"DOC" DORTON

He Makes Our Hearts Gay At The County Fair

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(Article Written By William Lindsay Graham)

There was a fanfare of brass, and the curtains parted on the outdoor stage. The grandstand crowd broke into applause as the chorus advanced — 18 luscious girls, precariously poised on rolling globes . . .

Around the edge of the fairgrounds stretched a 1,000-foot fence bright with rambler roses. Half the blooms were covered by a vine with broad, shining leaves, which shot its tendrils 12 inches longer every night. It was the Japanese Kudzu vine, imported as a cover crop to halt erosion . . .

Under the grandstand in the exhibition hall a 10-year-old girl, with the clover leaf emblem of the Four-H Club on her blouse pocket, tried to fight back tears. "I've lost it! Oh, jeepers, I've lost my premium ribbon!" Straightening her shoulders, she said to a fellow exhibitor, "I'm going to Doc Dorton and tell him. He'll know what to do."

She approached a man with alert blue eyes who listened intently, then grinned. "Just a minute, honey, and I'll get it down in my notebook. Now then, why don't you cut along upstairs and watch the show? If your ribbon doesn't turn up I'll get you another one just like it. Identical. And that's a promise."

The child's face glowed; all was right with the world. "Doc" Dorton had added one more to the thousands of people on the Piedmont plateau of North Carolina who think of the word "fair" as synonymous with his name.

For over a quarter of a century, Dr. J. S. Dorton of Shelby, N. C., has demonstrated what the ancient institution of The Fair can be when powered by horse-trader shrewdness, fervor for land conservation, and a whole-hearted love of outdoor show business. Other fair managers may top him in one of these qualities. It is doubtful if anyone ever combined them with greater force, catching up thousands of his fellow citizens in the whirl of his own enthusiasm and gently spinning them into a single strand of influence to draw the country along the way of agricultural progress.

Ignorance, apathy and the drag of ancient custom in tilling the soil are constant targets for the prophets of agrarian doom. Doc Dorton seldom stops long enough to view them with alarm. He is too busy showing his neighbors and the country at large how to make improved farming methods "take aholt" and spread like the kudzu vine.

On Broadway, Doc Dorton is known as a man who books the best, yet can stretch a dollar farther than any other human being. Part of the secret lies in his homemade flagpoles. Doc is a great one for "flagging up" the fairgrounds. "Flags are like hands," he says, "waving a friendly hello — beckoning the folks to come inside."

But Doc refuses to buy the sectional steel flagpoles usually carried by carnivals, for they cost about $150 each. Instead, he made his own. On a patch of land he owns near Shelby is a stand of loblolly pine, some of it 40 feet high. Doc cut down 300 trees, peeled and seasoned them, painted them with aluminum paint — and he had his flagpoles. For the top of each he designed

an ornamental silvery globe, made of six-inch aluminum mixing bowls from the five-and-ten, screwed together in pairs, rim to rim.

At the State fair in Raleigh he built two 50-foot towers with a slope of corrugated roofing between them sweeping down into a concrete basin. A small electric pump sucked water from the basin up into an overflow tank from which it foamed down again, over and over. At night, shielded bulbs turned it into a rainbow cascade. The whole thing was typical of Dorton — color, lights and motion.

". . . And in the basin what d'ya think he put? Thoroughbred ducks! Lost kids are taken to the basin while the announcer is calling the parents. When the parents show up, the kids start yapping for more popcorn — to feed the ducks! I'm telling you, that guy Dorton covers every angle."

In talking to Doc Dorton you can see at once one mental trait in which he differs from most of us: he sees things not as static, isolated units but as one great interlocking process. Or, as he would put it. "In the fair business everything fits together. When a 'hell driver' jumps his auto through a hoop of fire he's helping to break the stranglehold of cotton on this county."

