

Edward R. "Hoppy" Bennett and Historic Undulata Farm

Part I

By Jane E. Simmons © 2007



Edward R. "Hoppy" Bennett extends an invitation to his historic Undulata Farm. Photo by Jane E. Simmons © 2006

I extend my appreciation to Charles Cook for his help in meeting recently with Hoppy to update this article, which is based on my personal interviews with Hoppy last year when I was in Kentucky doing research for the historical biography of my father, Art Simmons. I was a guest of Undulata Farm during those six weeks. I consider Hoppy one of the book's "Angels" for the help and hospitality extended to me there, after he learned from mutual friend Cecile Hetzel Dunn of my hope to have one home base while being away from my own home for so long.

"You can buy my best horse," the owner of Undulata Farm said, as we watched Kentucky Unbridled Spirit trot in the indoor arena, "because I have them to sell, not to keep. That's one of the several reasons," he added, "that I don't show. By the time we develop a championship-ready horse that I would want to show myself, somebody offers me a price I can't turn down, and I sell it."

Selling horses that "people can get on, and win championships anywhere, all the time, for as long as possible, makes me happy," veteran horseman Edward R. "Hoppy" Bennett told me, and then added, with one of his broad Irish smiles, "especially when they tell everybody where they got their horses. When I go to Louisville's Grand Championships, and other shows, and see former Undulata Farm horses win, I feel a lot of satisfaction and pride knowing I participated in the making of those champions."

A few of the "horses I've sold and have done well include: An Heir About Her; Callaway's Sugarplum; Gypsy Supreme; Wall Street Week; Madame Machine; City Kitty; Star Scene; Cynthia's Party Punch, WC Undulata's Nuts And Bolts, WC Undulata Heir

Apparent, and Fire Engine Red. My first World's Champion was Gay Autumn Decision," Hoppy said.

Studs formerly owned, stood or sold by Edward Bennett in Shelbyville, Kentucky, "include: I Am A New Yorker; 42nd Street ERB; Grand Slam; Undulata's Nutcracker, Undulata's Man Of The Hour, High Rank, Night Prowler, Top Spool, and Stonewall Magnificent Genius."

In January 2006, "Undulata's Nutcracker's breeding rights brought \$26,000" at the All American Cup auction. "This was the third year in a row this stallion topped the auction. The All American Cup program is the biggest shot in the arm for the Saddlebred industry I've seen in my lifetime," Hoppy said.

The All American Cup program annually auctions the breeding service from a nominated stallion to a broodmare of the person who submitted the highest bid or phone bid for that stud. Over 175 stallions are on the Cup's nominated list. The Indianapolis, Indiana based group requires a minimum bid of \$500. Owners of mares are guaranteed certain protections. The owner of the stallion receives a percentage of the purse. The colt forthcoming is automatically entered into a weanling class that awards upwards of \$125,000, with the winning colt getting about \$40,000 — a lot more than the winner of the World's Grand Championship Five-Gaited Stake receives each August at the Kentucky State Fair, according to the group's treasurer, Jim Aikman.

The 2006 All American Cup auction was held at Claudia Sanders Dinner House. While in Shelbyville, I ate at the restaurant, which was started in 1968 by Col. Harland Sanders' wife. The current owners say they found the secret recipe for the Colonel's Kentucky Fried Chicken in his home, which they also bought. The restaurant is just a few miles from Undulata Farm.

Hoppy Bennett continues his success in the Saddlebred Horse industry working and living on his "nearly 100 acres" of rolling Kentucky hills. Gracing his property are miles of white-painted, four-railed, wood fences that divide Undulata Farm's pastures into numerous paddocks. An outdoor exercise ring is in front of the barn.

Hoppy "bought Undulata Farm on September 29, 1994." The property, owned by Dr. and Mrs. James E. Meffert, Sr., was offered at auction by horseman Walt Robertson's Lexington firm of Swinebroad-Denton, Inc. The Main House is in the Classical Revival architectural style. "The original place was owned by Confederate Calvary hero Harry Weissinger in the 1800s and had 2,800 acres." In December 1953, Miss Jane Meyer acquired 800 acres, creating a horse breeding farm, with a cattle and hog breeding program also. The Mefferts bought 92.3 acres from Miss Meyer with the Main House and out buildings included. Hoppy later "bought an adjacent four acres" when they came up for sale. I-64 runs along Undulata Farm's south property line.

"There are more than a dozen buildings, including five houses," here at Undulata Farm, "which I own with the bank," Hoppy said with his boyish grin. The property was placed on the National Register of Historic Sites after he purchased it. The three-story, nine bedroom Main House in 1994 had "only window air conditioners, a 1967 furnace, septic tanks, an electrical wiring upgrade done in 1989, its original tin roof, and in the barn, 29 stalls. The place had sustained years of benign neglect. To bring it all to what you see today took to 1997," Hoppy told me.

"Just the crystal chandeliers were in the house when I moved in with a phone and a bed. All of the antique furniture, mirrors, and paintings, I found going to auctions. I restored the elegance of the Main House by stripping wallpaper, repairing the huge recessed doors in the four first-floor rooms that open to the



"Hoppy" Bennett, at work here in his office, talks on two phones.

