

Billy Streaker: Forged in Excellence

2003 Maryland Horseman of the Year

By Hope Holland

Each year, the Maryland Horse Council recognizes a professional who has had an outstanding and influential career in the Maryland horse industry. Presented at the annual Maryland Horsemen's Party (a fundraiser for the Maryland 4-H Foundation and the Maryland Horse Council), the recognition is designed to inspire young people to wed their love of horses with their career. The 2003 Maryland Horsemen's Party will be held Saturday, March 1st, in the Carriage Room banquet facilities at Laurel Park. See the MHC Newsletter in this issue for more information.

Horses, for work and sport, go all the way back in Maryland, to our colonial roots, and Streakers go back almost far. Just about anywhere in Maryland you find a horse, you will probably find a Streaker. In Central Maryland, it is one Streaker in particular: William E. Streaker, Sr., or, as he is best known, just "Billy Streaker."

Long before horses were considered a legitimate and lucrative career, Billy

Streaker chose horses as his livelihood, and left his mark on Maryland as a breeder, a blacksmith, a rider, a trainer, and the father of another generation of horsemen. And he has done it all with an effortless grace that has endeared him to decades of clients.

If the shoe fits, chances are Billy Streaker put it on the horse, or trained someone who did. Generous in his teachings, Streaker has always shared his skills with newcomers, a practice almost unheard of in the farrier field. And he's been honing his talent all his life, firmly establishing himself as an all-around horseman.

The Magic Gift

"Both Billy, and his brother, Howard, have just the best way with horses,"

explains longtime Maryland farrier and Streaker protégé Tom Parris. "They walk into a stall and take hold of a horse and just expect that horse to do what they want. It never occurs to them that the horse might not want to do what they

want and, most of the time, the horse just goes right along with whatever it is that they have in mind. They both are just real smooth with horses and the horses like it. It's a gift, I think."

Long time client, Jan Collins, echoes

Parris: "We always seemed to be getting in lots of horses from the west...two and three year olds and many of them had never really been handled very much. Bill would come in and somehow he would sneak under those horses and get shoes on them before they even knew that they

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The Early Years: The Streaker Boys, Billy and his "older, good looking brother" Howard (circa 1939, 1942, and as teens)

were being shod. It didn't matter what the horse did, Bill never got upset, never raised his voice, just went on and got those shoes on that horse. It was sort of like magic."

Roots

The Streaker family was there for the founding of Howard County - Iron Bridge Hounds at the beginning of the last

century, and Bill grew up hunting, eventually becoming a whip. It has been only very recently that a Howard County Fair "Hunter Day" would go by without the Streakers, Bill and his brother, Howard, Jr., competing to see who got to take home the champion of this or that hunter breeding division for the day.

Billy and brother Howard ("the older, good looking one," notes Howard) inherited the family dairy and crop farm, Clear View, in Howard County. Although there were horses on the farm, back then few people made a living with horses. The philosophy of the boys' father, according to Bill, was "you had to work yourself half to death doing something else so that you could have horses." The boys did not agree, and shortly after their father's death they turned the dairy into a horse farm, and proving (fortunately for many Marylanders) that their father was wrong.

Bill got a "really nice pony" when he was five, and was coached by his uncle, Warren

Streaker, a long time horseman and horse show judge. Bill and the pony went on to achieve

high honors in all of the local shows.

The next mount was a large hand-me-down pony from big brother, Howard. Bill recalls that he rode that pony for one season and then, "I went cowboy!" Seems he had been watching Gene Autry, and became enchanted with the west. Howard remembers it a bit differently: "Dad gave him a pair of high heel cowboy boots. Bill has worn cowboy boots his entire life. Said it made him feel like he was walking down hill!

"He [also] spent most of his early life

roping things. He liked a western saddle 'cause it had a horn to dally his rope around. One day, Dad said, 'Bill, traffic on 144 is up to 3 cars a day now, go get yourself a car.' Chevy salesman, in his pitch to sell, said 'this model comes equipped with a horn.' Bill bought it."