The hell driver and his fellow daredevils, performing before the grandstand, have brought crowds to the fair. Once there, the people get a load of the state agricultural exhibits, strongly featuring the Live-At-Home campaign of crop rotation, more and better cornfields, importation of dairy cattle and a good kitchen garden for every farm—so the folks will eat "come high water or six-cent cotton."

According to Doc, "People can't be pushed anywhere. But they can be led. Seems to me the secret of good education is to mix it up with entertainment and spark it with friendly competition." He makes it sound easy because he has a naturally warm heart.

Doc did not enter the business of fair management by decision: he was "drug in." In 1923 the Kiwanis Club of Shelby (he was charter member) started talk of reviving a county fair. Doc was put on the committee and before he knew it he was the committee. With no previous experience at fair organization he rolled up his sleeves a little higher, "took aholt" and put the Cleveland County Fair together in six hectic months, building a grandstand seating 4,200, exhibit buildings, a livestock barn and a race track. He says "We moved 30,000 cubic yards of dirt with nothing but mules and dump carts, cutting and filling, to level the track."

The fair incorporated as a nonprofit organization in 1924 with a stock issue of $17,000 subscribed by local businessmen and farmers.

The property is now appraised at $225,000 and is only one of three such institutions run by Doc Dorton.

Meanwhile, North Carolina's big state fair at Raleigh was running at a loss, under private operation. And in 1937 a plain-speaking, bushy-browed mountain of a man named Kerr Scott ran for Commissioner of Agriculture (later governor) with this plank in his platform: "State operation of the state fair."

Scott won the election, and put Doc Dorton in as manager. Raleigh fair began to make money, a modest share of which went to Doc, who — now with two salaries from the fairgrounds — retired from veterinary practice. Freedom from the rounds of a barnyard sawbones enabled him to start a third fair on the meadow and around the pretty lake where his car had gone off the road a decade earlier. (On outskirts of Charlotte — this fair called The Southern States Fair)

In spite of the endless detail, Doc has found time down the years to serve as president of fair associations, take part in American Legion and fraternal activities, organize the North Carolina Saddle Horse Association with his friend Kerr Scott, and head civic committees. Last year he took time out from planning a new home to help build the town of Shelby a swimming pool (park and athletic field yet to come).

On the desk in Doc's study is a significant collection of literature: a Bible, a dictionary, a volume of Emerson's essays and a stack of back issues of Billboard, the encyclopedic trade weekly of show business.

In the depression years after 1929, the glitter of a fairground revue lifted people into wonderland for an instant, only to drop them again, when it was over, back into a world of worn clothes and worried hearts. Doc wound up his show in those days with a different kind of music. Adapting the idea of the mechanical rabbit in greyhound racing, he put a tame red fox in a steel cage and sent it around the track on a monorail carriage of his own invention; and top foxhounds, led by national champion Dangerous Fancy, competed in the world's first mechanical fox chase. The sound was sweet to Carolinian ears.

The corn crop failure of 1947 threw out a challenge to which Doc Dorton made a characteristic response: he started a Corn Contest with a $1,000 prize at each of his three fairs for the first farmer to produce 200 or more bushels of ear corn from a single acre, the yield to be certified by the county agent. The next year one farmer grew 148 and received two encouragement prizes of $100 each.

In April of this year (1949) the North Carolina legislature voted $2,000,000 to make the Raleigh fairgrounds into a permanent state exhibition of arts, industries, agriculture and wild life. Kerr Scott, the farm boy who grew up to be governor, drawled softly, "All right now, Doc — you been campaignin' around for this thing since away back yonder. Meanwhile you been building stuff out of scrap lumber and chicken wire, making it look like a million dollars. Well, now you got a million dollars. You got two million. What you going to do with it?"

Dorton's blue eyes crackled. "Commissioner — just you sit tight and watch. I've been studying this over in my mind too long to talk about, getting up at night when I couldn't sleep and writing down ideas in my notebook. Just you watch us —we're really going to come a-tearing out of the woods this time!"

—— By William Lindsay Gresham