

YEARS WITH SOIL MOLD STURDY MAN

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For all his 92 years, A.D. Murphree has lived with the land and nurtured it to his own benefit and to the benefit of his 10 children. This year, he is planting his 68th cotton crop.

And so what does Murphree choose to talk about first after all those years? Why the weather, of course.

"That rain last night really hurt us," he said. "We had 150 acres planted, but it looks like we'll have to do it over again."

Probably no other farmer in the Mississippi Delta has been so long involved with the sandy loam as Murphree. He came to Bolivar County in 1907 "from my Daddy's place over on the Tallahatchie River" to manage a plantation for \$50 a month. He remembers the land when it was covered with trees that would have to be cleared and when "the mud was deep and the cane tall and there were no roads at all."

Murphree has sacrificed some of his sight and hearing through the years and his stride is only a suggestion of what it once was. But he stands erect and his recollection is sharp. There is a cadence to his speech that younger men, men lacking his collection of seasons, do not possess.

"The first year," he said, "we saved \$250 and we took that money and bought two mules. The first day I hitched them up one of them rared up and died. I said to my wife that we had had bad luck, that Duck – that was the mule's name – died cutting stalks. She said, "We'll make it." She was a great help." His wife, Verna Murphree, died in 1966.

As the years came and went, Murphree added to his original 130 acres until, by 1919, he had 960 acres. He'd bought 1,200 more in 1920 and then, as he tells it, "the lights went out."

He lost \$68,800, and was left with "a plantation full of Negroes, a barn full of mules and a house full of children."

He was not alone; nearly every farmer in the Delta lost as the cotton market plunged. "I had had an opportunity to sell my crop for 85 cents a pound," he said. "My banker said it would go to a dollar or a dollar and a quarter. I ended up getting a nickel." He was left with 960 acres.

At one time Murphree had 75 employees. Now he has six tractor drivers. He misses the old way. "I used to get on my Walking Horse and go out to the plantation." He said. "I'd get up and ring the plantation bell at four o'clock in the morning and I'd meet the hands coming to work."

When he first came to Bolivar County, the man whose plantation he was hired to manage gave him a pistol to carry. He refused – "I told him I wasn't coming to fight a battle" – but he still owns the revolver and it is loaded with the original ammunition.

In 1914, he was doing well enough to buy a car. "Was it a Model T?" "No sir. It was a Cadillac. It cost around \$2,500. We wanted to go first class."

He counts himself fortunate that most of his children still live nearby. The eldest, Roland, was killed in an automobile accident in 1932.

The nine remaining, in order of age are Mrs. Sara McCorkle of Houston, Texas; Mrs. Lucille Maddox of Clarksdale, Miss.; Mrs. Julia Rose and Albert Murphree, Jr., both of Shelby; Mrs. Christine Gates of Oxford, Miss.; Mrs. Margaret Stone and Paul Murphree, both of Shelby;

and Mrs. Doris Wedgeworth and Mrs. Nena York, both of Shreveport. There are 19 grandchildren and 13 great-grandchildren. "That's the crop," Murphree said.

"There have been good seasons and bad seasons," Murphree said. "I've had some of all of it. I think it's getting time for me to quit."

Those sitting with him in the living room of his modest home – visitors and several of his children – nodded respectfully. And then he turned to his son, Paul, who manages the farm now.

"What time will you be by to pick me up?" the old man said. "I want to see how those acres we got planted are doing after all that rain."

(This article was written about Albert Daniel Murphree, Sr. of Shelby, Mississippi. He lived in a two story white home with a screened in front porch on Highway 61 facing the railroad tracks. This article was written by a reporter from the Commercial Appeal in Memphis, Tennessee who came to interview him. A.D. died two years later in July of 1976).