Whatever the reason, movie screen romance, boots or horns, Bill was

hooked, and soon he was making western horses out of his hunter hack champions.

Forged in Genetics

If horses were a family thing, then farriery ran in the blood. Both his grandfathers, John R. Streaker and William Edward Isaacs, shod horses. "I was bred to be a blacksmith," says Bill. "It skipped a generation with my father, [who] said that when he was a kid he had to keep the forge going for his father and he swore he would never do that for a living... but all the genes came home to roost with me it seems."

Recalls Howard: "For years, our mother thought Billy couldn't talk. One day, she took the seven horse shoe nails out of his mouth and heck, he could talk just fine!"

Bill went off to school at California Polytechnic University where farriery was then part of the agricultural program. His classmates included the now legendary Ray Hunt, and after school, the two college buddies rode and worked in California and Nevada. But when it was time to settle down, Billy returned home to Maryland.

It's Just That Simple

Back then, to make a living, a farrier had to cover quite a bit of geography, and that Bill did, traveling west to Poolesville and Sugarloaf, northeast as far as Mt. Carmel area of Baltimore County, and even to Salisbury and Crisfield on the Eastern Shore.

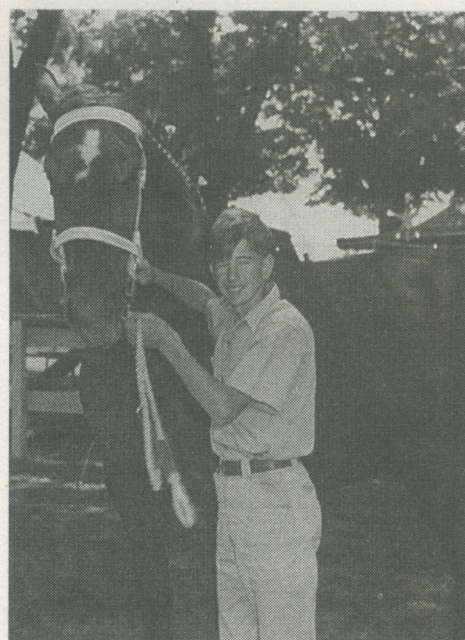
But he never minded driving, recalls Howard. "He was always driving to Montana; speed limit was 70 then, he drove 90. He was driving so fast one day the cap flew off the back of his truck. He did not miss it. [Apparently, he could drive faster without it.] On his way back month later, the damn thing landed in the

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—Jan Collins

"This is a pretty small world and there is a lot of gossip... people talk, you know. But never anything bad about Billy, never... Billy is really well liked in this profession."

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A young Bill Streaker

back of his truck, and Bill stopped and said, 'Ol' gal, you're holding me up!'"

So drive Bill did, for not only did farriers have to drive to reach their clients, Bill's way with horses ensured that he would have clients far and wide.

Hugh and Jan Collins in Taylorsville are among the faithful Streaker clients. "Hugh and I used to sell a lot of horses," explains Jan Collins, "and so many times a horse would throw a shoe just before people would come to look at it or the morning I was to take it to be vetted or to be delivered. I would call Bill in a panic and somehow, he always found time to come on over and deal with the problem. I don't know how he did it."

Gretchen Mobberly of Summer Hill Farm in West Friendship, says of Streaker, "Bill was our farm blacksmith from that time until he left to go to Virginia for good. He shod a few horses here that maybe weren't the nicest to work on but Bill never lost his temper with a horse that I ever saw. If you had a problem, it didn't matter what it was, a sick horse, a mare in trouble foaling—anything, any time of the night or day—you called Billy Streaker and he would say, 'I'm on my way' or 'I'll be there' and he would come and help you. It was just that simple."

Even "the older, good looking brother" can't help but also brag about his baby brother's gifts: "Bill is the only guy I know to get down in a pen of yearlings, no halters on them, and trim them all, all four feet, by himself."