Photo by Jane E. Simmons © 2006

grand foyer, and redoing the original wood floors. The ceilings are 14 feet high on the first floor, and the leaded glass windows have their original weights and pulleys. I want them to open to the fresh air of Undulata's hundreds of old trees."

To help with "the day-to-day running of the Main House," Hoppy has on staff "full-time house manager Debbie Peach," who makes smooth the almost continuous transitions from "one set of houseguests to the next," as customers and friends come and go. Hoppy also opens his farm "for weddings and other gala events. For six years, our indoor arena held the local theater group's annual Fantasy Ball," Hoppy noted.

"Undulata Farm," Hoppy said, "is one of the few horse operations in Shelby County that breeds, trains, and sells its own horses. Most farms are primarily training stables for horse owners who live out of town or out of state. With the some 61 Saddlebred farms operating in this county, we are like a countywide horse shopping mall that's just a 25-minute drive from Louisville."

To preserve the Farm's breeding connection, Hoppy often attaches the Undulata Farm name to a horse or his own ERB initials at the end of the name so "the Undulata offspring of these horses will show up in the pedigrees for the next 50-plus years. For the Farm, it serves as a great marketing tool."

In the Farm's barn area, Hoppy launched a major construction project: "We now have about 40 box stalls, the five-room office complex that gives a full view of the 250' x 48' indoor ring," and "The Chute" — the name given to the covered straightaway that runs open alongside of the barn for working horses outside.

Working the horses is staffer Bernardo Perea, who "has been with me for about 15 years. Christine Broder is a customer and friend who trains for me as an amateur rider. She has horses at Undulata Farm, and competes in some horse shows as does the Rowland family of Kansas City. Except for Christine and the Rowland family, we're not competing with the people we sell our horses to. Our customers call us on a regular basis, and we select horses to suit their particular tastes and needs."

Hoppy said "it is thrilling to see a rider, who may weigh 110 pounds, command a thousand pound horse with just his or her

hands holding those reins going to the bridle's bit. It's a little like harnessing electricity."

As for the dynamics of riding in a show ring, Hoppy said: "I've thought about why a ride can lift you up so high, or drop you so low."

He explained: "A good ride gives the euphoric feeling of exhilaration. A bad one, a disheartening depressed feeling. Often, you have to wait 24 hours to redeem a bad ride. I think it has to do with self-esteem. You can't buy self-esteem. In showing, you control from correctly reading the subtle signals the horse is sending through your hands, your legs and feet, your seat and the whole horse's body language. Miss any one of those signals, the whole thing can go sour. Your sense of worth at being a good rider rides on this ability."

Hoppy added: "Horses are athletes. Trainers are coaches. A horse will tell you what it needs. Some legislators and organizations these days want to regulate what a horse needs. They think they know better than the horse."

In 1990, Hoppy helped launch a second horse show in his town. "My brother and I started the Shelbyville Horse Show, along with the Redd Crabtree family. The annual Shelby County Horse Show is another event," he noted.

"When we started the show's Annual Kick Off Breakfast, held from 7 a.m. to 9 a.m., it generated the hottest 250 tickets in town each August." The much-sought-after tickets "are sold by the Shelbyville Horse Show organizers," not by Hoppy. Often, "the Governor of Kentucky drops by and greets everyone."

Now, "we have a whole week of things for people to attend before the show starts, like golf tournaments and jazz concerts." The horse show, which "lasts exactly two hours each night, is held two weeks before the Grand Championships in Louisville. It is a social event that is like a preview of the upcoming champions. 2006 was the show's 16th year," Hoppy pointed out.

"The entire town has become involved since my brother R.H. and I started the show. Hoppy's brother R.H. Bennett said he likes "the behind-the-scenes stuff. I enjoy making sure that things are working smoothly" at the show. "I sweat a lot more than Hoppy. We push him out front and make him do the talking to mayors, governors, commissioners, and the people." R.H. said he believes "neither one of us would want to trade jobs. We're completely satisfied with the way it is."

"R.H. is the power," Hoppy said. "He gets it done. He makes it tick. The stands are filled all four nights, Wednesday through Saturday, by the 15,000-20,000 people who attend the horse show every year. We started the show mostly because we are crazy. But, our location between Louisville and Lexington is a perfect location."

Shelbyville calls itself the Saddlebred Horse Capital of the World. The town has about a 10,000 population in a county of some 33,300, and Shelby County's median household income is \$45,500, according to the 2000 Census.

The two brothers, whose "father put on a horse pulling contest in Taylorsville for 32 years that became the World's Championship Horse Pulling Contest for the School Fair," hold theirs at the Shelby County Fairgrounds. Across from the Fairgrounds' front gate is a pocket park, featuring the bronze statue of Mary Gaylord (McClean) riding Santana's Lass. The statue is lighted at night.

Hoppy enjoys promoting and selling. "We are proud of all of our winning horses. That's why we display pictures of them here in our facility. We see it as a sign of our success." While I was visiting Undulata in January of 2006, I saw these huge framed full colored photographs of champion horses on walls



Hopalong Cassidy cowboy shirt worn by young Ed "Hoppy" Bennett.

