

The Road Not Taken

When you get your new issue of *Saddle & Bridle* each month, do you ever think of the thousands of others, here and in other countries, who are sharing your pleasure in that distinctive aroma of inks and coated paper, that exciting heft, promising useful information and a multitude of lovely pictures to pore over?

If we think of our fellow readers, we probably visualize them as trainers, exhibitors, and teachers, retired or still so busy they can barely find time to enjoy the magazine. We know that a big proportion of S&B readers are young people, enraptured with everything equine, but we probably don't realize how many there are whose love of Saddlebreds has entirely different and individual roots. Here are some interesting memories from a man who might have become a trainer, a person whose locale we somehow have not heard a lot about in Saddlebred history.

"I didn't realize I was at a crossroads," Charlie Sorsby, Edgewood, New Mexico, says of a non-decision he made in about 1960. "Since then I've wondered many times what my life would have been, had I pursued the option open to me then."

The circumstances were thus: he had asked his much-revered boss, Glen Wallace, operator of a recreation and training barn at Wheeling, W.V., how to become a trainer, particularly of Saddlebreds. Wallace suggested Gray Barham as a likely mentor.

"I don't know why I didn't act on that," Charlie says "I wasn't very good at approaching people, but I expect that if I'd asked, Glen would have introduced me to Barham. I simply didn't pursue it. Nobody to blame but myself."

He goes on to say that he has had "a very good life, a good living, satisfying work in electronics," Charlie says, "but I always wondered what might have been." It was a few years until horses were out of Charlie's life, and they were not totally out until marriage and career responsibilities had to take first place in all that he did.

Now, retired and 71, he is taking weekly saddle seat lessons and reliving — often with the help of *Saddle & Bridle* — earlier years of his life. "God," he says, "I

wish I had kept some kind of journal at the time to remind me of what the horse world was like in those days, in the area where I lived. So much has been lost to memory."

If Charlie had kept a journal, here's some of what it would contain: these words are his own, sent in e-mails, and given in interview.

Childhood memory of riding his pony, Sleepy, all over the hollow where his family lived. Sometimes he just joined Sleepy in her pasture and sat on her back, reading while she grazed.

Discovery during high school of Margaret Cabell Self's *Horseman's Encyclopedia*. "I bought a copy with earnings from my part-time job," he says. "I read it from cover to cover and I still have it and refer to it from time to time. That got me interested in what was then called simply 'English riding.' As opposed to riding western."

Then came the decisive event of overhearing some acquaintances talking about riding at Oglebay Park, at that time actually out in the country. "That caught my interest," Charlie wrote, "and, so, one weekend I went out with my soda-jerk earnings. I hadn't transportation of my own so I either walked the seven miles or thumbed (the term we used for hitchhiking in those days). I suppose that would have been somewhere round my junior or senior year at Wheeling Central Catholic High School.

"As it happened, that first time," Charlie says, "I got there just as they were starting to close up for the day. It was always Glen's policy never to send anyone out without an escort unless he knew the rider wouldn't 'cowboy' his horse(s). Anyway, he was kind enough to send one of the regulars out with me. I guess he figured anyone crazy enough to walk or thumb so far shouldn't have to go home without having a ride.

"After that, I rode on weekends pretty much as often as I could afford and as time permitted. During that time, I got to know Glen and his students pretty well. Many of the students hung out at the stable quite a lot and also helped with its work. The stable environment was right up my alley so I, too, spent quite a lot more time there than just what was allotted for my ride, typically an hour. Point of reference: The fee for a ride of approximately an hour was either \$2 or \$3 — can't recall which.

"I'd never ridden English before that first time at Oglebay, had never ridden anything but the pony mentioned earlier — and I couldn't afford lessons — or at

least I assumed that I couldn't, and so never actually asked what they cost. But by reading, watching others ride, and listening to Glen when he gave a lesson, I managed to teach myself to ride adequately enough for what I was doing. I doubt I could have won any equitation classes but I managed to do all right just riding for pleasure and later escorting trail rides.

"While looking for a job after finishing high school, I spent even more time at the Oglebay stable. When I was there, I helped out wherever I could. Glen began letting me escort trail rides and I did it eagerly for it gave me more time on horseback than I could have possibly afforded. Some times I'd go off with his grooms to fetch a load of hay from one of the local farms.

"In the early spring of 1955, I hadn't found a job yet, and Glen asked if I'd like to work at the stable. Of course I jumped at the chance. I would be a groom, trail ride escort, and general stable hand. I also drove hayrides pulled by the team of chestnut Belgians.

"The pay wasn't much although I don't remember whether it was any worse than that at the part-time jobs I'd had elsewhere. Oddly, I still remember my salary exactly. It was \$30 per week (\$26.10 after taxes). It kept me in food and cigarettes — one of the vices I picked up around horses — and I was having the time of my life. I've had a number of jobs over the years that I've enjoyed, but even though it was far from high-paying, and the work was often from daylight to dark, that one remains my favorite.

"First thing in the morning, it was feed and water the horses, then groom and muck the stalls. Horses were cleaned and stalls mucked every day, no exceptions. Stalls were also 'picked up' several times a day and horses were given second and third feedings. At that time, there were no water buckets in the stalls so the horses were watered several times a day and, of course, the hack horses were watered each time they returned from a ride.

"About the stable itself: The physical stable was owned by the Wheeling Park Commission and Glen merely owned the business, a concession, I suppose. Anyway, the business comprised three parts: Riding lessons; horse boarding; and horse rental for trail rides.