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A Decisive Vote— No Hanging Chads

In the past, the Maryland Horse Council (an umbrella association for all horse organizations in the state) has held open nominations for Maryland Horseman of the year. However, noting that the profession of farriery had yet to be honored, and recognizing the vital role farriers play in the health of our horses and in the health of the horse industry, MHC departed from its usual practice of open nominations, instead specifically requesting nominations of blacksmiths. With nominations solicited throughout the state, the choices were then narrowed to four standout candidates. MHC then asked member organization, the Maryland Farriers Association, to endorse one of the nominations, while simultaneously asking its membership to vote for one of the four nominees. In a landslide any politician would envy, Bill Streaker received not only the endorsement of the Maryland Farriers Association, but he won the “popular vote” among members as well, making him the obvious selection as the 2003 Maryland Horseman of the Year.

“I am so glad Billy is getting this honor,” smiles Gretchen Moberly. “He really deserves it! Bill has been one of my best friends since I came to Maryland in 1963, and I do miss him.”

Parris said, “You know, I believe that Billy Streaker got this award not just because he has been one of the best farriers in this area for over 40 years now, but because I’ve never heard one bad thing about him. This is a pretty small world and there is a lot of gossip about this one and that one—people talk, you know. But never anything bad about Billy, never. He treats everyone with respect and everyone treats him that same way. He never shows any temperament in his work and is just real even keeled. Billy is really well liked in this profession.”

Or, as his “older and good looking brother,” Howard says, Bill has always been just a “horse shoein’ fool!”

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Clear View Farm, the Streaker homestead

And That’s Not All

While trying to become established as a blacksmith, he occasionally broke horses for neighbors in Howard County. “I broke a bunch of horses for Jinx Blackburn, who had a stable behind his tavern down off Rt. 144 near Folly Quarter Rd,” says Billy.

“Blackburn raced a lot of horses back then. I got to thinking that if I could do that for him, I could do it for myself just as well.”

And do it he did. He got his first flat track horse, Foxy Mentor, from auctioneer Ralph Retler. He ran the horse at Charlestown, Timonium and then up at Penn National just after they opened, with Rudy Turcotte (brother of famous jockey Ron Turcotte) up.

So, while brother Howard used his half of the farm to breed and train the big draft horses (first Shires, now Percherons and crosses), Bill used his half of the farm to establish a successful Thoroughbred operation.

Bill now holds trainer’s licenses in Maryland, West Virginia, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania and he plans to get one in Virginia so that he can race his horses at Colonial Downs. He has about forty Thoroughbreds on his farm in Virginia and has been breaking and selling them as race horses, hunters and show horses.

In addition to still shoeing, still breeding, breaking, and training, as well as still hunting, Bill is also now selling barns for Barns & Stables, LLC., thus adding another line to his already sparkling resume.

“One of the reasons that the American Farriers Association and all of the state associations came into being [was] so that we could hold clinics and training seminars for farriers and horse owners to improve their level of knowledge. Billy Streaker has been doing that all along, one person at a time.”

—Tom Parris

Trade Secrets

Besides his way with young horses, Billy also has a way with young farriers, mentoring scores of local blacksmiths, including Dean Geis, Tom Parris, and his own son Tim Streaker.

“I was working as a grocery store clerk at the time and I was making sixty dollars a week,” recalls Tom Parris. I wanted to work with horses and I needed to figure out how to make a living at it. I called Billy Streaker, just sort of out of the blue, and he told me to come along with him while he worked. We went down to Bazy Tankersley’s Al Marah Farm and Billy trimmed about 25 or 30 horses. The whole time that he was working and I was holding horses and

watching, Billy tried to talk me out of becoming a blacksmith. We spent about 3 or 4 hours at the farm and Billy was charging the going rate for a trim at the time, which was \$4.00 a horse. He walked out of there with over \$100 in his pocket for a half day’s work. That was big money for the time. I did the math and I was hooked: if I became a farrier I could work with horses and make a living!

