical Society on March 8, 1974. One of its principle attractions is the conversational tone and should be read accordingly.



The Old Dominion Railroad crowded with school children

we called Bon Air at Kensington Street, to catch a car into Georgetown where we went to school. (I started school in Glencarlyn in a one-room schoolhouse * with thirty-five children and eight grades, and one teacher. I think, sometimes, that I learned more there than I have learned since.) Going into Georgetown we'd ride one of the two trains they'd run in the morning. By the time they reached us they were loaded. If you could hang on somewhere, you were lucky. They also had a line that went to Great Falls from 36th and M Streets. Great Falls was a popular amusement park and picnic area at the time. Sometimes we had to wait two or three cars before getting a ride out there and back.

I guess the automobile stole the train riders so the line had to fold up. I hated to see the right of way sold. Now they are talking about a Metro system, which, in my estimation, isn't going to be anything more than the Old Dominion was, except more improved. If you can get people to ride it, that's one thing. But as the old saying goes, "You can take a horse to water, but you can't make him drink."

Wilson Boulevard, which we think is a nice street now, was nothing but a dirt road. Many a time I have gotten stuck in the middle of the road with a team of horses. I would have to unload the wagon to get

Ed. Note: The east wing of the Ball-Sellers House, 5620 Third Street, South.

out. It was especially bad at Lexington Street and Wilson Boulevard. I think there was a spring right in the middle of the road.

Some of you may remember that heavy snow storm we had in January, 1922, when the roof of the Knickerbocker Theater caved in. At that time anything west of Glebe Road wasn't even considered in Arlington County so we had to clear the snow ourselves. There were five of us men and two teams of horses and the wagon spending all day Sunday breaking track from the farm down to Glebe Road so we could get through the next day with the milk. From Glebe Road to the bridge, the County had the road cleared.

The area around the Pentagon and Crystal City was called Hell's Bottom back in the teens. In those days Washingtonians wouldn't come to Arlington because they were afraid that they wouldn't get back across the river. Along Route 1 there were gambling dens, murder traps, robberies, and just about anything else. After World War I Commonwealth Attorney Crandel Mackey started cleaning up the area to make it safe for people to come to Arlington.

Another bad area over on Lee Highway just west of the Marriott Hotel was called Devil's Hole. The farmers would bring their produce into Washington along Constitution Avenue, called Louisiana Avenue then, to sell at a farmers' market there. They had to carry their money home with them, and some were held up in Devil's Hole. Mackey also cleaned up that section.

In the early thirties, to create work, the WPA started laying sewer and water lines in Arlington County. When these were laid the County enjoyed a building boom. I guess that was the beginning of the end of farming. In 1932, my mother donated about three acres for Arlington Boulevard to go from a little west of Carlin Springs Road towards Seven Corners almost to Montague Street. The only road there at the time was a farm road that took off from Wilson Boulevard. Instead of coming straight up the way it does now, Wilson Boulevard used to come up by Manchester Street and curve around the hill. The farm road curved sharply and came out on Carlin Springs Road near the Greek Orthodox Church.

I worked for forty-six years as a clerk in the Glencarlyn Precinct beginning in 1924. I worked as a judge, a registrar, and a commissioner at the Court House. When I reached seventy, I had to retire. I think the Election Board thought I couldn't tell the difference between a Republican and a Democrat.

One time I almost worked as a wireless operator. In 1921, I had a wireless operator's license to go aboard ship. I went to service radio school at Ninth and Pennsylvania Avenue, and I got my license about February 1921. The school guaranteed you a job. We didn't have a phone then, so I asked the neighbor farming my mother's old homeplace if he would deliver a phone message. One morning at ten o'clock he said,



The home of Nelson Reeves overlooking Bluemont Park

“Somebody down there called out here yesterday morning, and said something about a ship in Norfolk.” I knew what it was, and went down to Pennsylvania Avenue in fifteen minutes. Now it takes half an hour or more. I walked into the school, and the teacher said, “What are you doing here? You’re supposed to be in Norfolk.” I explained that I had just gotten the message. He called Norfolk, and they had signed on another operator. I went down there anyway and stayed two weeks during Prohibition, and signed up with the Shipping Board, Wireless Operator’s Union. I spent my time going to court and listening to Prohibition cases. After two weeks I wasn’t any nearer to getting a job, so I came home and went into farming.

