

NOSTALGIA

Joan Gilbert

Ransom

In addition to Susanne, the Saddlebred World has another historian whose contributions were formidable. He was J.H. Ransom (1893-1964) and his 14 volume series, *Who's Who and Where in Horsesdom* overlapped hers. It would be hard to say which — if either — of these writers is more important to us today, but we are fortunate to have had both.

Ransom, born in Iowa, we believe, spent most of his life in Illinois. He established and/or enhanced so many horse magazines that it is difficult to trace through them and to relay data about the mergers and sales that would enable today's researcher to present a coherent list with accurate data about their fates. Some, undoubtedly, became part of present day publications. Their titles included *Short Snorts*, a digest-sized publication which he combined with *Horse World*, as *Short Snorts of the Horse World*; he later dropped the earlier title and format and sold *Horse World*. Ransom created *Turf and Tanbark*, and he partnered in 1933 with Susanne to make *Kentucky Horseman* more than it had been before, eventually to become *American Horseman*.

Ransom called the Susanne books "the only authoritative history of the breed" and said that he felt privileged to have helped on her Volume III. We don't know if this meant actual writing and editing, or funding, or perhaps sharing pictures from his various magazines.

But knowing about this collaboration tempers Lynn Weatherman's near-dismissal of Ransom's 1962 *History of American Saddlebred Horses* as "heavily borrowed from Susanne." Ransom's one volume treatment does not pretend to compete with her three, and deals almost exclusively with the very most famous horses and people of the show

world. It is convenient, however, to have a briefer treatment to help define and map one's research. The fact that many of the same photos are used by the two authors may mean that Ransom supplied hers.

During most of his years of working on



Who's Who and Where in Horsesdom, Ransom was editing *Horse World* and during part of that period was operating an advertising agency catering to the horse world. Ransom also was for many years a columnist for various Saddlebred magazines, including *Saddle & Bridle* in the 1940s. His main content was interviews with prominent horses and stables and trainers, breeders and exhibitors. He especially liked to do dynasties, for instance, the Greenwells, Longs and Teaters. Ransom did another series of columns which relayed human interest nuggets and this was called "Memories of a Rail Bird". It would be most interesting to know what Ransom's daily work schedule was like and what he ate to sustain such a level of energy.

For none of the foregoing was J.H. Ransom's main contribution to horse world archives. No, that was the invaluable set of 14 books filled with show and breeding records along with profiles of important horses and riders. It constitutes, a gathering, actually, of his columns, but with important additions. For example, in 1958, he offered a 53-page interview with John T. Hook whose record as trainer, showman and salesman, he said "Would probably never be

surpassed." Ransom credited Hook with developing more outstanding riders and more champion horses than anyone on record at that time. This interview still has to be the most comprehensive in existence of a man whose eight-decade-long memoirs would have filled a big book. Weatherman called the Hook piece "a classic."

Ransom's series is, of course, a gem for researchers and collectors and not easily come by. After his death, a volume 15 appeared, providing data of the same type, generally in less depth, but attempting to update through 1969. It was done by a group of eight women who were themselves *Horse World* journalists or in some way deeply involved in the industry. They apparently intended to revive the series, though where Ransom had included Thoroughbreds and sometimes a few other breeds, they planned to confine themselves to Saddlebreds and Tennessee Walking Horses. They chose as subtitle, "The Record Book of the Horse Show Scene."

We were unable to find evidence that this extension of the Ransom series continued and if it did not, that would be easily understandable; such compilation would have been a superhuman task, even for someone who was, like Ransom, in constant contact with all facets of the horse world.

Apart from his work, we don't know a lot about J.H. Ransom. There is one reference in Susanne to his breeding a mare named Evening Rhythm, but we saw nothing else about his in-the-flesh horse dealings.

Ransom's *History of American Saddle Horses*, is lovingly dedicated to his wife, Lola, telling us that she had been his loyal supporter through 40 years of good times and bad. He credits her cheery disposition with being an asset to their whole family and expresses satisfaction that he was finally able to give her "a pleasant life." We read in the post-humorous Volume 15 that Mrs. Ransom sold the copyrights to her husband's books so that the series could be carried on, another indication that the Volume 15 team probably hoped to keep the series in print.

We can only end this far-from-complete story by hoping that we somehow missed the fact that more volumes of *Who's Who in Horsesdom* did appear, and/or that somebody is hard at work right now, gathering all facts and figures necessary for carrying on the Ransom tradition.

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