

Cowboy

Note: This document was retyped. Hopefully, it remains true to the original.

The first time that I remember seeing Hourse Strickland was sometime during the early Spring months of the year 1958. Even though his name was Hourse; I am sure that his parents meant for his name to be Horace, but they either misspelled the name or could not spell it correctly when his certificate of birth form was completed and his Birth Certificate was applied for. Possibility the doctor who delivered Hourse misspelled his name or better still, if Hourse had been delivered by a midwife, it is likely that she did not know how to spell the name his parents wanted him to carry the rest of his life. In our country and during the time of Hourse's birth we only had one registered midwife that I knew about, and this lady's name was Lovie Oswalt. Just about everyone knew Mrs. Lovie Oswalt except we did not address her as Mrs., we all knew her and called her Miss Lovie. It would be my guess that Miss Lovie brought Horace into this world out on Route 4 just across the Sipsey River in one of those rental houses that I presume was owned by Johnny Papasan in the year 1942.

Hourse was a skinny youngster who said that he was 16 years old of age when he came by our seed processing plant early one morning in late March. It was a cold, frosty morning and I could tell that Hourse was not dressed warm enough to be comfortable. Nevertheless, he quickly came to the point as to why he was there, opening the conversation by making a statement. "Mista Jack, ah'm 16 years old and ah'm full-growed and ah has come to go to woik". His calling me Mr. Jack was nothing new, for in our area, it is not unusual for one's employees to address the owner of the business in such a manner. I must admit that the way he said what he did took me by surprise, for most of the employees that work at our seed plant would have asked for a job. Not Horace, he just told me that he had come to go to work. My reaction to his telling me that he had come to go to work caused me to ask, "Boy, what's your name and how old did you say you were?" Without the least bit of anxiety he replied "Mista Jack, Ah'm 16 years old an going on 17 an my name be Hourse Strickland." Looking him up and down, I just had to ask, "Did you say Horse?" "Yasuh, Mista Jack ah said Horse." Being a bit confused and also maybe wishing to have a bit of fun with Mr. Strickland, "Surely you don't mean h-o-r-s-e," spelling out the word. "Hell, Mista Jack, cancha spell, H-o-u-r-s-e," he replied and I could tell that maybe this young fellow was prone to wear his feelings on his sleeve. I said, "That spells your name okay, but shouldn't your name be spelled H-o-r-a-c-e?" He quickly answered by saying, "Hit don't make no dif'ernce Mista Jack cause evabody calls me J.D. anyhow."

I liked J.D. a lot better than I did the misspelled Horace, and since I was very busy, I told him that he would have to be 18 to work for us for we were covered by the wage and hour laws that regulated the age of the employees. With that said, J.D. quickly replied "Mista Jack, this here paper says ah can woik jus lak ah'm 18." I looked at his waiver of age form that had been signed by his father or someone and approved by Mr. Ayers at the State Employment Office. J.D.

Strickland was eligible to work for us if we needed him. At about this time our Seed Plant Foreman walked up and told me that Calvin Johnson had not come to work and we needed someone to fill in for him. J.D. Strickland got the job. I do not remember what the job was, but I am sure that it was one of the least appealing jobs that we had to offer.

J.D. Strickland quickly became a key employee at the old Fairview Seed Company. He was quick to learn, was always on time and never minded being called on to work extra hours. We very likely took advantage of J.D., for it seemed that we were always asking someone to work extra on Saturday morning or either work over on a second shift. J.D. seemed to always be available. What I did not know was that he had secretly bought an old automobile and since he needed extra money to not only pay living expenses, he also needed extra dollars to pay the used car dealer over half the value to the car before he would let J.D. have possession of it. One Monday morning in early September 1958, J.D. shows up driving an old beat up Ford automobile. I can very well recall being concerned about J.D. and his purchase of that rolling wreck, but September was a very busy month for us and we soon were quite involved in the business of taking in and processing our hybrid seed corn crop. So much so that it was not until Will DuBose came by the office to tell me that the night shift would be short a man, and J.D. said that he could not work over because he had to do some work on his car. Between Will and me the problem of getting someone else to work the night shift was solved. I also asked Will to have J.D. to come by the office at quitting time.

