

Oldham Era, Thursday, December 27, 2007

A sure bet



Photo by John Foster

By Elizabeth Troutman

Rose Cooper guides a retired Thoroughbred around jumps inside a training ring at Alta Vista Farm. She's wearing loose riding pants and a secure helmet on the top of her head, talking sweetly to the Bay horse as they cruise across wet sand.

The sun is starting to peak through layers of clouds in Skylight, where U.S. 42 weaves through the rolling hills of the county's prominent horse community – most notably the location of renowned Hermitage Farm.

Cooper, 53, has fallen in love with horses for the second time in her life. Blame it on empty nests, retirements or childhood fantasies, but many women boarding a horse at Alta Vista picked up riding as a hobby later in life. Around 2000 Cooper decided to revive the joy she experienced nearly 40 years ago taking riding lessons in her teen years. She now owns Libby, a 14-year old mare.

There are also girls as young as 6 who train, jump and take riding lessons at Alta Vista. But farm owner Mary Lowry claims that all girls love horses – no matter what age. Even Jane Beshear, wife of Gov. Steve Beshear, has taken lessons at Alta Vista. More than half of Lowry's clients come from Louisville.

Cooper drives from her home in Louisville about three days a week to spend time with Libby. She wishes she had more time to ride — it's a release from the city. And she happily admits, she's putting a lot of money into Libby, her baby.

Through boarders, breeders and horse enthusiasts like Cooper, Oldham County's equine industry is luring money from Metro Louisville into the rural economy. While Oldham County Economic Development Authority officials are bustling to fill Oldham Reserve with businesses — and the community disputes the possibility of building a commuter airport — a less destructive and often overshadowed industry contributes about \$50 million into the county's economy each year.

It's an industry that can grow and expand without the negative effects of development and construction, Lowry said.

Lowry, who is also the director of the Oldham County Equine Council, hopes the Oldham County Equine Survey will spread awareness of the benefits equestrians bring to the county. Each year her farm hosts equestrian events, which bring riders and spectators from all over the world into the county. Local businesses reap the benefits as tourists spend money on food, hotels and gasoline, she said.

Laura Collard drives her daughter Alexis from their home in St. Matthews for a lesson every week. She sits on a bench outside the ring watching the lessons with a couple of farm cats — it's not like she can drop off her child and run home. Her daughter has been taking lessons since kindergarten.

Alexis rode King, a spotted Paint, one of the girls' lesson favorites, around the rink in a blue T-shirt and grey riding pants on Friday afternoon.

Her mother doesn't regret the drive to Oldham County. She says while some moms take their kids to the mall on a Saturdays, she can take her daughter to the barn for the day. While working with horses, Alexis, 11, learns responsibility and life-long skills. And an added bonus— it keeps her away from boys.

"It's a much better place to be than the mall," Collard said.

Lowry also organizes an annual horse trial at Flying Cross Farm in Goshen, a weekend event in September that attracts equestrians from all over the country. Farms like the 40-acre Flying Cross Farm are rare private properties that are used for equestrian events. The horse trial includes a dressage competition, what Lowry describes as "horses doing ballet," and cross country jumping course.

The event brought 144 competitors from 13 states to Oldham County in September. "This is a rare farm," Lowry said. "With pressure of development, people can't afford to keep their farms."

The equine industry generates about \$27 million in revenue per year in Oldham County. Equine businesses spend more than \$32 million for operation costs and an additional \$3 million is spent on horse purchases and equipment in the county.

Nearly 14,000 acres in Oldham County are used for equine, which is 22 percent of the county's agricultural land. The value of the equine land and capital is \$148 million. The Oldham County Equine Council started in January 2007. Doug Wampler, director of Oldham Ahead, assisted in conducting the Oldham County Equine Survey with Ken Heppermann, a local Thoroughbred business owner. The council is a non-profit group that partners with Oldham Ahead and the University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service, and is open to anyone interested in the equine business in the county. Its purpose is to provide an educational forum for equestrians while promoting the business and job opportunities related to the business in Oldham County.

“While Oldham County is struggling with a budget crisis, tourist dollars are easy dollars,” Wampler said. The horse industry is one that is growing, he said. Jose Garcia came from his home in Mexico City to work with Thoroughbreds in Kentucky. He is the assistant manager and a trainer at Skylight Training Center on Liberty Lane. The training center includes three barns which are owned by Bill Wahl, who developed the training center to prevent suburban development on his land. Equine businesses in Oldham County county generate about 400 jobs and workers earn about \$7.79 million per year.

On a typical work day, Garcia gets to the barn at 6 a.m. to manage the daily exercise and grooming of Thoroughbreds owned by his clients. He started out as a rider 12 years ago. “I love everything about what I do,” Garcia said at the stable. But his favorite part of the business, not surprisingly, is winning at the track, he said.

Garcia now owns a home in La Grange with his wife and two children. They’ve lived in La Grange for seven years.

Members of the Louisville Thoroughbred Club often visit the training center to inspect horses they board at Skylight. Garcia said every day five to 50 owners stop by the track to check-in with their horse, keeping more than 30 employees busy.

Four hired riders take horses out on the new polysynthetic track installed behind the barn this summer – a \$1.2 million investment which allows for year-round training at Skylight rather than taking horses to South Carolina or Louisiana for the winter.

