

The Oldham Era

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Bigger isn't always better

by Elizabeth Troutman

Editor's note: The soil in Brownsboro is ideal for agriculture business — there are few rocks and clay, and water drains well.

Environmentalists say it is the most productive farming land in the county, but also the type of land developers are looking for.

In 1999, a group of neighbors gathered to form the Brownsboro conservation council. The rural character of Brownsboro attracts families and is the reason farming families have called the community home for decades. The council is finding ways to maintain agriculture businesses and farmland in the midst of inevitable development.

The Oldham Era will introduce you to three families whose agriculture businesses reflect the character of Brownsboro during the next month.



Nokkvi Petursson pays a friendly visit to a horse at his family's Icelandic horse farm off Ky. 329 in Brownsboro. John Foster/The Oldham Era

These families represent what the conservation movement in Brownsboro is hoping to preserve. Also with this five-part series, we will show ways development is affecting this community, and steps residents of this beloved crossroads town are taking to ensure the future of their rural landscape.

Fluttering his tiny hands and shuffling his bare feet, Nokkvi Petursson is well aware of what a bright blue riding helmet decorated with yellow ponies means for him.

Mom stoops to his level on gravel outside their barn, placing the helmet over a mess of blond hair and buckling the straps snug under his chin. Gigja Petursson then hands off the babbling three-year old to her husband, who's mounted on a sturdy midnight stallion. Nokkvi, who is now giggling, leans back comfortably in his father's lap.

In perfect riding posture, Gudmar Petursson guides the stallion across the paddock and into a wide Brownsboro field. Dry grass sways above the horse's knees and his heavy auburn-tinted mane and tail waves in the breeze.

They trot along the perimeter of the field, gliding by pregnant Gigja, who perches on one of the lower boards of the fence.

"Hey yah," says Gudmar, with a gentle nudge to the horse's belly, quickening their pace.

"Hey yah," says Nokkvi in a tinier, but commanding voice.

The natives of Reykjavik, Iceland run a 60-acre Icelandic horse farm in Brownsboro where they sell, show and train about 50 Icelandic horses.

Most of the horses are owned by Petursson's clients, who take lessons and show their horses with him. After relocating to Oldham County two years ago, their business has spread the popularity of Icelandic horses, calling attention to a breed that are famously strong, gentle and beautiful.

Gigja keeps a watchful eye on the trio.

Too brave, she says - her toddler has never feared the horses. But he has no reason to.

Tyr, the nine-year old stallion, is hosed off outside the barn after the Peturssons' ride. He is bulkier than an average horse, with a thick coat, extra hair under his muzzle and fur trimming his hooves. He remains absolutely still as Petursson removes the saddle, the bridle and boots from his hooves.

While saddling each horse for routine exercise, Petursson points out that not every horse is so tolerant as the Icelandic. The Icelandic will load into trailers without resistance and rarely spooks, he said.

"On big trail rides you see all the horses act up," he said. "With the Icelandic horse, you see them behave and handle difficult situations very well."

The breed's disposition is evident as Nokkvi greets each horse poking its head from the stalls inside the barn. Nokkvi reaches up to grasp the nostril of a curious Chestnut. The horse relaxes, allowing the boy to snag his face without jolting away.

Gudmar Petursson's Icelandic Horses (formerly Viking Horses) started

taking off 1995, when Gudmar started showing his family's Icelandic horses at Equitana USA in Louisville. He said his family ties back home allowed him to provide Icelandic horses for Americans, and the business continued to grow.

Petursson travels the country giving lessons to Icelandic horse enthusiasts living everywhere from Florida to Alaska. The Peturssons relocated to Brownsboro because of its central location in the country, and the booming horse business in the state.

"Obviously, it's a huge horse state and there's a lot of horsemanship here," he said.

Because the Icelandic is the only five-gaited horse in the world, Petursson's expertise in training Americans on how to ride in the two speciality gaits is in high demand. The Icelandic walks, trots and canters like traditional riding horses, but also is renowned in the horse world the "flying pace" and the "tult."

The famous flying pace is a high energy, yet controlled, gait in which the horses hooves sound like thunder as they meet the turf. It is the only gait of any horse in which all four hooves are airborne at the same time. At this pace, they can reach more than 30 miles per hour.

The Icelandic's natural gait is so smooth that Petursson said a rider can carry a glass of wine on the horse without spilling.

While Gudmar exercises individual horses, Gigja guides a herd into the barn from the field. She walks among the horses, which range from 14 to 16 hands, with little restraint as she guides them into stalls without halters.

The horses come in every color imaginable—except Appaloosa.

Because the Icelandic craves companionship, they're housed in pairs inside the stalls. As a wild breed that survived for centuries after the vikings left their horses in Iceland, the Icelandic has a natural tendency to stay in groups.

“The herd sense is very strong,” said Gigja. “Very often, they pick out someone in the lead of the herd— and it's often an older mare.”

The Icelandic develops a natural winter coat, which sheds in the spring, so they don't require much grooming. They are also known for low vet bills. Gudmar Petursson's greatest marketing challenge is convincing Americans that bigger is not always better when it comes to horses.

“America is all about size— everything is bigger in America,” he said. “These horses are healthy, fertile and full of common sense.”

The Peturssons own half of a nation-wide tourism program, which takes American riders to Iceland for a week of riding in Iceland. Gudmar Petursson teaches during these trips, and they are taken twice a year. For information on this program or Icelandic horses, visit www.gpicelandichorses.com.

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