Photo provided by "Hoppy"

throughout the Farm's buildings.

Making money "is important in selling horses. It's how I make my living. But, there's something more important: for me, doing the job is the priority. When you make doing-the-job your goal for the benefit of the horse and its owner, the financial abundance will follow. Successful horse selling gives a person a feeling of great self-esteem, something everyone needs. And, I also stay on with my customers," Hoppy said, "after they've bought their horses from me. For example, if they do not already have a show trainer, I offer to help them find one, since we train our horses primarily to sell."

"Horses are Kentucky's number one cash crop," he emphasized. He shared a state Agricultural Statistics Service report stating "horses and mules (including stud fees) generated \$950 million in 2004," nearly twice as much as tobacco, which was behind cattle/calves and poultry/broilers. "Our horse farms keep Kentucky beautifully green and we want to keep these rolling hills from being covered over by concrete," Hoppy said.

Today, 58-year-old Hoppy Bennett is an example of the current Saddlebred industry's business-oriented elders. He utilizes technology throughout his farm operation: computers, FAX, cell phones (actually has one for each ear), a gadget that automatically calls his cell phone when a foal begins to emerge from its mother, in-office copier, e-mail (which he often answers himself), and an elaborate phone intercom system. Heading his office is Connie Hayden, the job held previously for 27 years by Ruth Lally, who retired in 2004. This office is in the Main House. Hoppy's loyalty to his staff obviously is returned.

Undulata Farm's breeding program commands much of Hoppy's time and energy. "We have a veterinarian on staff checking the health of our mares and horses in training." With a reputation as a pedigree genius, Hoppy joins those horse breeders who "study the get of stallions and mares throughout America." He told me "some 65 to 70 horses are Undulata Farm bred each year" and he had 27 foals in 2007." The Farm "operates a breeding and selling program. We sell before they

get to the show ring."

In horse breeding, Hoppy looks "for head carriage, athletic ability of speed, control and leg action, and manners in the horse. I also look for this, of course, when I am judging" a show. To start 2006, he judged the 22nd Annual Gasparilla Charity Horse Show's Saddlebred, Hackney, Roadster and Equitation divisions on February 28-March 4 in Tampa, Florida. He has "judged many of the horse shows in the United States."

Hoppy's known to express his political opinions, and believes "more horsemen should be active in positions of governance both inside and outside of our industry."

The industry organizations to which Hoppy belongs, include: the American Saddlebred Horse Association (ASHA), the United Professional Horsemen's Association (UPHA), and Kentucky Equine Education Project (KEEP). Hoppy hosted, as Shelby County Team Leader for KEEP, a meeting at Undulata Farm attended by more than 200 horse people. This group, "a broad-based coalition representing most horse breeds," is "committed to ensuring Kentucky protects its multi-billion annual equine economy."

Hoppy also has a reputation for being a consummate ground trainer. This method helps further his "goal of doing what's best for the horse, because you can't be on top of a horse and really see how it's looking. I could tie a monkey on its back and with me standing on the ground, I can determine what will help improve the horse and its performance better than if I tied myself on its back," he said, with the famous Hoppy humor. He then shared with me several fun insider horse industry stories illustrating his point.

"Promoting the Saddlebred at every opportunity is important. Here at Undulata, we welcome everyone, sharing the history of this horse that is the only breed developed to show. A Kentucky Department of Tourism official told me that he personally brought 3,500 people here in 2005. And, we have other groups and individuals come to this Historic Site every year, some from other countries." Hoppy noted. "In 2006, 5,000 people visited Undulata Farm from the Kentucky Department of Tourism."

His farm is the "realization of a boyhood dream. Before I was old enough to drive, my family would drive by Bob Whitney's Stables near our home. That farm and the grounds looked like a state park. It was so Kentucky — with the horses grazing in the white-fenced pastures. I love all of these amenities of having horses. If I couldn't have this, and be a part of it, I'm not sure I would love it like I do. I love Kentucky and that's part of what I love about it."

Edward Raymond was "the sixth child of nine surviving children and four foster children" his parents reared. He has been known to everyone as Hoppy since childhood. The Hopalong Cassidy shirt of his youth "is framed and on the hallway wall" next to his office in the Main House. He "loved the film star's cowboy movies on TV" during the 1950s.

The "rest of the story," scheduled to be continued in Part Two in the October issue of *Saddle & Bridle Magazine*, covers Hoppy's youth, military service, partnership with Jane Lederer, earlier stables, daughter Tate, the passing of his parents, and anything else he wishes to share.

You may contact Hoppy Bennett at Undulata Farm, 1600 Zaring Mill Road, Shelbyville, KY 40565 or by phone: 502-633-0520 or via e-mail: UndulataFarm@aol.com, or by FAX: 502- 633-0520.

You can contact Jane E.B. Simmons, who is completing an historical biography of her parents, Art and Ollie Simmons, via her e-mail: Jane@SimmonsBook.com, and visit her website: www.SimmonsBook.com.