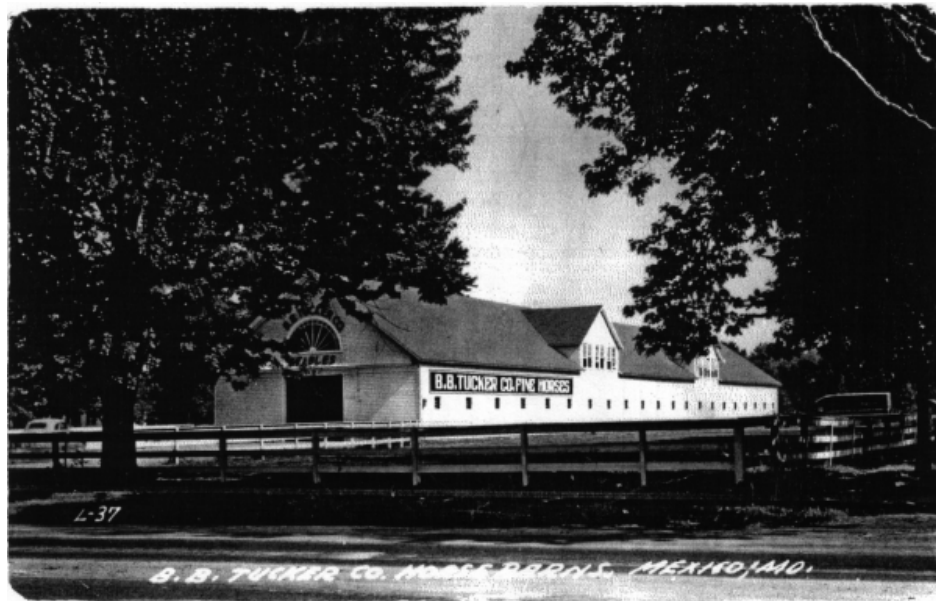


# Preserving the irreplaceable in Mexico



A 1940's postcard of what is now the Simmons Stables historical restoration project. (Photo: International Saddlebred Hall of Fame)



The little girl bounces merrily in the playground of the St. Matthew's Episcopal Church.

Amid her laughter and giggles, she is distracted by a beautiful saddlebred stallion trotting through the green fields of the bright white stable across the street. It is a fond memory that Bobette Balsler Wilson often recalls from her childhood in Mexico. Watching the horses frolic at the Simmons Stables was a common past time of her youth, due to the pure majesty of the saddlebred mares, stallions and fillies kept at the stables and the legends that called its walls home. Now, many years later, Bobette is furiously working to save the treasured memory and piece of Mexico history.

In June 2001, the Simmons family moved its horses out of the heart of Mexico to its family farm outside of town, when it became too hard to keep the stables running. Without a set plan of what to do with the

stables left in the center of the city, a bulldozer was called in to clear out the space for sale or rent.

When Bobette heard the news, she took her kids for one last tour of the famed stables. Just as she was about to say her final goodbye, she noticed two dusty old frames hidden behind time and dirt on the wall. She brushed the dust off the frames to reveal a picturesque history of the stables from newspaper clips around the world. The international acclaim for the stables astonished her and she knew immediately they told a story that Mexico could not afford to lose.

"I could not imagine looking at this building for so many years, my entire life, and realizing that it wasn't going to be there any more," Bobette says, gazing over the Simmons Stables grounds on a bright, breezy fall day. "The history of this building is the history of our town. It was simply unfathomable to me that it was being torn down."

Bobette sprung into action, and worked on her own for a year to save the structure. She researched how to get it on the National Register of Historic Places and how to go about preserving the buildings. With all the fervor in the world, she could not do it alone and realized she would have to write the final good-bye she was prepared to give a year before to the legendary stables. As she sent out its obituary, Bobette gained support from locals and equestrian lovers around the area. Things began to fall into place, and the Simmons Stables Preservation Fund, Inc. was created.

Mary White Littrell was one of the first to jump onboard. "The Simmons Stables are continually associated with greatness," Mary says. "The community deserves to keep

Sales Company. The stables took more than a year to finish and were built with the 2,000-year-old post and beam method popular in barns with large roofs and lofts. The structure was massive, measuring more than 250 feet of length and more than 40 feet of width with an interior that could house roughly 36 horses, and a loft that could house 5,000-plus bales of hay. Every detail was thought out, even down to the 20-foot-wide center aisle that was used as an indoor ring during inclement weather.

"The stables were known world wide," Mary says standing in the rundown interior of the famed center aisle. "If people wanted to find a good horse, they came here to Mexico."

