

The end of an era

Marion "Bit" Hutcheson

by Bob Funkhouser



Bit Hutcheson was honored by many organizations for her contributions. In 2006, she was inducted into the Southeastern Charity Horse Show Hall of Fame with longtime Happy Valley trainer Eddie B. Womble by her side. photo by Shiflet

The end of an era is usually filled with a mix of sadness and great memories and that's exactly what the November 2019 passing of Marion "Bit" Hutcheson is, the end of an era for the iconic Happy Valley Farm. Bit would have been 64 this coming July.

The Valley, as it was known, had its beginnings in 1936 with John L. Hutcheson, a man with great vision and a love for his family. At the time, Happy Valley was home to some of the finest Jersey cattle in the world. When Hutcheson decided to add horses for the family to trail ride and quail hunt with, he hired David Neil of Blythewood Farm fame to watch over the Hutcheson's humble beginnings in the horse world.



CH Buck Creek Precious Princess was a reserve world's grand champion with Sam Brannon and then a Ladies Three-Gaited Over 15.2 World's Champion for Bit the first year she was out of junior exhibitor.



CH Lily Merrill was the first big time horse John L. Hutcheson purchased for his daughter. They won the Junior Exhibitor Five-Gaited Mare World's Championship from 1968 - 1970 and added the world's champion of champions title in '70.

When Neil was called away to serve in WW II and other interests took Hutcheson's focus, the stables were put on the back burner for some time. However, with the birth of his daughter Marion, Hutcheson's interest in building Happy Valley Stables was renewed.

Bit had this to say about her earliest memories in a 1994 Horse World interview. "I wasn't really thrilled when I first started taking riding lessons," said Bit. "Dad wanted me to learn to ride so I wouldn't fall off when we went hunting on our family's property at Lake Geiger. I wasn't a natural when I first started. Actually, I fell off a lot."

"Little Bit," as she was known in those days, started riding with Tommy Yates in nearby Flintstone, Georgia. That's also the place where the Hutcheson family met the Womble family. Starting in the mid-60s, Eddie B. Womble became an integral part of the Happy Valley family for 30-some years.

In 1965, Hutcheson purchased a top walk-trot mare, Flavor Taste, for his daughter to show with Yates. His enthusiasm was growing and so was his daughter's.

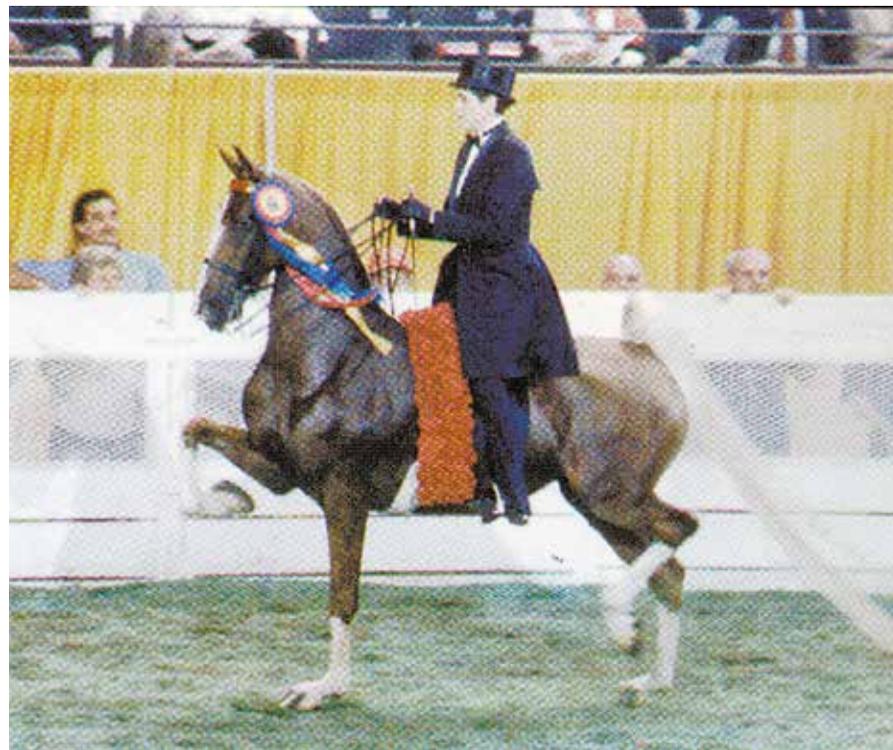
"I was kind of getting into the horses when we started going to shows," said Bit in that earlier interview.