About two minutes after 5 PM, J.D. came through the office door and I could tell at a glance that he was in a hurry. Before I could get my question put to him, he said: "Mista Jack, ah'm gonna keep my car. So doncha try tu to get me to carry it back." I knew then that some of the other employees had told J.D. that I would have him carry the old car back. What I had to say to J.D. really surprised him and at the same time caused him some real worries. I asked him, "J.D. do you have a drivers license?" "Na suh, ah sho don't," he replied with a crestfallen look on his face. "Well", I said, "you'll have to have a license if you drive that automobile." J.D. did not say any more to me, nor I to him. Within a second or so he was gone. J.D. continued to work his regular shift every day and I presume he worked on his old car after work, at any rate, he did not work over anymore.

It must have been at least two weeks later that I had a chance to talk to J.D. again; but this time when he came to the office, Will DuBose was with him and Will did all the talking. Will said, "Mr. Butler, J.D. has got to get his driver's license." "Will", I said, "J.D. was told this two weeks ago, is something wrong?" To this question Will replied, "The Highway Patrol caught him driving yesterday." I was not surprised and I told J.D. and Will that this was bound to happen sooner or later and I also told Will that I had told J.D. the first day he brought the car on the Seed Company grounds that he had to have a license. Will then turned and told J.D. to step outside because he wished to speak to me in private. When J.D. was outside and out of hearing, I asked, "What's the matter?" Will told me, "Mr. Butler, J.D. can't read or write anything more than his name. He will have to do both to get a license." With this, Will and I both sort of looked at each

other and I know that we both thought about the same thing. Will DuBose was our foreman and I believed then, as I do now, that he was one of the finest people that I have ever known. Finally, I told Will to go ask J.D. to come back in and I also told Will that I would appreciate him staying with us for a few minutes until we could get this problem for this young man solved.

J.D. truly was illiterate, but he was for certain a most intelligent person. As soon as he was in my office, I asked both him and Will to have a seat and then I asked J.D., "Is it true that you cannot read or write more than your name?" "Mista Butler, I can sho read a little bit, yas suh, a little bit," J.D.'s confession to ignorance was one that I have heard many times and it saddens me every time the experience occurs. The morning's paper was on my desk and I passed it to J.D. and told him to read the headlines out loud. The morning's paper was on my desk and I passed it to J.D. and told him to read the headlines out loud. "Mista Butler, ah can't read a dam thing, and you know that." He replied in almost a whisper. Well, I guess that J.D. thought I would fire him, robbing him of his job and most of all the loss of his beloved automobile.

"J.D. would you come by the office every afternoon and on those days when I have the time, would you let me teach you to read and to write enough to enable you to get your driver's license?" I asked the question hoping that he would tell me that he would enroll in one of the adult classes at the local high school, however, not so because he quickly said "Mista Butler, ah sho preciate ya doing 'at."

Beginning that day and every day that it was possible, I taught and J.D. learned. The old car sat on the Seed Company premises with a promise from J.D. that he would not move it until he could get his license. The ordeal was not as difficult as I thought it would be, for not only did J.D. learn quickly, he seemed to be hungry to discover something that opened up other doors for him. Within a week he had mastered the elementary first and second year readers that I had borrowed to help him in my instruction course. By the third week, J.D.'s progress was so advanced that I was certain that what this young man had was a photographic memory. However, when I asked him to read the headlines of the paper, I was thrilled to see that he really did understand how to break every word down into its syllables and even though he made plenty of mistakes, he was on his way.

