

*“We all have roots in the farms, even if we weren’t farmers.
Nowhere is that more true than Loudoun County.”*

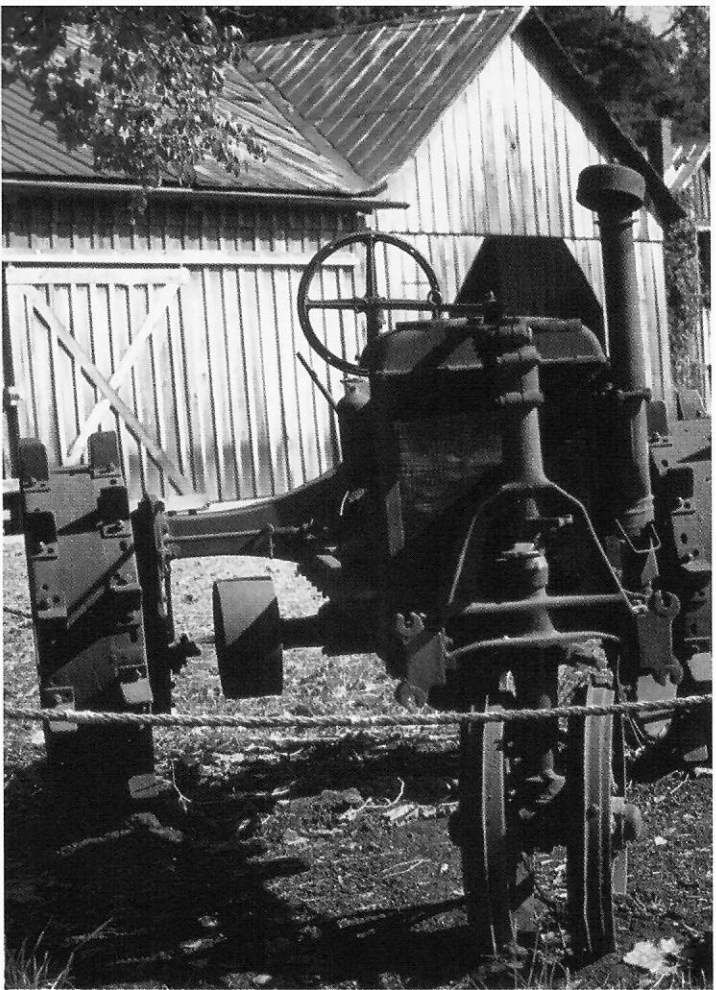
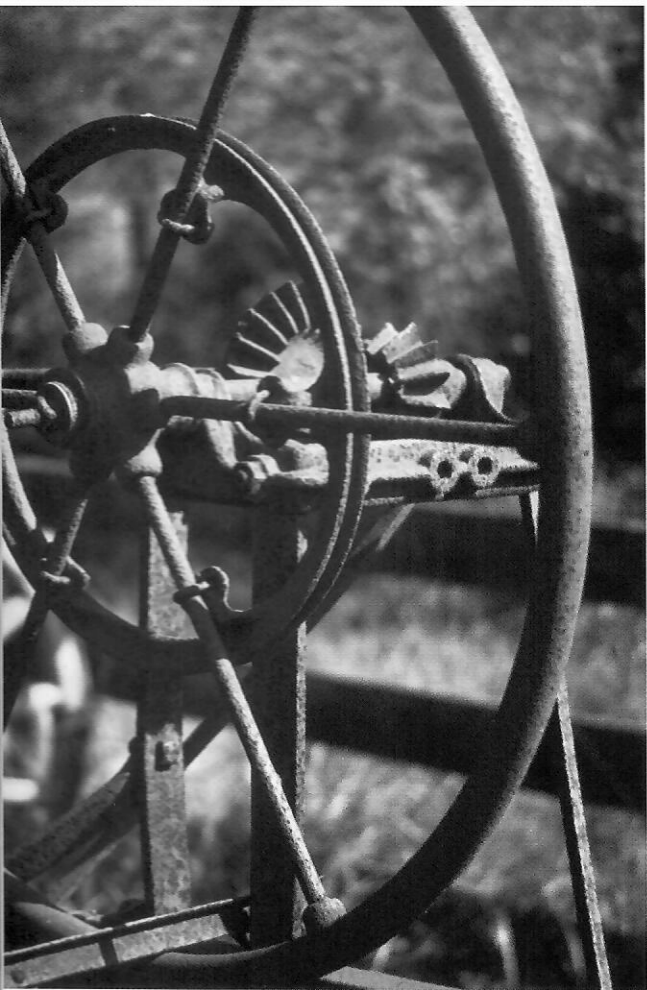
—BILL HARRISON