My grandfather, William H. Torreyson, came from Unison, Virginia, to Arlington around 1863, and bought one hundred sixty acres. The land extended to the Greek Orthodox Church, over where the Woodlake Apartments are now in Falls Church, down to Kenmore Junior High School, all the way through on the Old Dominion Railroad, to Wilson Boulevard where Church of the Nazarene is, and back up through the woods to the starting point.

The Boulevard Manor area and Bluemont Park were once part of the farm. In 1954, the County bought twenty acres from us. Two schools

are on the property, Ashlawn and the shop section of Kenmore. Two churches are on the old property, Church of the Brethren on Montague Street and Church of the Nazarene on Wilson Boulevard. When Grandfather came here he built a log house at about where First Street, South, and Madison Street, where it takes off from Arlington Boulevard, are. Later on he built a big beautiful home which was torn down in 1953 when they started building the north side of Arlington Boulevard. When they laid the road out it was two hundred feet wide, and the marker came up to the front steps. The house stood on what is now the service road, about five houses from Manchester.

The County had quite a time getting that old house down. It had oak sills and oak studdings which were dovetailed into the sills. They had to use a crane to lift the whole thing up, and literally shake it to pieces.

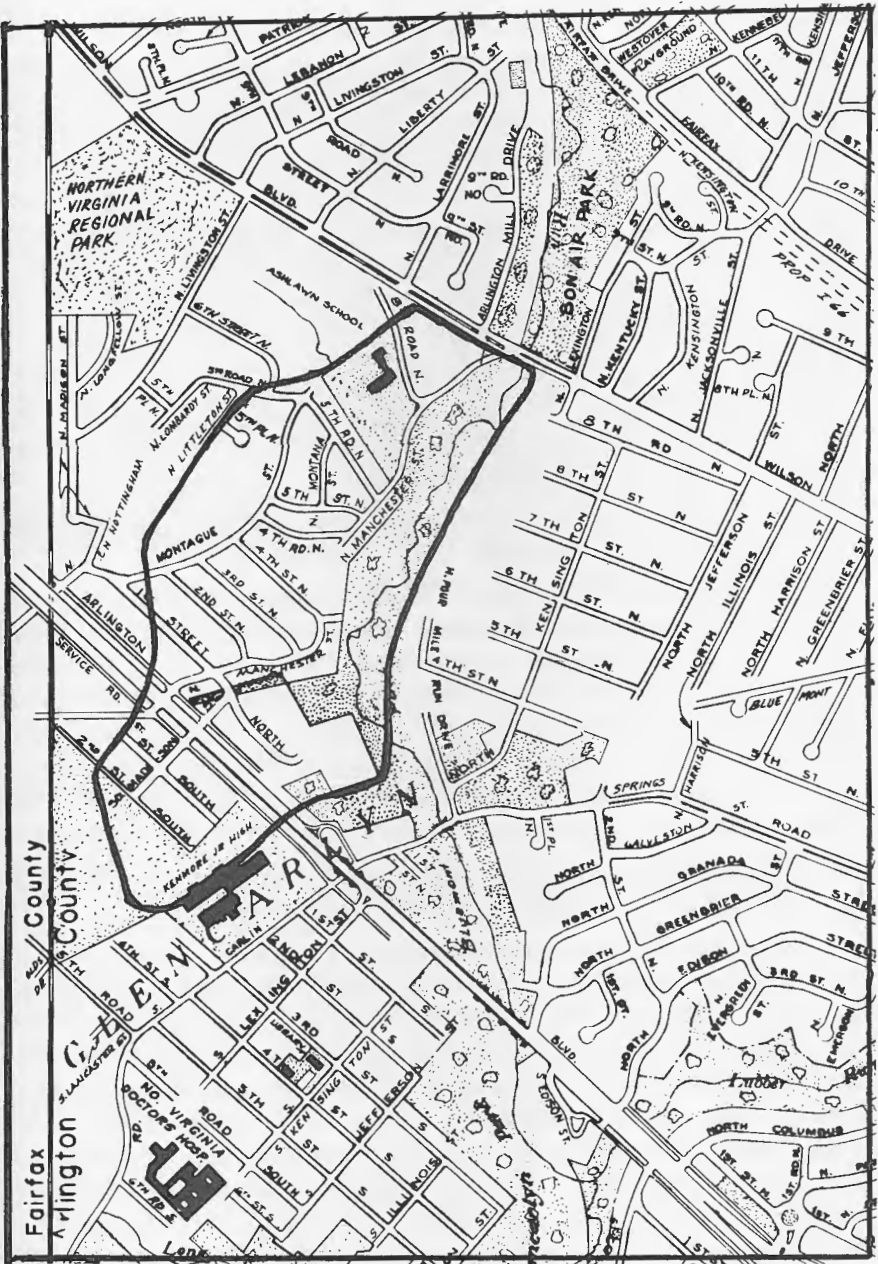
When they tore the barn down, they took off the roof and used the crane to pick up the framework. The barn had big timbers put together with wooden pins, and was almost as difficult to tear down.

