

East Tennessee Riding Club -- Oak Ridge historic site and working stables

D. Ray Smith – Oak Ridger Newspaper

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Frances Parrett and Rachel Vowell contacted me recently asking if I would be interested in the history of the East Tennessee Riding Club as a possible subject for *Historically Speaking*. As you might suspect, this is not unusual. Many people suggest stories for me to consider, and I appreciate that very much.

This story started out much as many others have, with someone suggesting it, then providing some reference material and participating in a series of interviews on the subject. I never imagined what was in store for me when I told Frances that I would write an article about the Riding Club. She agreed to provide some photos and to have Rachel drop off some reference material at The New Hope Center.

I had a backlog of subjects for the column and put this one on the back burner for a few weeks. Periodically, Frances and I would talk about the story and I would promise it was in the queue. Then on April 25, I got my chance to drop by the stables during the horse show held on that day. That was a treat as I got to see the stables, meet some wonderful people and get to know some special horses.

Two of the horses will be featured in this article, as will their owners. It was a pleasure to meet the owners, see the horses, take photos and provide each of the horse owners with photos.

But first, let's look at the history of this unique riding club. It is the only member-managed co-operative horse barn in existence in the nation. The barn is a group effort, owned by all club members equally, with rent based on expenses. Each member is responsible for tending their horse or horses and must share in the maintenance of the facility.

In addition to Frances and Rachel, I also have met Ruth Tuft and Paula Walden. Both of these ladies are special people who love horses and were introduced to me by Frances and Rachel. Each of these wonderful ladies has a unique story I want to tell later in this column.

The Riding Club has been called an unusual blend of a riding stable and a social club. The club was founded Jan. 16, 1945. This was in the midst of World War II and while Oak Ridge was still a "Secret City." A formal charter for the club was not developed until July 11, 1949.

In 1945, the government was still in charge of all activities, including such activities as riding clubs. As with all other aspects of managing the city, the Roane Anderson Company managed the rental agreement with the club for the use of the warehouses as stables and a clubroom. The cost was \$13.12 per month.

The war-time atmosphere tended to cause the government to try and accommodate all such requests that could be done to keep the people living in the city behind fences as contented as possible while demanding herculean efforts of them as workers. So, a riding club fit right into the scheme of things.

The present stables were first used as warehouses to store material for the construction of the Manhattan Project sites in Oak Ridge. The X-10 Graphite Reactor and the Y-12 Electromagnetic Separation Plant materials would likely have been stored here. K-25 materials were likely stored near the K-25 site.

Interestingly, there is still evidence of this storage because of some fairly large pieces of graphite still buried in the floor of the portion of the stables known as the "Annex." These warehouses were at the end of spur railroad tracks where the materials were brought in by train and stored until they were needed in the construction of the Manhattan Project sites.

A side note: When the western end of Manhattan Avenue was recently realigned to match up with, and form an intersection with the southeast exit from Wal-Mart, I noted an unusual exposure during the excavation. There was a railroad beneath the street. It is aligned such that it would have gone toward the warehouses turned stables that are now the Riding Club. I made a photograph of the exposed railroad rails.

By 1945, the warehouses would have been empty. The railroad would have run between the rows of warehouses with the loading doors facing the railroad tracks. Originally there were six warehouses with four of them being torn down and the Riding Club given the use of two of them.

Originally the club used one of the warehouses for a barn and the other for a clubroom. The members then constructed the stalls in the barn. The hallways were covered with dirt to provide an indoor riding area.

The club had a bar while Anderson County was still dry. Much of the money used to construct the stalls and the arena came from the operation of a private club in the clubroom. With Oak Ridge being a dry city in two dry counties, the only liquor licenses were given to private clubs with the Riding Club being one.

The club rented the warehouses turned into stables until the decision was made to sell property to Oak Ridge residents. They immediately took advantage of the opportunity to purchase the warehouses turned barn and clubroom. The club purchased 19.5 acres and two warehouses with improvements for \$1,800.

Over the years additions to the stables have been made including a "red barn" that was added in 1959. To pay for the barn, the club sold five acres of their land. Other improvements have been made over the years including the arena, spectator bleachers -- removed in the 1990s, a concession stand, sprinkler system to wet down the arena and dressage areas.

In 1967, a loan was taken out for \$4,000 for substantial improvements to the facilities. The loan was paid off in 1972.

Another interesting story about the club is the popularity of the manure generated by the horses. There was a time when manure was dumped in a designated location for removal by area gardeners. Stories are told of lines of cars and trucks in the spring time waiting in line to get manure. Some even offered to clean stalls to get the manure.

The club has always encouraged youth through riding and holding competitive horse shows just for the young boys and girls. This continues today. On the day I went to the stables for photographs, young ladies were showing their horses and proudly displaying winning ribbons.

The riding club has been featured in *The Chronicle of the Horse* and is a well-known riding stable with an excellent reputation for involving families and especially children. Oak Ridge has a jewel of a horse-loving Riding Club that focuses on children and maintains an excellent stable for riding.