BY JEFF COWART

A GOOD PLACE TO GROW UP

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DIANE HELENTJARIS

ARCHIVAL PHOTOS COURTESY OF BILL HARRISON



FARMING EQUIPMENT FROM A BYGONE ERA

Two decades ago bicycle riders could leave Fairfax County heading west on the Washington & Old Dominion Trail and cross over Route 28 into another world. The rapidly growing communities of western Fairfax were already dense with homes and teeming with people. But Route 28 was like an imaginary line between that urbanizing county and Loudoun, where thousands of acres of open land swept west. The riders were immediately enveloped within the wide open spaces and rolling green of Loudoun County pasture and cropland.

To the south, Dulles Airport was about to awaken into the true regional economic powerhouse that it is today. Ahead to the west and off to the right, the thousands of homes now known as Ashburn were mostly drawings on development plats.

In their minds, these riders were cycling in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by the beauty of thousands of acres of some of Loudoun County's choicest farmland. In truth, they were riding across the agricultural history of 10 generations of Loudoun farmers, a proud tradition of prolific agrarian production that had already ended, though residential and commercial density had

not yet fully overtaken the land.

Halfway to Leesburg, the riders could stop for a cold drink at Partlow's country store at the intersection of the W&OD Trail and Ashburn Road. Then they could continue west for miles more before the familiar characteristics of the distant town of Leesburg rose up around them.

These riders had never heard of George Wenner, the son of a German pastor who turned beekeeper and settled in Lovettsville in 1726. Silvey Mason, the African midwife herbalist from Raspberry Plain who turned native plants into remedies, was an unknown to them. So was John Alexander Binns, who found unique ways to increase tobacco crop yields through experimentation with plaster of Paris. They did not know anything about Morley Davis' dairy or R. T. Legard's reluctance to embrace the tractor.

With certainty, they didn't have a clue about Round Oak Rag Apple Elevation—one of Loudoun County's most famous bovine citizens and one of the most well-known Holstein production sires in the world. Elevation was born and raised south of Purcellville at Ronald Hope's Round Oak Farm and in 1999 was honored globally with the title, "Bull of the Century." The

genes of an estimated 20 percent of the world's 50 million Holstein dairy cattle trace back to this long gone Loudouner.

However, men like Bill Harrison and Curtis Poland know about all of them.

A CHANGING LANDSCAPE

Harrison arrived in Loudoun as a county extension agent in 1963—the same year Dulles International Airport opened its doors.

And, during the next 40 years of his career spent in assisting the farming community there would still be plenty of time for Harrison to watch much of the county's agricultural heritage fade away into memory.

"Back when I came here, there were about 26,000 people in the county," recalls Harrison. "Things hadn't changed much in hundreds of years."

Curtis Poland could tell the bicyclists that the trail they were riding was once the bed for a thriving railroad that provided a vital connection between Loudoun County farms and the profitable marketplaces of Washington, DC.

"That railroad was the lifeline of the Loudoun



BILL HARRISON IS PRESIDENT OF THE HERITAGE FARM MUSEUM'S BOARD OF DIRECTORS

farmer," says Poland. "Everything that we sold got packed up and went out on the railroad and everything we bought came back to us on that railroad."

Progressively, in just the relatively short span of Harrison's career, changes in the agricultural landscape would be dramatic. Farming would become a slender shadow of its noble past.