“Then we got back into his truck and



Bill Streaker ensures a fellow member of the hunt field enjoys a good day.

went way up beyond Frederick to the Sugarloaf Mountain area for the next farm. That was where Billy started teaching me how to balance a hoof, which is the real basis of good shoeing. It doesn't matter what kind of shoe you put on a horse—if that hoof isn't balanced before you tack the shoe on, it won't do you a bit of good."

"Now, you have to understand how rare



"Bill...just never gets riled up with a horse...he keeps his temper and has never been anything but a true professional."
(Mike Figgins)

this was at the time," Parris says. "The old time blacksmiths never, never showed anyone anything. They treated farrier work as some sort of arcane secret and they didn't share their knowledge. Billy was one of the few farriers who would tell you how to do what you had to do to be a good farrier."

Today Tom Parris and his sons are known as Alpha Omega Equine Services, shoeing horses in Montgomery and Howard Counties. Tom is perpetuating Bill's legacy via the American Farriers Association and the Maryland Farriers Association. "That's one of the reasons that the American Farriers Association and all of the state associations came into being—so that we could hold clinics and training seminars for farriers and horse owners to improve their level of knowledge. Billy Streaker has been doing

"A true professional."
—Mike Figgins

that all along, one person at a time."

Can't Touch That!

He may be 67 years old now, but Bill has not slowed down. Besides breeding, breaking and training race horses, field hunters and show horses, Billy still comes to Maryland to shoe horses.

"Bill was here just last week," says Jan Collins "For a while there I didn't think that he would be shoeing for much longer. Bill had some really bad back trouble and he would get out of his truck at our place hurting so badly that I didn't think that he could even walk to the barn, much less shoe a horse. But he would work right through that. He has the most amazing drive of anyone that I have ever seen."

Boasts his older ("and good looking") brother Howard: "At age 65, Bill drove 200 miles in the morning, trimmed 64 head of horses and shod 3 others and was eating supper at Clear View Farm at six o'clock. All in a day's work. Can any farrier match that? I bet not. Bill can drive up to a barn, get out and shoe all four feet before these modern day farriers can get those fancy trucks with the big fancy kits stopped and opened up. Bill still shoes out of a box you carry in by hand!"

Billy is also still doing the trims and shoeing for Glade Valley Farm. Farm manager Mike Figgins says that an average day for Bill is about 40 horses if it is only trims. "If you say that in the article," notes Figgins, "none of the new blacksmiths are going to believe you, but it is the truth. The new guys give out after 5 or 6 horses, but Bill just keeps on going. We might start at 10 in the morning and by 4 in the afternoon, he has trimmed about 40 horses. If we have a combination of shoeing and trims, Bill might do 10 sets of front plates and 20 trims or maybe 20 sets of plates if we have a bunch of young

horses that are being shod for the first or second time. I don't believe that many of these new blacksmiths could keep up with him for a day, let alone a life time.

"Probably the reason that Bill can do that is that he just never gets riled up with a horse. He is good with the babies and has never had a real problem with any horse on the farm. He keeps his temper and has never been anything but a true professional here."



DAVID VEERS

Bill Streaker Just Looked Like a Cowboy...

It started with a "really nice black horse with a white blaze," according to Billy Streaker, "an Army Remount horse" from the Front Royal liquidation in 1945.

This was the first horse Billy successfully converted from English seat to neck reining. Billy recalls one particularly tough show, when he was about 14 or 15, in which he entered that old Army horse, a show put on by the League of Maryland Horsemen: "[it] was judged by Carl Ensor and Gus (Augustus) Riggs, III. One of the toughest competitors I can remember from then was Bob Spedden (now a nationally known Quarter Horse, Paint and Appaloosa judge). Bob was riding a nice bay horse named Tex."

Spedden also recalls that show: "He was one of the best riders around at that time in the western classes and he had a real nice black horse. He had one thing in particular going for him that I can remember: Bill Streaker looked like a cowboy!"

Neither would divulge who won that class.

