

## Getting started in the horse business

Back in 1972, a friend, George Arrufat, called one morning and asked my wife and me to go to a registered horse sale with him. We saw a young paint filly that we just had to have. George told us we could keep her at his place. The seller, a preacher named Quinn, practically sat on us until we agreed to buy. The price was right, so we did. My wife, Cecilia, was teaching, so we had a little extra money. That's when and how I started owning horses.

Q-Ton Overo Miss was the filly's registered name. We called her QT. She eventually had filly of her own, who in turn gave us more fillies, two of which we still have today.

At that time I had been trying to find a job for two years and I couldn't face another job interview. So five mornings a week, I contented myself with getting my family off to their schools. My wife Cecilia was a teacher and our two youngsters, John Jr. and Christina, were in grade school.

Another friend, Roger North Haynes (a student of my father's at Texas Western College, now UTEP), had a ranch in Ennis, Texas, 35 miles south of Dallas. He had a trailer that he wanted to sell, and he also sternly reminded me that I hadn't been down to visit him and see his ranch. And if I made it down there, he was certain that we could find a saddle or two, which I could sell on returning to El Paso, helping pay for the trip.

One weekend we went to see Roger. We had a great time and came home with our second horse, a trailer loaded with saddles, hay, and all sorts of other things, including an old oaken icebox to keep, which we still have in our den today.

One day while I was feeding and cleaning pens a young couple came up and started talking to me. The conversation eventually got around to: why were my horses so well behaved and theirs not? I offered to work with their horse for \$10 a session. They agreed. All I had to do was set up a regular routine of riding, and show the fellow who was in charge. Later I sold them a saddle and then a horse trailer that I had bought from Roger. Without thinking about it, I was on the verge of starting a business that eventually grew into Cowboy Trading Post.

Another friend, Sandy, and I started going to the local horse sale once a month. We were real greenhorns — although both of us had some experience with horses, trying to make money at it was different. Sandy was a good-looking blonde, which helped draw some attention from the seasoned horsemen.

One guy, Sam Wells, always sought us out. Soon he was telling us: "Don't buy that one because..." Later we started meeting him during the month at other livestock pens to look at horses. Both my friend and I bought lots of stock from him, and he also bought a number of horses from us.

Sandy and I had started years back when I was seduced into running a

## Taking a Look Back

by John McVey Middagh

boarding stable for a young guy named Joe Briones. He got me involved, and then vanished one day, which was OK with me because he was just the silent partner anyway. I do thank him, looking back, for getting me started in a large stable operation. After he left, Sandy stepped up. She had been an original boarder when I started running the place. Sandy knew the people my vanished partner was subleasing from, so she went to them and got the lease put our names.

Sandy and I had \$150 between us when we started, and with that we bought our first horse together; at the same time, we bought some hay and put gas in my truck. Our partnership was formed, and we went on to make good money which we split 50/50 for years.

We were buying and selling a lot of horses, tack and other stuff and having fun. One day, Sandy found herself a boyfriend and he couldn't quite fathom the entire concept of her horse trading, so Sandy and I parted ways. It was sad because by that time we had been working together for some years.

Cecilia had been going to a few sales with us, but wasn't entirely on board with our garage full of horse gear and a front yard crowded with livestock trailers. It was time to open a store.

My Cowboy Trading Post grew from a rented 14x16 railroad outbuilding to 3.5 acres that I would own with a 1,200-square-foot house that I turned into my store. I built up the business for 25 years. I was responsible for up to eight employees and 80 horses (72 at the store and eight at Sunland Park Race Track). We were feeding over a ton of hay a day. Most of the time I had an inventory of 137 saddles and 300 bits in the store. There wasn't an inch of space where something wasn't hanging that a horseperson couldn't live without. I hardly ever threw anything away, knowing someday someone would come in looking for just that piece. I'd gotten the reputation for being the place to go to find anything you might need.

I closed the Trading Post in 1998 because the city was growing all around me and I had nowhere safe to ride any longer. Also, a buyer wanted the land to round out his plans for a mobile home park, and he had the cash.

I ran Cowboy Trading Post for over 25 years, which gave me plenty of material that I put into two books. That might seem like unlikely work for someone like me, whose mother and father were college professors. My father was always a journalist; my mother had been a horsewoman growing up. They never pressured my brother and me about what career path to follow. My brother has been in the swimming pool business for over 50 years and I'm still peddling a horse and saddle, now and again.

Go figure!

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