"Dulles Airport really started the demise of agriculture," says Harrison. "It started changing the dynamics of the county. First, it took about 10,000 acres of farmland and family farms that were down in the lower end of the county. And it generated growth and brought more people, and that took more land. It created jobs for the farm labor that paid more than the farmer could afford to pay."

A SPECIAL PARTNERSHIP

Harrison's career happened to parallel one of the most significant shifts in Loudoun's character and its culture—and maybe its soul—in hundreds of years. Perhaps that's why, in retirement, he's so passionate about helping create the Loudoun Heritage Farm Museum, so passionate about making certain the

men and women who came before us and worked the land are never forgotten.

The museum, which opens to the public this spring, centers around 12,000 square feet of exhibit space at the Claude Moore Park, just off Cascades Parkway in eastern Loudoun. It is a public/private partnership with the county's department of parks, recreation and community services. The 357-acre park also includes a farmhouse dating back to the late 1700s, several 19th century barns and outbuildings and a one-room schoolhouse from the 1870s. There is also a working blacksmith shop used for periodic demonstrations of a bygone craft.

Running through the park are identifiable ruts from Vestal's Gap Road, once one of the major overland routes linking the Shenandoah Valley with the Northern Virginia Tidewater region. That route was often used by George Washington in his travels. The grounds around the museum building are filled with old-fashioned farm implements that have been collected over the last five years in anticipation of the day the museum would become a reality.

"A lot of people wonder why the museum is in eastern Loudoun County," says Harrison, who

is president of its board of directors. "Most people don't realize that there were a lot of family farms throughout this area. Western Loudoun has some of the richest farmland in the county, that's true. But the east is a great place for the museum in terms of accessibility to people who want to know about the county's farm history."

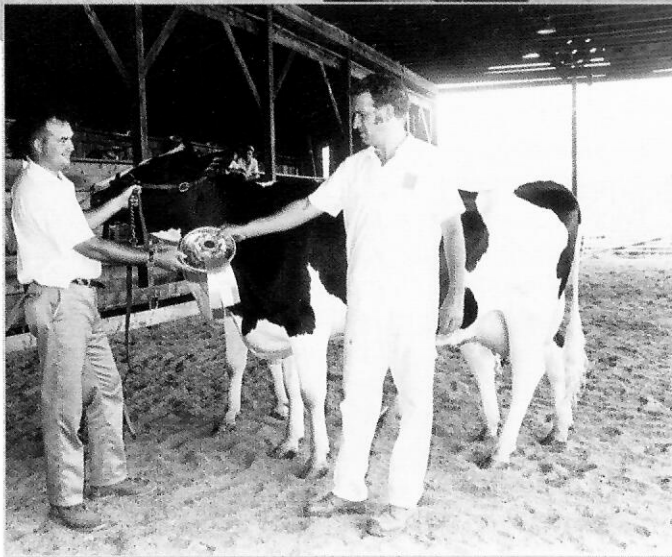
The concept of creating the museum rests with a dedicated group of farmers, history buffs and volunteers. Included are advocates like Harrison, farmers like Curtis Poland, whose family has been working in agriculture for five generations, and supporters like Terry Sharrer, a member of the museum advisory board and curator of health sciences for the Smithsonian.

"About 10 or 12 of us involved with farming got together and came to the conclusion that we were going to lose all of our history here if we didn't do something," Harrison says. "We felt like in another generation or two it would be lost forever. And, we felt like we needed to do something about it."

The museum's basic design focuses on 10 generations of farmers. Lonny Schwartz developed the original concept design for the museum and muralist Michael Rosato was recruited to paint



DONNIE HOPE, SHOWING A DAUGHTER OF INTERNATIONALLY FAMOUS ROUND OAK RAG APPLE ELEVATION, ACCEPTS A TROPHY FROM ROBERT REED AT A LOUDOUN DAIRY SHOW IN THE 1970s.