"America's #1 Sales Barn" played an indelible role on Mexico becoming the

**"I could not imagine looking at this building for so many years, my entire life, and realizing that it wasn't going to be there any more."**

that history alive. Our children deserve to know the stories of the people that came through here and helped make Mexico what it has become."

Constructed in 1887, the barns of the Simmons Stables were built at a time when horses ruled; they provided transportation, entertainment and hard work to the people of Little Dixie and around the world. Cyrus Clark and his brother-in-law, Joe Potts, built the barn as a way to house their budding business, Clark & Potts

Saddlehorse Capital of the World. The town's horse history is one of the most beloved in Little Dixie. "It is a major part of our heritage," Mary says. "This stable needs to be more than just our history, it needs to be our living history and continue to tell our story."

"You know, that fanlight window on the front of the stables?" Bobette injects. "That fanlight window was on everything when I was a little girl. It was one of the symbols of where I am from, and you know

what, it still is. They redid the city logo not long ago and it's on there."

## STABLE SUCCESS AND SUCCESSION

Throughout the years from its beginnings, the Simmons Stables told one of the richest stories of Mexico with the people and champions that walked through its doors and trained within its hallowed stalls.

Ownership shifted several times throughout its hundred-plus years. Its original owners were the Lee Brothers, who supplied Mexico saddlehorses to presidents Taft and Roosevelt, creating a legacy that continued throughout the stable's long life.

After the brothers, the stables changed hands to B.B. Tucker, followed by Bill Cunningham and lastly Arthur Simmons. Arthur, who took over ownership in the late 1940s, operated the barn for 52 years turning it into the most successful public sales and training stable in saddlebred history. His reputation as a trainer and salesman of quality equestrians only grew when he started the Heart of America Saddle Horse Sales at the American Royal in Kansas City. The annual auction was the nation's premier public auction for saddlebred horses.

Beyond the owners, the legend of the Simmons Stables cannot be told without mention of the trainers, whose skillful hands and talents helped build its legacy. Many trainers passed through its doors including John T. Hook, Splint Barnett, Hugh Dempsey, Del Holeman, Lee Butler, Ross Drake, Jim Hitte and Arthur's son, Jim Simmons. These trainers were the key that

made the horses such a hot commodity to view, show and purchase in Mexico.

The most famous trainer in Mexico history to pass through Simmons Stables is undoubtedly Tom Bass. An African-American born into slavery on a plantation just south of Columbia, Tom learned his way around horses while on the plantation with his father and grandfather. A wonderful horseman in his own right, Tom's father taught him the art of picking out and training the perfect championship horse.

Some time around 1870, Tom left the plantation and set out to work with horses in Mexico. He quickly found his niche and garnered a reputation as a gentle trainer with seemingly effortless

and degradation to become recognizable worldwide as one of the greatest horse trainers ever to grace a pasture with his presence. His success and his nature made

horses, such as Miss Rex, Forest King, Columbus, Rex Brees, King Lee, Mr. B, Roxie Highland, Courageous Peavine, Ann Rutledge, Blarney Stone, Miss

[The stables] original owners were the Lee Brothers, who supplied Mexico saddlehorses to presidents Taft and Roosevelt...

him beloved by the equestrian community all over the world, despite the race relations of the time. But Tom remained a humble man, and stayed true to his roots, even after winning world championships, meeting several presidents and riding in inaugural parades. Although he did not make the trip, he was even invited overseas to visit with the Queen of England.

Lori and others. The legendary World's Fair of Chicago had a connection to the heart of Missouri, as Mexico's own saddlebred horse, Lee Rose 832, won its grand prize in 1893.

Simmons Stables famously produced many harness-class champions as well including six-time world champion Colonel Boyle, Tashi Ling, Stonewall Lee, Vanity Again, Perfect Stranger,



This interior of one wing of the stables is part of the overall work in progress of the Simmons Stables Preservation Fund, Inc. The group started construction on the buildings in October 2008. (Photo: LDW)

effectiveness with the most troublesome horse. This gentle nature led to the creation of the Bass Bit, a new bit that did not irritate the horse's mouth when in use.

In a time when race created almost insurmountable barriers, Tom refused to let it hold him back. He struggled through discrimination, segregation

Some say trainers are only as good as the animal they have to work with, be that the case, the reverse, or rather a mix of both statements; Mexico was known not merely for its equestrian businessmen and trainers, but also for its legendary horses.

Simmons Stables provided the resting and training place for a long line of champion

Personal Touch and Gypsy Dream Girl, to name a few.

## RESTORING HISTORY

Bobette and Mary walked headlong into unknown territory when they took on the project of restoring Simmons Stables. The buildings had deteriorated badly throughout time resulting in a

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shifting building with weak side walls, a leaking roof and interior water damage.