Tommy Drury is the manager of the barn, a licensed trainer and also a jockey for horses at Turfway Park in Florence. He believes there’s not a more ideal location in Kentucky for a flourishing equine economy than Oldham County. The Skylight Training Center is 30 minutes from Churchill Downs, an hour from Keeneland Race Track in Lexington and an hour from Turfway Park.

“There’s about no question that location is everything in this business,” Drury said. “It’s easy access for our clients that come in town.”

Proximity to high-profile racing venues is one reason Oldham County and horses are a great combination. Lowry said the topography is also ideal for horse farms.

“Land here is good for horses,” Lowry said. “Hills make them fitter, and drainage of water is better.”

Horses helping the economy, residents

Margaret LaRocca happens to be a horse lover and a psychotherapist who combined her two passions a few years ago.

LaRocca treats her patients with the help of nine other therapists, who she says have abilities and insight that surpass her own expertise with the human psyche.

She's got a strange family of horses — an Appaloosa, a quarter horse, a miniature horse and a draft horse — that are an integral part of emotional healing for her patients. Horses display human-like emotions, and have an understanding of family relationships they develop by living in a herd, she said.

La Rocca and her husband run Forward Motion Inc., a therapy program for people seeking guidance through the diagnosis of a deadly disease, including HIV or cancer, or for people dealing with psychological disorders.

“Horses live their lives nonverbally, but they are constantly communicating,” La Rocca said. “I like for clients to live in that nonverbal place and communicate mentally.” She often asks members of her counseling group to select a horse from the herd on her 40-acre farm in La Grange. She says the patients' selection mirrors their personality, or at least what they perceive their personality to be.

Earlier this year she counseled a foster child dealing with mental health issues. La Rocca said the boy had a “tough” demeanor. He immediately went after Jim, the draft horse, arguing that he was a leader like the massive horse.

For several of his counseling sessions, he attempted to strap the halter onto the horse for hours, failing each time to win over Jim.

“He was out there throwing the halter at him and calling him everything but a horse,” La Rocca said.

Then on the fifth session, he came in with confidence. He led Jim from the field within 10 minutes. La Rocca's patient finally realized he was a bully in the field and at home, and Jim could sense that about him.

“Horses force you to live in the moment,” La Rocca said.

La Rocca's business is a success in Oldham County because she has the ability to work with groups from organizations such as the Home of the Innocence in Louisville and HOST House in La Grange.

Plus, she believes Oldham County is widely known for its horse population. “It's easy accessibility to a large metropolitan area,” she said. “It's very conducive to being in a metropolitan area.”

Risky business

Dr. Gary Lavin drives his silver Mercedes through the grass at Longfield Farm as if he were driving a tractor.

The ride is bumpy, but the view from the window resembles a quintessential morning in Kentucky — something you might see on a postcard. His will-be yearlings swat their

short tails and prance along the diamond wire fencing. Their coats are thick and fuzzy for the winter. Like any group of kids, they are high energy and frantic. After decades of being around foals, Lavin still marvels at the beauty of the animals.

“But don’t mistake attractiveness for intelligence,” he says. “They are awful creatures of habit.”

He’s referring to their finicky nature. They are easily startled, and don’t like their routine to change.

Lavin knows first-hand about the nature of horses from his career as a veterinarian. He worked for Hermitage Farm in the 1960s before starting his own breeding business. He and his wife, Betsy, are the fourth owners of Longfield, a 700-acre breeding business on U.S. 42 near Goshen.

The farm includes about 100 brood mares and their estimated 65 foals. According to the council’s study, the 3,186 horses in Oldham County are worth \$40 million. Of the survey respondents, 123 show horses competitively and 68 are breeders.

Lavin bought a portion of Longfield, called Wedgewood Farm for its triangular shape, in 1966. Over the years he acquired the surrounding property, purchasing the main office area in 1979 and land across the road in 1989.

Now his sons, Allan and Kevin, each live in houses on the farm with Lavin’s six granddaughters.

The foals turn a year old on Jan. 1, no matter when they were born in the spring. They usually are sold in November and January and start training in September. Lavin and his staff spend six weeks per year touring the country to breed their mares with stallions. The stallions may be located on farms as close as Lexington, or as far as Australia. The busiest time of the year is foaling season, when most of the 100 mares on his farm give birth.

Lavin’s farm is also the burial ground of Royal Glint and Prarie Bayou. Royal Glint was one of the nation’s first millionaire horses.

Lavin not only works with these horses, but he invests in a few as well. Two of his horses are trained under Drury at Skylight Training Center. He tracks the progress of a 3-year-old filly and one of his yearlings.

He admits purchasing race horses is not for every person or every pocketbook. He mentions the highest selling Thoroughbred of 2006, named “The Green Monkey,” sold for \$16 million and never won a race. Money down the drain, he said.

“Everyone always thinks they are going to win the lottery when they buy a ticket,” he said.

So, why invest in a horse? Winning is fun, he said.

Jo Ann Heppermann advises her clients not to use their child's college fund or 401K to invest in a race horse. But she does call the industry a "million dollars' worth" of fun.

Truth told, Hepperman is afraid of horses. But whether you like horses or not, everyone can relate to the satisfaction of winning. Especially when money is involved.

She and her husband Ken don't live on a farm, but they manage the racing of about nine horses for people living in 20 different states. They would like to see their business expand to managing 20 horses in Oldham County.

"We think we're the future of the horse industry," Heppermann said. "What ever is good for the business is good for us."

E-mail us about this story at: elizabeth@oldhamera.com.