

Hoofprints By Dan Boyts

As I walk across the field to the barn, I remember the first time I saw him; I was just a child. Prince is full of pride and vigor in an elegant way. The sun shines bright and he shakes his head with an air that says, "Get out the buggy." As I set the harness on his neck and shoulders, the old leather straps loosen just a little to fit his firm physique. He prances anxiously, waiting for the command to go. I quietly give him the giddy up, lightly slap the reins on his haunches, and he trots off with his head held high down the old road in the small town where we live.

We call him Prince because he is one: regal and majestic in his old age, most comfortable when he has the small two-seat buggy behind him. He's a stallion with an attitude and a meanness about him that commands respect; he's earned it. His liver and white coat accents the blond mane and tail that seem to float in the wind as he sails down the small county road. The sound of his hooves clop-clop-clopping, on the chip and seal pavement that was once just dirt, echo in the still daylight.

Traveling through the country takes me back to a simpler time, one of sparse technology and quiet nights sitting on the porch of a two-story farmhouse that holds the memories of love, and hard work. We round the first bend in the road and come upon the neighbors that are closest to the farm. They wave and smile at the sight of us trotting by, as they burn a brush pile in their pasture, the smoke spilling into the sky, taking advantage of the calm day that marks the end of spring and the beginning of the hot summer ahead.

Civilization has become too fast and cluttered. I like the slower pace of the past when there was always time to visit with a neighbor, or to wave at them as they drove by. That was a time when people were friendly and knew your name. It was nice to sit outside on a hot day and drink lemonade or iced tea, while you rocked away the time on the front porch, or in the swing

under the Maple tree that was older than any other living thing around. The shade it gave tempered the heat while waiting for a breeze to travel by, bestow its fleeting relief, and then move along to the next home. It was always quiet enough to hear the phone ring inside the house, and if you hurried you might catch who was calling, if not, you could count on them calling back, they knew you were outside. The noise of highways and traffic of all kinds breaches the calm in so many ways; it's hard to know what a day actually sounds like anymore.

Each place has its own sound if you listen for it; if it's possible to even hear it today. Sometimes, I think the identity of the world has been masked by the noise of progress. There are advantages to the modern world you can see, but the advantages of the past can only be remembered. There is nothing like sitting down to dinner with friends and family to talk over the day's events. There are no distractions pulling you away, no programs to watch on TV, and no excuses for not knowing what is important in life.

Pulling back into the pasture, I feel refreshed and renewed from my time on the road with Prince; I can tell he feels it too. The barn welcomes us back and invites us to remain there for a while as the worn leather comes off and returns to the post that holds it. As I brush him down and remove the lather from his coat, he seems to smile as if saying, "Well done." I wonder what would happen if we could turn off the volume of the world and listen to nature talk to us. Would we learn new lessons left unshared by the earth mother? Have we reached a point that we have nothing left to gain from the ancient voice that is drowning from our search for convenience, or have we just stopped listening while another voice speaks? Life brings us what it will these days, and we can only hope that it has something important to say to us about the depth of time immortal. I hope it sounds like hooves on a country road.