“It is very similar to having children,” Mary says. “Sometimes it’s better if you don’t know what you are getting into before you start. Knowing all the difficulties and roadblocks can deter you from something that might be the most rewarding experience.”

The first project for the Simmons Preservation Fund was to get the stables onto the National List of Historic Places. Once that was done, they brought in inspectors and construction workers to bid the property and evaluate what needed to be done. The restoration of the buildings and surrounding lands would cost an estimated \$1.2 million. Through grants and fund raising the

group raised roughly \$800,000. In October 2008, construction began on the front stable when 5 Oaks Construction Co. of Centralia took on the project. “These guys that work on it, they are the key ...the key that makes it all come together,” Bobette says, beaming with pride. “They truly have the heart for it. They aren’t here to merely build a new

structure, they want to save what was here before.”

Since October 2008, the first part of the stables is almost finished. With a complete exterior, signs of life are returning to the once rundown and almost forgotten stables. The construction team redid the roof and walls of the structure, but reused all the

siding and loft floorboards they could to maintain its integrity. They incorporated a few advancements in design to give the structure a little more support including steel cross ties and cables to help sturdy the stable.

To recreate and refurbish the instantly recognizable entrance to the stables, the workers used



One wing of the stables shows the exterior on its way to being finished. The next section has not received any treatment as yet. (Photo: LDW)

*Let them eat cake!*

attributed to Maria Theresa wife of Louis XIV

*Let them eat bacon-wrapped jalapenos!*

attributed to Rebekah proprietess of Beks

- Also succulent Roast Chicken, seared Salmon, tender Ribeyes, Filet Mignon, Prime Rib & grilled Pork Loin (all beef USDA Choice grade)
- Homemade seasonal soups, fresh salads like grilled chipotle chicken and grilled teriyaki salmon plus manwich-sized sandwiches
- Beks home made cheesecakes, cappuccino brownies, and more!
- Specialty coffee drinks made with Starbucks® brand coffee, Tazo teas and spiced cider
- Extensive local, national and international wine list Reserve list also available
- Extensive beer selection of microbrews, domestics and imports (retail beer & wine sales!)
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Sat 8:30 a.m. - 10:00 p.m.
Sun closed

Breakfast 8:00 - 10:30 a.m.

Lunch 10:30 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.

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the original fish scale shingles until they ran out of reusable tiles. To replace the unusable shingles, they pulled tiles from the back of the stable cutting and shaping each one by hand to match up on the front of the stable.

Although progressing nicely, the restoration hit its bumps in the road. Unexpected funds, a rough economy and harsh weather have all delayed the completion of the project. But Bobette, Mary and those involved in the restoration continue to fight.

"We may not know all the ropes, but we sure can learn them." Bobette says. "We will do what we have to do to save this building. We aren't above learning."

The Simmons Preservation Fund is coming up on a standstill

after completion of the first stable. The onset of winter will slow down construction, but lack of funds could halt it completely. "People see the stables and they take them for granted," Mary says. "They have always been there and most people think they always will be, but they cannot remain there without a lot of work and a little help."

Roughly \$700,000 is needed to finish the other half of the project including the second stable, farriers building and back barn. Eventually the team wants to acquire the John Hook barn and stone Art Simmons house across the street from the stables to further restore the district. The group continues to raise funds for the project through grants, events and public donations. They sell stall space to help set up an endowment fund and the preservation's annual dinner social and silent auction will take

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place on Oct. 20 at the Mexico Country Club at 5:30 p.m.

Upon completion of the project, the team hopes to open the International Saddlebred Hall of Fame, which could draw visitors from around the world to Mexico. It will feature a museum to tell the story of Mexico's rich horse history through exhibits, artifacts and educational activities. Having horses back in the stables is a priority, but they hope to incorporate them in different ways such as with a therapeutic riding school.

Before plans are put into place for the stable's future, the team has to preserve the irreplaceable past. "This project isn't a billboard for any one person or one family," Bobette stresses. "We are here to honor all the horsemen and horses. It's about the whole area ...Boone County, Callaway County; all around us is so rich with horse history."

It has been nearly 10 years since the stables almost found an untimely demise and the magic within its walls still resonates with those who enter it. "My

husband asks me some days if I am going to go to those darn stables again," Bobette says with a laugh. "I just have to tell him there's something about it. They really draw you in. I just can't get enough." ~ Amanda Dahling



Tom Bass (1859-1934), one of Mexico's most famous equestrian trainers. (Photo credit: International Saddlebred Hall of Fame)

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- ❖ It directs NEW customers to your retail shop, restaurant, b&b, motel or performing arts venue
- ❖ It tells NEW customers why they should drop in to check you out
- ❖ It makes it easy for your NEW customers to find you

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