INSPECTING ONE OF THE MUSEUM'S PORCINE RESIDENTS

the 180-linear-foot mural that runs around the perimeter of the exhibit hall depicting the primary farm activity of that particular generation. Beneath those murals, Malone, Inc., an exhibit design and fabrication firm from Atlanta, created realistic exhibits of tools, soils, crops and other artifacts of the generation.

"The exhibits are centered around people and each scene depicts the agricultural experience of that person in a representation true to that time in history," says Harrison. The exhibits themselves trace the history of farming and crops in

Loudoun—from tobacco up through orchard grass, from sheep to dairies, from corn to the remarkable life of Round Oak Rag Apple Elevation.

CROPS AND LIVESTOCK

Most people don't know that from the 1930s to the 1960s, the seed of orchard grass—an 18th century European import recognized for its value in pasture and as a hay crop—was one of the county's largest cash crops before giving way to corn. Seed company operators such as Contee Adams, followed by his

son, Lynn, were well versed in orchard grass. Harrison notes that a lot of the farms in Loudoun County were paid for with funds derived from orchard grass seed. "That was the biggest cash crop we had for a long time," says Harrison. The fertile soil of farms like Jim Kelly's at Bluemont, a major orchard grass producer, made Loudoun a prime spot for its production.

Few can likely recall, if they ever knew, that there was a time when more than 44,000 head of beef once grazed in Loudoun pastures or that more than 25,000 sheep called Loudoun home. Farmers such as Lawrence Thompson at Hillsboro and Owen Thomas at Round Hill for years raised prime beef animals on their well-tended farms. "Once upon a time we had more sheep than we had people here in Loudoun County," says Harrison. "We used to have what we called the wool pool. All the sheep would be sheared, the wool would be bagged and sent to market as one total unit for the entire county." Sheep shearers like Frank Keesling could shear a sheep in three minutes in those days.

Typically unknown to many now living in the county is that Loudoun's dairy industry was for much of the 1960s and 1970s the second largest in the state. Proximity to Washington, DC and economical transit costs also made it one of the most profitable for Loudoun farmers. Dairies dotted the Loudoun landscape and created an entire way of life, keeping the Brown, McComb, Hope, Sprague, and Potts families, among many others, busy from sunup to sundown. Today the Edwin Potts family north of Hillsboro and the Robert Potts family at Lincoln operate the last two dairy farms in Loudoun.

The importance of the dairy industry unfolds in an interesting story involving a Holstein bull bred by the Ronald Hope family at their large dairy farm south of Purcellville. Round Oak Rag Apple Elevation, the product of this family's years of genetic study and thoughtful breeding program, was purchased as a yearling in 1966 by a breeding syndicate for \$2,800. Due to the acceptance of artificial insemination within the cattle industry, Elevation became the most prolific sire of quality Holstein dairy cattle in history. Conservative estimates are that Elevation has sired over 70,000 Holsteins, with his descendants around the world numbering over five million. Round Oak Rag Apple Elevation is such an important figure in Loudoun County agriculture that he is the only animal to represent one of the 10 generations in the museum exhibits.

HISTORY COMES ALIVE

In the middle of the exhibit hall is the town square, bringing to the museum the feel of the traditional center of the community. At one end of the square is the completely reconstructed Tillet's Store, which draws its name from the grandson of original owner S.E. Mundy Sr., who established the store in the 1890s. In the 1940s, the Tillet family closed the store by locking the doors with all the contents intact inside. Some of the most delicate artifacts are enclosed in plexiglas, but there's plenty of hands-on opportunity for the kids built into the preservation.

The store includes an intriguing look into the old Waxpool Post Office, with original letters still in mailboxes. A "Re-elect Roosevelt" sticker is visible on the glass as well as advertisements posted on the wall for "sweet Cuban fine cut cigars" and other assorted products and services.

Off to the side of the store is a small theater where visitors can watch a 12-minute video that provides a quick, 300-year overview of county agricultural history, giving context to much of what is depicted in the museum exhibits.

HERITAGE FARM MUSEUM CONTRIBUTORS

"One of the most interesting aspects of the farm museum project has been the grassroots support generated by the community."

