

we're in horse country

by Debra J. Brouillette

When I moved to Denton from Evansville, Indiana, in April, 2006, I had no idea I was moving smack dab in the middle of horse country—second only to Lexington, Kentucky's Fayette County and surrounding area in numbers of horses. While I had lived all my life 100 miles from Louisville and less than 200 miles from Lexington, I had never attended the Kentucky Derby and never paid much attention to horses. However, once I moved to Texas, I loved seeing the horses on drives through the countryside, and when the Convention & Visitor Bureau's "Behind the Barn" Horse Country Tour of North Texas was advertised, I signed up right away.

Early on in our daylong air-conditioned bus tour, I learned that more than 25,000 horses can be found in one of 300 horse farms in Denton County, generating around \$52 million a year in (about \$20 million in horse sales; \$11 million in boarding fees, and \$21 million in the support industry.) While the majority of Kentucky's horse ranches are home to thoroughbreds, bred and trained for the racing industry, Denton County is home to a diverse range of breeds. Quarter Horses predominate but Paints, Andalusians, Appaloosas, Arabians, Saddlebreds, and others are home here, too. Farms often specialize in what the horses are bred or trained to do. The "disciplines," as they are called, include reining, jumping, cutting, halter, hunters, and more.

So what is it about North Texas that has brought horse breeders, trainers, and professional horsemen here from all over the world? "It's the sandy, loam soil," says Gretel L'Heureux, Denton County Convention & Visitor Bureau's Horse Country Tour Guide for its public tours, scheduled several times a year. "It's good for working and training horses, and the mild climate means they can work with them year-round."

Ready access to the Dallas/Ft. Worth International Airport is another plus, according to Gretel. "People interested in purchasing horses fly in from all over the world to visit Denton County horse farms. They can see lots of horses in a short amount of time." She continues, "The horse market of today is markedly different than it was in years past. Horse farms now specialize, simplifying the search for a horse, whether that be by breed, discipline or quality."

Our first stop on the "Behind the Barn" tour was Scott Sugg Show Horses, which specializes in Paint Horses, my personal favorite. Next we visited Metcalf Quarter Horses. (Here's a "didya know?" The name refers to the horse's reputation for speed at the quarter-mile distance. They are used for rodeo events such as cutting, roping, and barrel racing.)

On the way to our lunch stop, our tour guide pointed out longhorn cattle, as well as ranches of interest, including Reata Ranch, owned by Texas Motor Speedway, and E & E Farms, one of several area film locations used by the Walker Texas Ranger TV show. Valor Farms, home to several of the top stallions in the southwest, is another Denton County showplace, which I toured in May as part of the Chamber of Commerce's annual Farm and Ranch Tour. Chapel Creek Ranch, another stop on that tour, produces all the Andalusian horses used in the Medieval Times dinner shows, located in Dallas and across the country.

At Tommy Manion Ranch, which specializes in cutting horses, we were given a demonstration of how the



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horsemen work the cattle to “cut” them from the herd. It was incredible to learn that this ranch alone, thanks to 29-year-old stud, Smart Little Lena and his offspring, has made a \$300,000,000 impact on the horse industry through competition earnings. And, there are many other renowned sires in Denton County whose earnings have exceeded \$1,000,000.

If you would like to take a self-guided tour of the area, a wonderful North Texas Horse Country Driving Tour brochure has been compiled as a joint effort by the Convention & Visitor Bureaus of Denton and Fort Worth, and Pilot Point Chamber of Commerce. It contains maps pointing out all the major ranches in the Denton and Pilot Point Area, with information on many of them. Fort Worth’s western-themed museums, halls of fame, and horse associations, also included in the brochure, are sure to stimulate several ideas for day trips. An on-line version of the brochure can be accessed at www.horsecountrytour.com.

If you find yourself interested in seeing more of Denton County’s showplace horse farms than you can see from your car, please be considerate of the owners by signing up for a planned tour, rather than calling to ask for a personal tour or stopping by unannounced. The tours I’ve taken were a real bargain—only \$25 for the day, including visits to several horse farms, lunch and snacks.

The Convention & Visitor Bureau will continue to hold periodic horse country tours of its own, in addition to working with local tour companies. The next one, offered by Patty’s Tours, is set for Saturday, September 22, 2007. For more information, call the Convention & Visitor Bureau at 940-382-7895, or visit the discoverdenton.com website.

No two tours of the horse country will be alike, as the tour directors don’t want to wear out their welcome with the farm and ranch owners. So, even if you’ve taken a tour in the past, don’t hesitate to go again. You will be certain to have a different experience the next time around. ■



Introducing **Debra Brouillette**, writer, graphic designer, photographer, and contributor of the horse country article on these pages, relocated to Denton, Texas, from Evansville, Indiana, in April, 2006. Self-employed as a Public Relations Consultant since 1981, she specializes in writing, photography, and graphic design for newsletters, brochures, and other print media. Past clients have included hospitals, a travel agency, various businesses, and even a Christian recording artist. Proud to call herself a “Texas transplant,” she is in the process of re-establishing her business here and will be writing occasional articles for Denton Lifestyles. Debra may be reached at 940-483-1264 or via e-mail: debrabrouillette@verizon.net