

## SIMMONS STABLES from page 12

and training for Potts, who recognized his giant talent and put it to work. Bass' integrity, as well as his gentle and skillful horsemanship, eventually earned him thousands of trophies and ribbons, as well as accolades from presidents and royalty. His talents also earned him fame with a winning horse named Belle Beach, one of the few horses to beat the illustrious Rex McDonald, who is now revered as the most famous show horse America ever produced.

Bass also invented, but refused to patent, a "humane" bit to ease the pain horses endured during training. It is still widely used. In honor of his accomplishments, the American



**STABLE STAR:** Born into slavery with a unique gift for horses, Tom Bass (1859-1934) got his start at the Mexico stable under owner Joseph Potts, and defied the cultural prejudice of his time to become a world phenomenon as a trainer. His talent earned him honors by the thousands, and brought him to the attention of presidents and royalty. (Photo courtesy of Audrain County Historical Society)

Saddlebred Horse Museum in Mexico devotes an entire section to Bass, and museum curator Tom Usnick is one of his biggest fans.

"Tom Bass said the bit he invented was his gift to horses," said Usnick. "Now every Saddlebred stable in the United States – and probably the world – uses the Tom Bass Bit."

Additional horsemen connected with the stable include the noted trainer John T. Hook, who first worked as a groom at the great old barn and later operated his own stable right across the street. Hook is said to have developed more outstanding riders and champion horses during

his career than perhaps anyone on record at the time.

Two other noteworthy denizens of the stable were the famous Lee Brothers – Bill and George – who operated the barn as a sales and training stable, and supplied horses to the police departments of New York City, Chicago, Philadelphia, and other large cities. According to accounts, this pair contracted with the biggest Eastern dealers to supply the carriage trade, and sold horses and mules by the trainload to the U.S. Government.

As for the horses connected with Simmons Stables, writers and historians of the Saddlebred world have long searched for adjectives eloquent enough to memorialize the kind of show horse talent once quartered there. They involve a litany of stars, including Forest King, Belle Beach, Roxie Highland, Miss Rex, Thornton's Star, Senator Crawford, The Replica, King Lee, Sea Beauty, Meadow Princess, Ann Rutledge, Bugle Ann, Tashi Ling, and six-time world champion Colonel Boyle. What would the 36 stalls of the "Big Barn of the Boulevard" be without them?

In addition, those entrenched in the industry can recite by heart the names of the celebrated horsemen associated with the onetime big red barn. In addition to Bass and Hook, they include stable owner Robert G. Steward, who painted the barn white and renamed it Dincara Stables; trainers Splint Barnett, Hugh Dempsey, Del Holeman, Lee Butler, Ross Drake and Jim Hitte; noted talent finder, trainer, judge and stable owner Bill Cunningham (who once advertised the barn as "The Best Saddle Horse Sales Barn in America"); owners and operators P.W. Woodruff, Jack McCracklin, B.B. Tucker and Joe Graham; and in more recent decades, the esteemed Art Simmons and his son Jim.

It was Jim's decision in 2001 to move his stabling and training operation to the family farm outside Mexico that set off the crisis of conscience that has propelled Wilson and the preservationists ever since. Just knowing this last hallmark of Mexico's Saddlebred ancestry might be bulldozed into the ground caused Bobette to confront Simmons with all the heartfelt enthusiasm a novice could muster.

"You can't tear this building down."

What clinched it for her was the discovery of two picture frames hanging on Jim's office wall in the stable, where she had taken her children for one last look. As she wiped the dust and cobwebs from the glass, she noticed each frame was stuffed with yellowed news clippings and photographs that trumpeted the renowned achievements of the stable, and the men and horses that graced it. Suddenly the history of the thing swept over her in a wave.

"I said, 'Perhaps I'm stepping out of my bounds, but you just can't tear this building down. I

mean, everyone that's come out of these stables has been amazing. Presidents came here to buy horses. The horses from this place showed at Madison Square Garden. This place provided halter horses during the war ..."

"I really don't know anything about Saddlebreds," she'll admit to anyone. "I own horses but I don't own Saddlebreds. But for me, it's about the history, it's about the stable, it's about all the people that have come out of it. It's about the whole area ... Mexico, Audrain County, Callaway County. There were just big stables all around the area."

Simmons Stables is the last of the old soldiers standing.

Its preservationists envision a time when the barn and its adjoining facilities could become a National Saddlebred Hall of Fame, a museum, an educational site, and a focal point for visitors from across the nation. They foresee a training facility and riding academy, agricultural exposition, farmers market, pioneer and crafters village, equine seminars, gift shops and a host of other possibilities.



**A WORK IN PROGRESS:** This shot of the interior wing of the stable shows a glimpse of the progress so far on the roof, haylofts, catwalks and stalls. Restoration contractors dug fresh footings and poured new concrete foundations to support the posts, and although the roof required a total replacement, they were able to use original vertical sideboards for the barn's exterior. (Advocate photo by Susan Denkler)

Now the challenge is to push through to completion and see the dream fulfilled.

So far they've listed the stable on the National Register of Historic Places. The National Park Service even pushed them to expand the registration to take in an entire six-acre "district" of buildings central to the horse

business that once flourished there.

And in a strange juxtaposition of the old and the "new," the dream of a revived stable is finally beginning to take shape between two oval tracks. So far,

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