— ALLISON WEISS, MANAGER, LOUDOUN HERITAGE FARM MUSEUM

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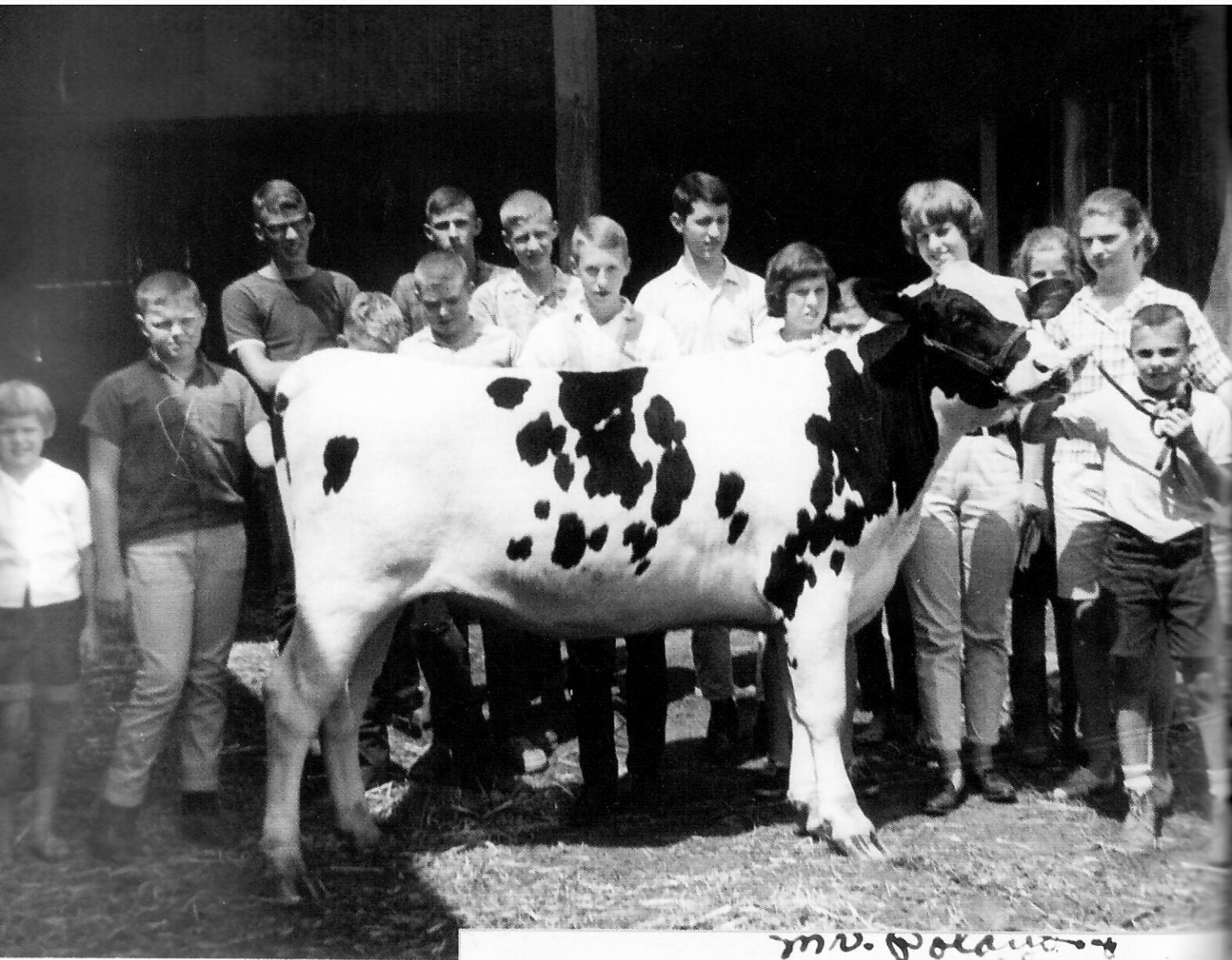
GRANTS:

American Institute for Conservation, Claude Moore Charitable Foundation, Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, National Endowment for the Humanities, Loudoun Restoration and Preservation Society, Make It Happen fund, Heritage Preservation, Robert Earll McConnell Foundation, Loudoun Agricultural Research Foundation.