The club is considering submitting the stables for possible consideration to be placed on the National Register of Historic Places. I think that is a good thing to do and suggest the Oak Ridge Heritage & Preservation Association would be a good partner for that effort.

One of the many programs the club has supported over the years is the 4-H Club.

Now for the two ladies I met on April 25, 2009. First let me tell you about Ruth and thank her for the extensive work she has done already to document the history of the Riding Club. She shared that information with me and it forms the basis for the early history of the warehouses that serve now as the horse barns and clubhouse documented in this column.

One of Ruth's passions is the 4-H Club program for children. She told me her story while I was at the barn and also followed up with details that I will share with you now.

Ruth started in 4-H when her daughter was 9. Her daughter is now 42. Ruth is just now thinking of turning over the 4-H project of the Riding Club to others. Even then she still plans to "stick around on-call" for the Project Group. Such dedication to children -- we can learn from Ruth.

Ruth noted that when her daughter started in 4-H that there was no horse project listed. When she asked about it, she was told, "We don't have an advisor for that." She said, "Well, I can do that" and the rest is history, so to say.

Ruth then approached the board of directors for the Riding Club about forming a 4-H group. They agreed. The Anderson County 4-H Horse and Pony Project Group began in the fall of 1991 with six girls. 4-H Horse Shows have been held every year since, except for one year when the arena was under repair.

At first, the numbers of kids were small, but over the years, interest has grown until typically about 30 kids sign up for the 4-H horse program. Several drop out after they learn the work that is required by the program. Those who stay cite the program for the positive lessons they learn, as well as the great fun they have riding the horses and getting to know horses.

Ruth also wrote the story of Rex -- The Wonder Horse, which was published as a guest column in The Oak Ridger. The story is of Charles V. Beall, who purchased Rex, one of the horses used to patrol the area during the Manhattan Project. When that approach ended, the horses were sold. Charles found that his horse could outrun all the other local horses and he thought the horse could jump rather well.

So, Charles decided to train his horse and built a jumping race course near the Riding Club stables to practice jumping with his horse. He had his heart set on racing in Nashville and borrowed a truck and trailer to take his horse to the race. Because of a flat tire which had to be repaired as he had no spare, he was nearly midnight getting to the race track in Nashville.

The next day, Rex and Charles were set to race. Charles had not considered Rex's memory of the times he had patrolled the rough terrain around the perimeter of Oak Ridge's government reservation. He also did not think that when he trained Rex to jump he had used solid obstacles for him to jump.

When the race started, Rex and Charles got off to a fast start until the first jump. You see, the obstacles in this race were not solid, rather the obstacles were brush jumps over a hedge. Well, you guessed it, Rex was used to going straight through blackberry vines, honeysuckle and brush without ever a thought of jumping. So, Rex ran right through the jumps, not only the first one, but all nine of them.

The race committee took pity on Charles and Rex and allowed them to run in a second race that used solid obstacles for the jumps. But this race was no better for Charles and Rex. At the first jump they got crossed up with another horse and rider and Charles took a fall.

That was the end of Charles and Rex and their racing career. In fact, Ruth could not find any record of a Charles Beall or Rex in any of the East Tennessee Riding Club records.

Ruth also shared with me the story of Blackberry, the rescued mustang. He was born in Nevada and is about 15. He is "freeze-branded" on his neck and that is how Ruth got the information about his origin. She purchased him from the Riding Club when the owner could not pay the boarding bill and the club took over the ownership of the pony. Ruth paid the \$250 owed the club in September 2007.

She began to train the horse by picking up on his fears and helping overcome them. For example, he was afraid of people and would not eat when anyone watched. He trembled when anyone attempted to pet him. When a bell attached to his stall door was rung, he would cower in the rear of the stall. There is no telling what this horse had endured before coming in contact with Ruth.

Soon she had the 4-H kids helping her work with him. Eventually she even got Blackberry to the point where one of the 4-H kids won several ribbons riding him.

The second lady I met on April 25, was Paula Weldon and her horse, Dandy. This horse is a Missouri Foxtrotter. He is a fine animal with a glossy coat of hair and a really well developed mustache. Anyone passing by his stall for the first time will do a double-take because the mustache is so unusual and very much unexpected.

Because of the very fine mustache, he has been given the nickname of “Yosemite Sam.” The mustache is well developed and could be waxed into a mighty good handlebar mustache. You can see a smile come to the face of everyone who looks at Dandy. He seems to know he is attracting attention with his mustache as he will push his chin out of the stall and seem to smile when the mustache draws added attention his way.

Paula was proud to get some good photographs of the mustache as she was having trouble proving her horse had a real mustache and not just a collection of facial hair. No doubt about it, Dandy has a real mustache.

I hope you have enjoyed learning about the really quality riding stable and social club we have in Oak Ridge and also the two unusual horses I took a liking to on my visit.

Stop by the club sometime and experience the pleasure of seeing kids having a ball with their horses and also see the grown up club members who are actually enjoying life as if they were kids themselves. Horses seem to keep people young at heart.