One afternoon when I explained to him simple arithmetic, he became so excited that he asked that we work an additional hour. We had in our office a blackboard that I used to leave instructions for Mr. DuBose when I planned to be away. J.D. loved to write on this small blackboard not only words, but numbers too. The rapidity of his ability to learn often surprised me. As a matter of fact, by the time Thanksgiving came around, J.D. announced to me that he was ready to take his drivers exam for his license. I was concerned that he might not be ready, for he would first need to study the questions and the answers to get by on the written test. Another surprise, Will DuBose told me that he had been studying the questions and answers for weeks. Even before he could read well enough to understand what a question or answer was, he had committed both the questions as well as the answers to memory. In early December in 1958, J.D. took his driver's exam for his license and scored a passing grade. His license was

issued and on or about December 15, he took a hand pump and pumped up his tires that had lost a lot of their air pressure sitting on the Seed Company yard, borrowed a set of jumper cables and finally got his old car to purring like an old car does. Then with several books on the car seat beside him, his license in his billfold, he drove out of the Seed Company parking area very different than the kid who showed up in late March and announced to me that he had come to work. Come to think about this young fellow, he did come to work and work he did.

As J.D.'s ability to read and write improved, he soon quit coming by for lessons and in so doing seemed almost ashamed if he came across a word that he could not pronounce or did not understand. When he tried to write, he very quickly realized that his penmanship was very poor and when I suggested that he might prefer printing his words, he seemed relieved that printing was acceptable. The last time that I talked to him about his writing he told me that it was much easier for him to print than to write longhand. Either J.D. bought a dictionary or someone gave him one. I do know that he had one and I do know he was having a hard time finding the words he was looking for. I took the dictionary and showed J.D. how the words were all in alphabetical order and that if he could not spell a word well enough to look it up, he would just have to get someone to help him. I do not know what he did for he never got me to help him. Sometimes he would ask me to pronounce a word for him or ask me to spell a word for him or sometimes get me to read a passage for him. This I do know, when he felt that he had mastered this reading and writing problem, he went almost altogether on his own, seldom asking anyone to help him.

Winter in 1958-1959 was a rather difficult time for us in the seed business, but we had come to depend on a few good workers and as often happened in the winter months, we had to lay off some of our workers J.D. was not one of them; however, when he did not show up for work one Monday morning in early February 1959, we thought maybe he had found a better job working for someone else. When he was out all week long, we were sure that he had found employment for some other firm. By the time he was gone a week, we began to ask around about him and in doing so, we got a telephone call from the District Judge you told me, "Jack, that Strickland boy has got to spend some time in jail, he almost killed some other young fellow who was courting Strickland's girlfriend." Judge Nolan continued, "we would keep him in jail another week, then if you want to get him out, come down and pay the balance of his fine and I will parole him into your charge."

While we were waiting for the week to pass, I learned from Mr. DuBose that J.D. had gone to see his girlfriend and found two other boys at her house trying to court her too. If Mr. DuBose got the story right, it seems that J.D. took an ax handle and beat up on both these boys to the extent that one had to be hospitalized. A warrant was issued for his arrest and court was held on the Monday morning that he failed to come to work. By the time we heard about any of his trouble, he had served almost a week of his time. Will DuBose went by the jail to see J.D., who told Will that he wanted to beat them both just like the cowboys did in the motion picture

shows, but he soon learned that he had to have the ax handle for help. When Will came to work and told all the other employees the story of J.D. and his desire to whip the boys like they did in the cowboy motion picture shows, J.D. was never again called J.D. or Hourse but forever more was called COWBOY.

As long as we were in the seed and feed business, Cowboy worked for us. Even when the business failed and the new owners kept me on to run the business, all of our employees stayed with us as long as I was the Manager. When I finally left in September 1970 all the other employees left also. First will left, then cowboy and one after the other until all of my people were gone.

Cowboy is now 46 years of age, the father of two children and is not only a good mechanic, but a skilled carpenter and a master electrician. Cowboy reminds me of a real good mule or horse who will work on either side of the wagon tongue. You see, mules and/or horses are sometimes either left-handed or right-handed. Not COWBOY, HE COULD WORK ON EITHER SIDE OF THE TONGUE.

JSB, senior

JSB S.
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