"The trail rides, as mentioned earlier, were of approximately an hour's duration along one of the trails through the park. No group ever went out

without an escort and if the group was large enough, two escorts — one in front and one behind, I can remember one large group which required use of every hack horse in the barn; for that, a third escort was added at the middle of the group.

"Most of the lesson horses and even a few of the hack horses were Saddlebreds — not world champions but decent horses. There were private and group lessons. Weather permitting, lessons were conducted in the ring up on the hill behind the stable, otherwise in the aisle of the stable. On Friday nights, Glen had what he called 'Stable Students' where outside of show season, everyone came and rode together in the aisle, sort of a blend of a group lesson and a gymkhana.

"That first summer, someone else groomed at the horse shows and I remained at home at the stable, rubbing horses, mucking stalls, feeding. Week-ends when there was a show, we'd bandage legs of the horses that were going, pack up tack; then one of Chester Sayre's horse vans would pull up and we'd load tack trunks and horses and off they'd go."

The main shows that Glen's kids went to were on "the interstate circuit," overseen by The Interstate Horse Show Association. That circuit, then, was comprised (in no particular order) of the Wheeling show (still held at Oglebay at that time and, so, the one show I got to see that summer); Moundsville, W.V.; Waynesburg, Penn.; Washington, Penn.; Bedford, Penn.; Johnstown, Penn.; maybe Butler, Penn.; Canfield, Oh.; (technically, the Youngstown Charity Horse Show); Berea, Oh.

"There probably were a few others that I'm forgetting," Charlie says, "although I suppose that's not an unreasonable number of shows for a summer. These were not, in those days, small shows. They had a full complement of classes and classes were usually very well filled with good horses.

"That was before the Saddlebred classes exploded into the variety that exists now. There were, of course, Three-Gaited, Five-Gaited, (my two favorites) and Fine Harness classes as well as Roadsters (usually to bike; I can't recall if under saddle). There were classes for Equitation, English Pleasure, Walking Horses, Hunters, Open Jumpers, often Western Pleasure and Parade Horses."

Charlie explains that his time of being an actual employee of the Oglebay stable was only about a year and a half — spring 1955 through late summer 1956.

"From then through the early '60s, I rode there, hung out there a lot, lent a hand, went to horse shows with them and, helped there, all that at weekends." He kept the tie with Oglebay intact for several years, as he went into his career with electronics, traveling about to shows as his work allowed, sometimes with friends, sometimes alone. He managed to see — at least once — some of the most important ones: Louisville, Lexington and Shelbyville.

At shows closer to home, Charlie sought out the Oglebay stalls, borrowed a couple of coolers ("Remember those nice wool coolers?" he asks) and sacked out in an empty stall. "Then, because Glen and his students and grooms were my friends, I'd lend a hand in the morning and when they had classes," he says.

Were there but world and editorial word allowances enough, a great deal more could be gleaned from the experience and feelings of one man who a few decades ago might have become a trainer and has never lost his youthful compulsion to be around horses, "Especially Saddlebreds." Those words recurred often in his conversation with us. Charlie is reluctant to say a lot about people and horses he knew, lest he leave out someone or get details wrong, after so many years in another world. But here is his answer to one specific question:

Are you riding Saddlebreds in your lessons?

"No. I ride with a trainer named Liz Sanchez, northwest of Albuquerque. She began with Saddlebreds in Chicago, but when she came here, she found that New Mexico doesn't have many of them or much demand, since they are not well known here. She switched to Arabians."

Charlie took the opportunity at one point in the interview to say that he never considered being a groom menial work. He does not go so far as some of our interviewees have, to say he always knew how important he was to the horses he rubbed, whom he regarded as friends and fellow employees. He doesn't say he found it very gratifying to make them comfortable after work, and to see to their ongoing needs all the time. He says "it was just work that I liked. I just liked working with horses. I like horses and I like horse people." And, apparently, he likes *Saddle & Bridle*.



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about everyone else's, and know a lot of random information in general.

She encouraged the students to remember how hard-working and stressed out the show secretaries are when approaching them with a problem, or even a simple entry. If they go on to become trainers, she encouraged them to make scratches early and to be kind to the people in the office, who probably have had as little sleep as the trainers on the grounds. Manners should not go out the window just because you're at Louisville.

"I think when people drive through the Kentucky State Fair they lose their common sense. They leave their brains at the East or West and priorities change..." Backer thought out loud. She's seen it many times, and she encouraged the students to remember, it really is "just" a horse show.

Backer also stressed being involved in other activities besides horses.

"[If you're going to make this your career] you have to have other interests. Don't let this industry suck all the life out of you. We tend to all go to a horse shows and lose track of the outside world."

Backer introduced a new idea being put into action during this year's American Royal: the Pink Ribbon class. The Pink Ribbon class is the Ladies Five-Gaited Championship on Friday night, held to raise money for breast cancer awareness. It is exactly what Backer means when she talks about "letting real life come into horse show life."

People who are participating pledge a certain amount of money per horse entered, so if you say ten dollars a horse and ten horses enter, your total pledge would be a hundred dollars.

Whether the class is an absolute success or even if it is a total flop, Backer is proud of the horse show management and its supporters for daring to try it. Something tells me at least, that it will be a success. Though often scared of change, horse people tend to come through for good causes, and this is certainly a good cause.

It is a daring move, probably scary for some, but "you have to throw yourself into situations you're scared of, or you won't grow." At least that's what Sandy Backer told our class.

Well, that's it for this month. Next month look forward to hearing about our trip to Mike Robert's new barn. Until next time, "May all your days be blue ribbon ones!"