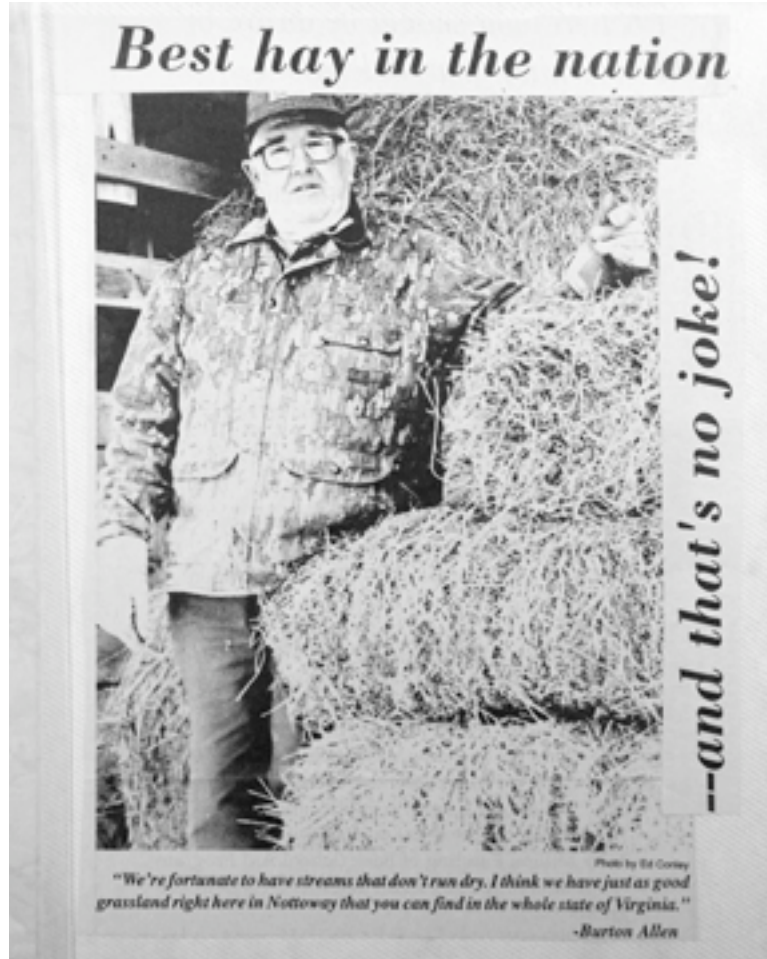


Nottoway farmer grows award-winning hay



The rolling pastures on Burton Allen's cattle farm have not felt the cutting blade of a plow for 30 years. When Allen bought his 400 acres in 1955, the gullies were so deep you could lose pick-ups in them. But years of rotational grazing have built up the topsoil to a deep luster finish.

Now the beauty of these mature pastures takes your breath away. Balanced by lines of cedars, each lush green field sloping into the other, this Nottoway land is a visual symphony.

Always at work, Allen, 73, is a master farmer who plays his land like Stradivarius played his violin. While steers fatten on his land from spring to fall, the music in his life is hay—the best legume in the nation, according to the American Foraging and Grassland Council, which held its annual contest in Pennsylvania recently.

"The land this Sericea Lespedeza (the name of his hay which Allen loves to roll off his lips) was on was grazed in the fall and winter, up until April, then I made one cutting later on that summer and rolled it in round bales. This hay came off the same land. It was baled in the middle of August. So I got two cuttings of hay, plus the grazing in the dry year. Then the cattle went back on it in October," said Allen, easily summing p a whole year's work as if it were a days' labor.

“It takes more time to produce the quality hay Allen Produces,” said Russel Leslie, Nottoway’s Extension Agent who was with Allen during the interview. “You can’t just go out and cut a whole field in a day and expect to bale all of it. He’ll cut what he can handle right, rather than cutting down a whole area and lose some of it. He takes pains and it pays off in the marketplace.”

Leslie was obviously pleased with Allen’s recognition by the Foraging Council because this was also Nottoway land that had won the award. Imagine, these pastures had produced under Allen’s loving hand a hay better than any in the country, and last year was a dry year, too.

“He’s done an excellent job, not with just the hay but with pasture rotation too,” continued Leslie, who has been at the front of Nottoway’s effort to improve cattle raising. “Allen is revealing that county’s potential for forage crops by showing what we’re capable of here.”

While we were near the barn, the phone rang and a customer ordered some hay. Allen said he has some who drive two hours both ways to buy his baled hay, which is excellent for horses, he added.

“I have fall, winter, and spring hay,” Allen continued, enjoying the opportunity to explain his hay and cattle production. “Some years I’ve grazed practically the entire winter. I don’t usually start feeding hay until the middle of January to the middle of March.”

For pasture, Nottoway had been blessed, said Allen. “We’re fortunate to have streams that don’t run dry. I think we have just as good grassland right here in Nottoway that you can find in the whole state of Virginia.”

It’s difficult for a city mind to appreciate the love a farmer like Allen has for his land. Raised on an Amelia farm, Allen came to Nottoway with hands already calloused. “I cleared most of this land with ax and saw. I guess I’ve cleared 150 acres here. I believe I’ve got 17 different pastures now.”

Allen’s face was ruddy and he laughed easily, especially to questions he would have never thought of asking, like “How do you make good hay?”

Yes, it was a dumb question. Asking Allen how he made award winning hay was like asking Mozart how he wrote music or Michael Jordan how he dunks a basketball.

Allen just does it! It’s the nature of a good farmer to make good hay. April 21, 1994