CONTACT INFORMATION:

For further information on, or to donate to the Loudoun Heritage Farm Museum, contact the museum's office, 703-421-5322, or visit the website at www.loudounfarmmuseum.org.

*Source: Loudoun Heritage Farm Museum. Every effort has been made to include names of all those who have contributed both financially and with the gift or loan of items.



LOUDOUN YOUNGSTERS GATHER AROUND A HOLSTEIN HEIFER IN THE EARLY 1960s. CARROLL LAYCOCK, NOW MANAGER OF LOUDOUN'S FARM CREDIT OFFICE, HOLDS THE LEAD ROPE AND TODAY'S LOUDOUN COUNTY COMMISSIONER OF THE REVENUE, KITTY ASHBY, STANDS BEHIND HIM. THE FIRST PERSON WHO CAN IDENTIFY ALL OF THE PEOPLE IN THE PHOTO WILL RECEIVE TWO FREE SUBSCRIPTIONS TO LOUDOUN MAGAZINE.

CURTIS POLAND'S GRANDFATHER STARTED A THRESHING BUSINESS IN LOUDOUN IN THE LATE 1800s.



"This is really a very well-thought out idea," says Harrison. "We want families and children to be able to experience part of what life on the farm was like."

Roland Legard's big red Farmall tractor is on display. He never liked tractors. They were noisy and smelly and he held off getting one until farm labor got so hard to find during World War II that it became a necessity.

"Mr. Legard bought it for about \$700," says Harrison. "We know because we've got the tractor and the check he used to pay for it."

Curtis Poland and Richard Fiske have built a silo in the museum, reconstructed from timbers from a dismantled silo on the old J.S. Buck farm. Kids can turn a crank and put corn into a smaller, interactive silo.

"When you walk into the museum you become spellbound," says Poland. "It's kind of spiritual to be able to see all of that history in one place. This is a wonderful experience for children."

A WAY OF LIFE

One of the most impressive features of the museum is the substantial collection and display of farm tools and implements, many of which are touchable. From churns to threshers and everything in between—from the antique to the modern—visitors have the opportunity to inspect a wide variety of the practical things used on the farm, most of them turned up by the museum's small army of volunteers.

