



Mississippi's Giant House Party

by Stephanie Dunkin Deep South's Southern Hospitality at the Neshoba County Fair

My phone rang. It was Ed Lafferty, president of the Deep South Region inviting me to attend the annual Deep South Paso Fino Demonstration at the Neshoba County Fair. Two days later, my phone rang again. It was Deep South member Forrest Bridges inviting me to his farm in Philadelphia, MS. Knowing that I had just lost my horse, Forrest invited me to come ride all of his horses at his farm, and pick out the horse I would like to ride in the demonstration at the Neshoba County Fair. Southern Hospitality is surely overflowing here in the Deep South.

On my visit to Forrest's Farm, and after riding several of his wonderful Paso Fino Horses, he invited me to join him for

dinner at his friend's cabin at the Neshoba County Fairgrounds. I had heard much talk about this Fairground community but words could not describe the visual feast found when I laid eyes on this place.

Rows and rows of bright pink, polka-dot, lime green, peach, bright red, yellow, turquoise, and orange cabins, some adorned with flags and multi-colored strung lights, all set up in its own village positioned in a network of narrow dirt streets. When Forrest took me on a tour of the place, I felt more like I was on the back lot of a movie set or somewhere down on the beaches of Florida. The cabins were built generations ago and handed





L-R: Forrest Bridges still coordinating with Talentoso left and Pecadora right. Dynamico, Divinia and Talentoso getting ready for their demo. Ed Lafferty and Claudia Kot with Forrest Bridges readying Pecadora for her ride.



L-R: Emily Deaton riding her Talentoso. The Griffith family: Terrence riding Cataclismo, Betty Casada (grandma) riding Dynamico, Vickie riding Divinia, and Tara riding Adreana. Jim Minninger riding Empresario.

down from family to family. They are a little more than a shack, with minimal insulation, many with window air conditioning units, and some with none. They are used for two weeks of the year, the weeks before and of the fair. This village is known once a year as Mississippi's Giant House Party. Family and friends congregate on porch steps, then move to another, then on to a third. All doors seem always opened to friends, family and any passerby.

"The Neshoba County Fair has its roots in the agricultural fairs and the church camp meetings popular in the nineteenth century. The Lake Patron's Union in Scott County was a regional fair held on the former site of a Methodist camp meeting and served as a model for Neshoba Countians wanting to establish a fair of their own.

The first fair was called the Coldwater Fair and was held in 1889. Two years later in 1891 the fair was organized as a private corporation called the Neshoba County Stock and Agricultural Fair Association and was moved to its present site.

Families coming to the Fair began camping on the grounds for the duration of the fair. In 1894 a pavilion was constructed and a hotel was built to accommodate visitors. Cabins began to replace wagons and tents and in 1898 the oaks were planted that shade Founder's Square today. The first cabins were simple one-story structures with some being log cabins.

Improvements and additions were made to the grounds through the years. The racetrack was built in 1914 and the

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L-R: Mary Craft and Primo & Vickie Griffith heading for the demo area. Stephanie Dunkin riding Pecadora. Tommy Griffith riding Angel.





Top L-R: Swarmed by spectators. Betty Casada making a young girl's dream come true. Bottom L-R: Tara left watching as Vickie is about to make a dream come true. Terrence and Cataclismo bringing lots of smiles. Vickie and Divinia giving a young boy a very warm heart.



Fairgrounds received electricity in 1939. The Fair was not held during World War II, but was reopened in 1946. More cabins were built establishing distinct neighborhoods beyond the Square. The Fair was expanded to a seven-day schedule and entertainment began to come from nationally known stars."

When I arrived Saturday morning the Giant House Party was in full bloom with every cabin busting at the seams with Southern folks. Forrest was the Fair coordinator for the Deep South demonstration and had all of the horse trailers and picnicking pavilions set up for us in the center of the racetrack. The Demonstration was set for 1:00pm, so we all began to bustle around getting horses ready and changing into our Demonstration uniforms of kaki pants, white shirts, show boots and pleasure hats. Ed Lafferty was the announcer for the demonstration and the riders were Tommy Griffith riding Angel Brilliante de Mossy Oak, Vickie Griffith riding Divinia de DCT, Terrence Griffith riding Cataclismo Ideal, Tara Griffith riding Adreana de Mardana, Betty Casada riding Dinamico de Mossy Oak, Jim Minninger riding Empresario de Marfran, Mary Craft riding Primo, Emily Deaton riding Talentoso de la Sierra, and myself riding Fairway's Pecadora. We represented

the Paso Fino breed's finesse with 7 Pleasure horses, 1 Performance horse, and 1 beautiful, black Fino stallion.

With Ed Lafferty announcing, we rode these beautiful horses down the racetrack in front of the stands filled with spectators as they awed over our multi-talented horses. Not only did we demonstrate Paso Corto, Largo and Fino, we also took some of our horses, mine included, into lope and full gallop down the racetrack demonstrating the versatility of our horses at full speed, then coming down into Paso Corto without missing a beat. The crowd really loved that demonstration. I must say I enjoyed this as well and didn't realize Fairway's Pecadora would allow me to sprout wings. Pecadora was such an honor to ride.

When the history and demonstration of the Paso Fino to the spectators was completed, it was then time to give them their first one-on-one encounter with the Paso Fino horse. Deep South's southern hospitality really kicked in as the riders invited all of the spectators from the stands to come ride their horses. They were then swarmed with people gathered around each rider asking questions, touching muzzles, petting necks, and lined up to take their very first ride on a Paso Fino horse. I was completely taken aback at the generosity of every rider of this

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L-R: Tommy giving a gentleman his first ride on a Paso Fino. Tommy, Terrence and Brittany cooling off after the demo and enjoying the picnic. Stephanie and Pecadora - life doesn't get any better than this.

demonstration. It had to be at least 100 degrees, with no cloud in sight, and not a single Deep South member left that track until every spectator wishing to experience these horses had their turn. My special award for most dedicated sharer goes to Tommy Griffith for being the last rider in. He just couldn't leave the track until he made every child smile after riding its first Paso Fino Horse. My hat is off to you Tommy.

With the demonstration over, we all changed into cooler clothes and gathered around the shade for a picnic lunch. Forrest's neighbor cooked us up some great barbeque and Forrest made his delicious baked beans and potato salad. With bellies full, Forrest then emerged with a huge, ice-cold watermelon and began slicing it up and hand delivering each piece to all us. He then went around and salted our pieces for us as we held on to our giant slice of ice-cold melon. There's that true southern hospitality again.

It seems I have a tape playing each time I write an article for the magazine. It's that same recording of "we are one big Paso Fino family". I must say since recently moving to Mississippi, I have felt a little misplaced and out of my elements and familiarities. Being horseless seems to compound it all as well. It's amazing what can spin from a phone call. Thank you Ed and Forrest for making that phone call and giving me the opportunity to fully experience the Deep South Region's southern hospitality. Thank you Emily for bringing out horse after horse, tacking it up for me and letting me ride it, at Forrest's barn to help me find the horse to ride at the fair. Thank you to the Griffith family (grandma too), Jim Minninger and Mary Craft for showing me the true generous spirit you have in promoting the Paso Fino breed. Lastly, thank you Fairway's Pecadora, you are a true testament to the Paso Fino breed, and thank you for giving me that "in the saddle" feeling again.

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