When my mother and father were married, they went to Mexico, Missouri, to farm for about eight years. About late 1899, they came back here because my grandfather needed help. My brother and sister were born in Missouri but I was born in Arlington. My home was just a three room tenant house then. We had a wood cookstove, oil lamps, and a bathroom down the path, and that was good living. Now they call it poverty. My father added on to the house two different times, first on the east side to make a sitting area off the dining room, and then about 1910 on the west side. It has a living room, dining room, kitchen and parlor. My parents eventually took what was the parlor and used it as a bedroom and put in a bathroom downstairs. We have four bedrooms on the second floor and fifth bedroom on the third floor.

We had a small spring house with the best water in the County. We had to pump the water from the spring to the barn and house. When the building began on the property, I hated to give up the spring. In 1956, I hooked up with city water.

When Grandfather farmed the land, I went everywhere with him. I guess I was his pet. I remember that he would have to go to Alexandria with a team of horses to buy equipment, fertilizer, or dairy feed. We would sit up on that old wagon and come up Route 7 with the wind blowing into us. Some of those wintertime we wondered if we would ever make it home, or freeze to death.

One time we went down to Georgetown in a one-horse wagon to buy some potato bags. They used to ship one hundred pounds of potatoes in these heavy burlap bags. It got to raining so hard that I got wet. My grandfather decided to stop for some coffee and thought I better have some too. That was the first cup of coffee I ever had. I was glad it was coffee instead of something else.



Map showing boundaries of the farm in Arlington County. About sixty acres not shown were in Fairfax County.

On our way home we got past Ballston and, Glebe Road, but at Abingdon Street a stream went through there. (It's covered over by a culvert now.) The water was very high, and we had to go down through it and back up again. Grandfather said he didn't know if we would make, it, but we'd try. When we went into that stream, the horse started swimming. The old wagon was going down stream, but the horse finally reached the far side, got his front feet on the ground, and we came out. At Four Mile Run there was a bridge and the water was right up under it. We were fortunate to get home.

Before my grandfather died in August, 1910, he had divided the farm between my mother and my aunt. He hired a surveyor and had the boundaries laid and all the points written in the deed. They knew what they had, and it was pointed out to them.

My aunt received the section from where Woodlake Apartments are, the south side of Arlington Boulevard, down to where Manchester Street goes now. My mother's property ended up where the Kenmore Junior High School shops and football area are.

Three generations farmed our land. My father and grandfather farmed it, and I stayed there. My father and I went into partnership in 1924, and I kept it going until July 11, 1955, the last day I shipped milk.

We ran a herd of Guernsey cattle. When we first started out, three of us were milking fifty-five cows by hand. Then in 1932, we changed to milking machines. At first we shipped to Joe Wise, who operated a little route out of the basement of his house on P Street. He later developed Chevy Chase Dairy which was on M Street near Wisconsin Avenue. They sold out to National Dairy who also bought Chestnut Farms. Then we shipped to Arlington Dairy, and when they sold out, to Alexandria.