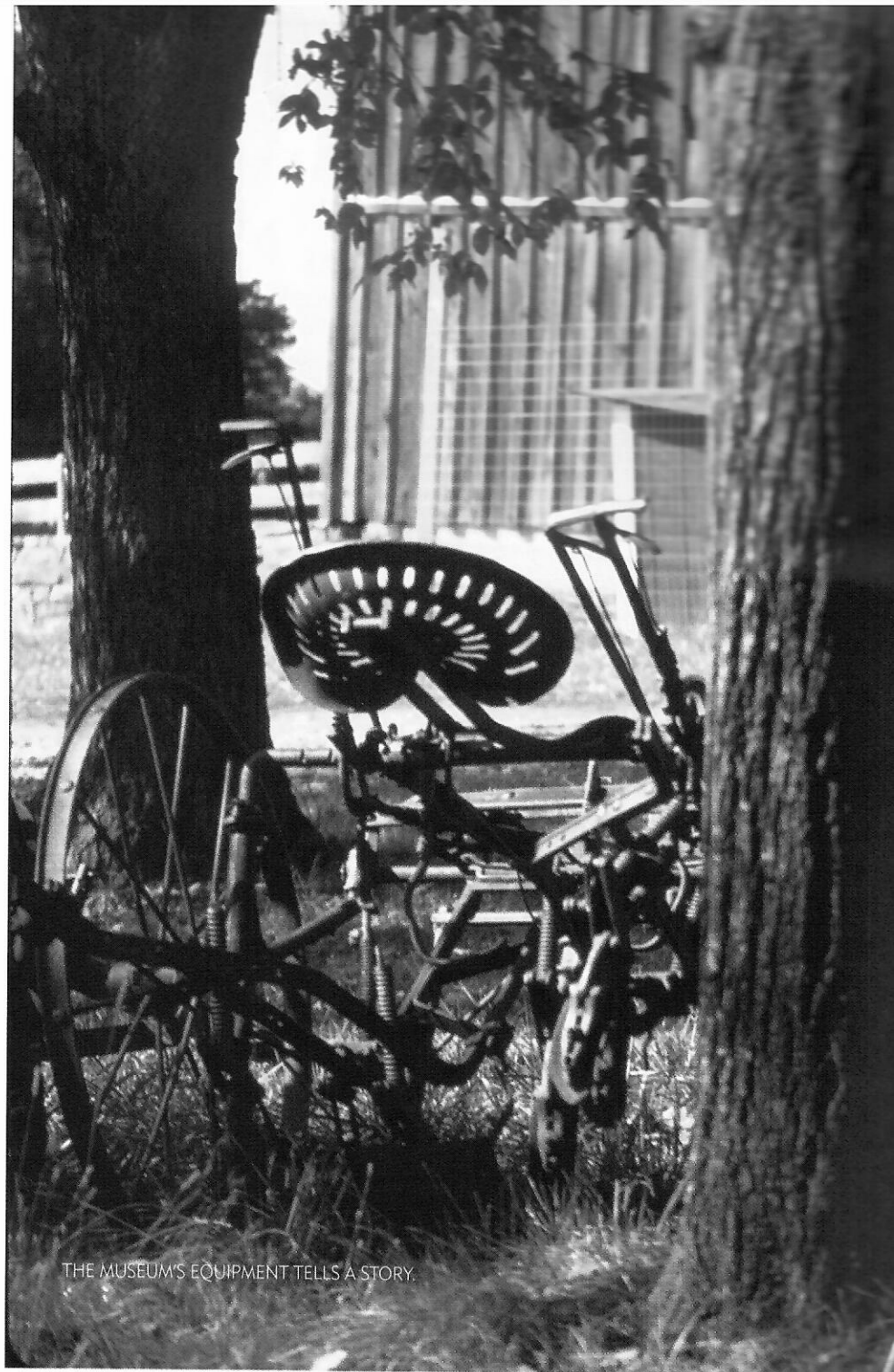
"We have a very fine collection, and that includes a lot of fun things for the kids and visitors to do in terms of a hands-on experience," says Harrison.

Poland agrees that the collected items are interesting, but adds that the stories they tell make them even more important. Such is the case with the museum's threshing equipment. Poland's family started threshing in Loudoun in 1899 when his grandfather set up a farm-to-farm service.

"Threshing machinery was expensive and it was too big of an investment for every farmer to have," says Poland. "You had to have the machinery and then you had to have power to pull it."

Poland, who has put in a fair share of his own time volunteering at the museum, says the experience helps visitors understand that farming history has a romantic side, but it also represents a way of life that connects people of all generations.

"When we would gather on the farms to thresh, it was just like a big camp meeting," says Poland. "There was a lot of excitement, a lot of joking and laughing, and a lot of eating. A lot of food got cooked and everybody ate well. But



THE MUSEUM'S EQUIPMENT TELLS A STORY.

mostly, farmers had a lot of compassion and concern for each other. If someone got sick, everybody else would gather up to plant their crops. We were just one big community for a long time."

COMMON GROUND

In the final analysis, the primary purpose of the museum is to open a window into history and give today's generation a chance to connect with generations before them. "You real-

ize that your grandfather and your grandmother, your aunts and uncles, and your cousins all shared the same experiences," says Poland. "You realize that farms are a good place to grow up."

Harrison agrees. "This museum represents an important part of everyone's history and heritage," he says. "We all have roots in the farms, even if we weren't farmers. Nowhere is that more true than Loudoun County." **LM**