We handled the milk in the milk house where we had milk coolers and our steam boiler. We sterilized all milking equipment.

When Arlington Dairy was operating from what is now the Cooper-Trent building on Wilson Boulevard, Julius Marcey, who ran the dairy, had several customers who wanted raw milk. He asked me to produce raw milk for him. Every morning they would take three ten-gallon milk can from us and bottle them. They delivered some of this milk to the White House.

The father of John Melnick, who is our representative in Richmond now, was the inspector in Arlington County. He would stop a truck or a wagon on the street to get a sample of milk to test it for butter fat and bacteria. Our unpasteurized milk was testing at 1800 count, and our pasteurized milk was passing at 2000. So, I was real proud.

We also planted crops. At the end of the cow barn I always planted one tomato plant to experiment with and see how tall it would grow.

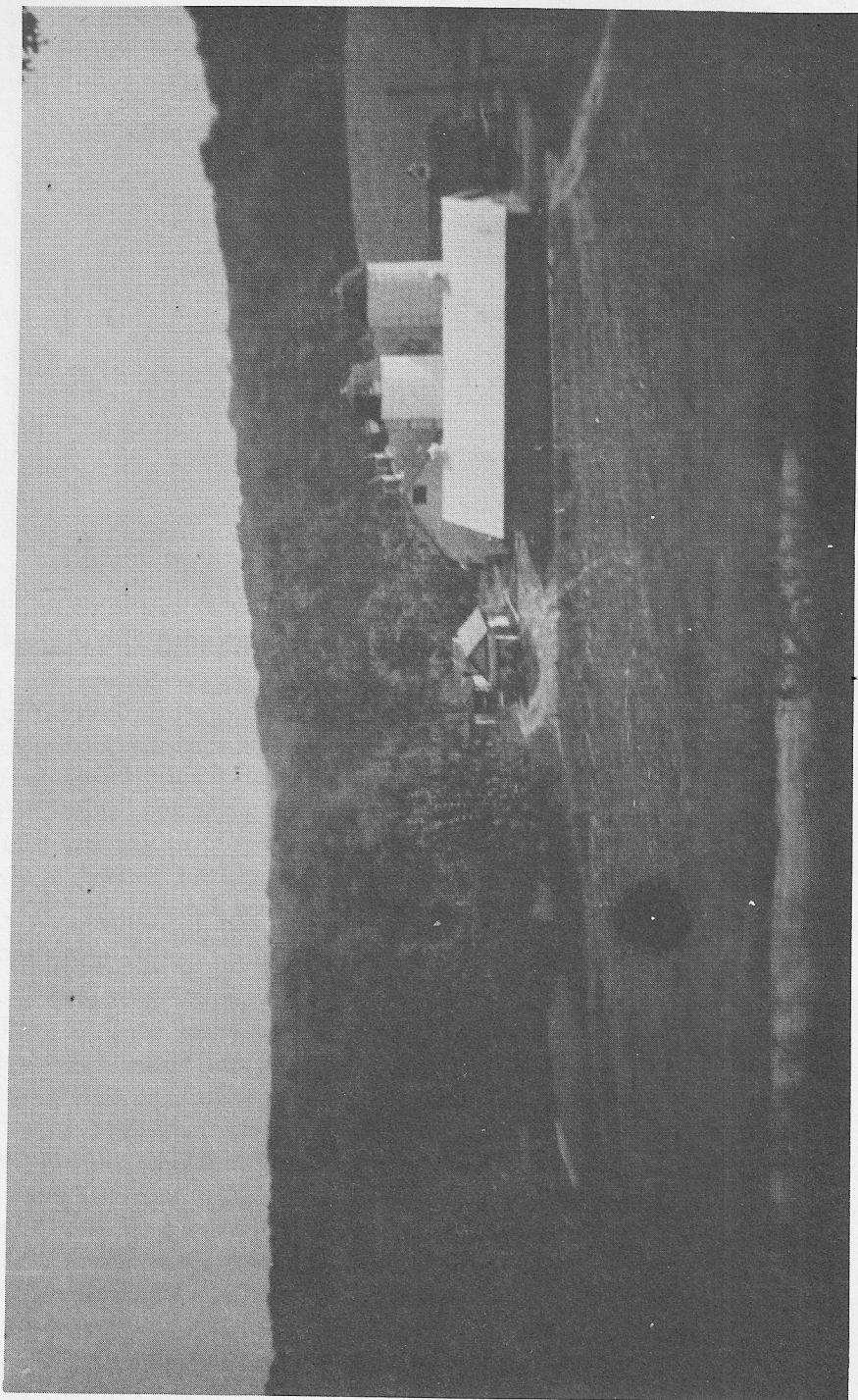


Mr. Reeves hauling corn—about 1940. Looking to Bluemont Junction at corner of Fourth Road, North, and Manchester Street.

One year I had one that must have been twelve feet tall, and produced about ninety tomatoes. When the first frost was due, I put a big canvas over the plant and nailed it to the barn. It kept that night, but the following night was too cold and they all froze.

We also raised tall corn, about fifteen feet high. We planted open pollinated corn. I don't think you can get the seed for that anymore. Today everybody plants hybrid. In those days you couldn't go into the field with a forage machine to cut the high corn. We would cut it by hand and load it up on the wagon, and haul it up to the silo where we had a cutting box and blower. I used an old Studebaker truck to load corn. I bought it in 1948 and kept it for twenty-four years and four months. Then I couldn't get a mechanic to even talk about it. So I gave it away. We raised some wheat. Many times I would drive three horses and a combine to cut wheat around Pershing Drive and Glebe Road.

There were a few truck farms that raised vegetables. I know Grandfather used to keep a four-horse team for hauling crops such as watermelon, sugar corn, and potatoes into Washington. He would always haul back a load of oyster shells. He would get his lime by building up under the shells and burning them. We have a beautiful oak tree where he burned his shells, just up from Bluemont Park. I think that is what makes the tree look so pretty.



View of the milking barn, showing silos and milk house to the left

The first piece of ground we sold was on the south side of Arlington Boulevard, the west side of Kenmore Junior High. It got so that after Arlington Boulevard was built we couldn't haul our crops out of there because of the traffic. We planted corn on that side and hauled it over to the house and filled the silo. We had a helper who would go down in the road to try to slow traffic down. We had to go down a slope to get across. I have seen people in their automobiles run that man clean up the bank when he was trying to slow them down. We had to give up because it was too rough. Fortunately, because of a stream, they had to put a culvert in under Arlington Boulevard. My mother agreed to give them the ground if they would build a tunnel for us to get cattle under the road. That is the way we got our cattle there, and we used that land just for pasture rather than growing corn.

Farming is a good life, although it is a hard life. We had to get up at 4 o'clock in the morning. I started to help milking when I was big enough to sit on a milking stool and the old cow wouldn't switch me off with her tail. I was about six or seven. When we were through milking we'd eat breakfast and get ready for school. At the end of the day we'd catch a car home, get a slice of bread, put jelly, sugar, or butter on it, and head for the barn. On Saturday we always had chores to do. We didn't have a lot of money in my day, but we had a good living. I guess my family and I were lucky to be able to hold onto the farm for so long so that the land increased in value.

I got out of the milk business just about the time they quit using milk cans and started using tank trucks. These tank trucks would come and hook their hose into the refrigerated bulk milk tank, pump the milk into their tank, and then go on to another dairy. These tanks must have held at least four thousand gallons of milk.

When I quit dairying, I had sixty-some ten-gallon milk cans, all in good shape, all good enough to ship milk in. A fellow came along and offered me thirty-five cents apiece for them, and I sold them. You can't buy one now for less than fifteen dollars.

I kept two cows. We milked ten gallons a day, taking forty percent cream and making butter and ice cream. We had a freezer full.

After you work hard all your life, you don't sit down and let the rocking chair get you. I was put on the Board of Trustees up at Oakwood Cemetery and have been working there with another retired dairy farmer keeping the grounds in good shape for the last twenty years.