That's all it took for John L. Hutcheson to build a magnificent show barn on the family's property in Rossville (GA). He also converted the many dairy barns on the property into broodmare and colt barns. The beautiful mansion sitting in the middle of it all made for a charming old south setting at the foot of Lookout Mountain that was perfect for raising world class American Saddlebreds.

BIT HUTCHESON



Bit and the Longview Supreme son, CH Enlightening, were the 1985 Amateur Five-Gaited World's Champion of Champions.



Three-time world's champions, CH In Reality and Bit added the 1987 Amateur Three-Gaited World's Champion of Champions title to their great career. She was later the dam of world's champion Fortune and For What It's Worth, the sire of world's champion of champions CH Platinum's New Look, aka Tonto.

Sam Brannon was hired as trainer and in the spring of 1966, they went to Tattersalls and purchased the breeding stallion Indiana Peavine, his daughter, 1965 Junior Five-Gaited World's Champion Lily Merrill and her dam, Ensign's Fair Virginia.

Soon to follow were stallions like Chief Of Greystone, Sultan's Contract, King Dell, High Rise Spirit, and the great Standardbred, Eyre Lad. The show string and broodmare band also grew and grew. Just like the cattle empire Hutcheson had built earlier in his career, the horse entity was becoming one of the finest operations in the country.

"Dad was a breeder and I think the horses filled that void," stated Bit in that Horse World interview. "He had to make the decision with the cattle operation to automate it or sell it, so he sold it. He was upset when he sold the cattle and he missed the breeding end of it. Dad really enjoyed seeing if he could 'create' the finest."

Soon, The Valley was breeding 100 mares a year, foals and colts of various ages were everywhere. That continued for decades with the breeding numbers eventually coming down, but that remained the focus long past the 1980 death of Mr. Hutcheson when Bit took over the reins and followed his passion.

In its prime, veteran horsemen like Sam Brannon, Bob Vesel, Nelson Green, Bob Gatlin and Eddie B. Womble guided the farm to championships from Stone Mountain to Music City to Freedom Hall. Also, the likes of Greg O'Kelley, Carl Irwin, Pat McConnell, Jerry Hutson, Donnie Pyburn, Danny Jenner, and Brian Chappell developed the Valley's stock.

Some of those early stars included world's and national champions like CH Buck Creek's Precious Princess, CH Happy Valley Treasure, CH Wind Sir, CH Valley Witch, CH Star Scene, CH That Special Flavor, CH Contract's Tinker Toy, Dream Hill's Ann Thompson, CH Beau's Patrician Peavine, CH Spellcaster, CH Valley Venture, CH Princess Blanchita, CH Reata's Virginia Wolf, Apple Cider, Priceless, Kalanchoe, Wizardry, Sue Elegant, Another Feather and Allege. Fine Harness World's Grand Champion CH Be Happy and world's champion Preferred Property were born at The Valley.

In addition to the above list, Bit won two World's Champion of Champions Amateur titles in the '80s. The first came in 1985 with the great Enlightening racking and trotting his way to the roses, followed in '87, '88 and '90 by Amateur Three-Gaited World's Champion of Champions CH In Reality.

Also during the mid-80s a horse came along that would define Bit as a breeder, which is the job that would define her. Other than the four years she went away to college, she never lived anywhere other than the farm. Showing was nice, but the mares and babies were what fueled her fire. She literally devoted every waking minute to Happy Valley Farm and for the longest time that horse, Merchant Prince.

"Her horses were her family and the broodmare barn was her happy place," said George Ann Majors Nash who showed such stars as Photo Prince and With A Friend for Bit.

Bred by Happy Valley, Merchant Prince was a 1983 son of Mountain Highland Memories and their former Three-Gaited Reserve World's Grand Champion CH Buck Creek's Precious Princess. Nelson Green drove him to the 1986 ASHA National Three-Year-Old Fine Harness Futurity World's Championship. He showed a couple of times after that, but the breeding shed was where he was needed and what a job he did as a sire.

Among his stars were Fine Harness and Three-Gaited World's Grand Champion CH A Sweet Treat, the only horse in history to win both of those world's grand championships. Some of Merchant Prince's other standouts included CH Marching Orders, CH Rejoice, CH Nightly Affair,

BIT HUTCHESON



Happy Valley was created by Bit's parents, the late Mr. and Mrs. John L. Hutcheson who is pictured here with the late Royce Cates.



Merchant Prince became a household name in the breeding world after winning a three-year-old harness world's championship.

CH Cash Back, CH The Radiant Prince, CH Heathermoor's Prince, CH In Your Dreams, CH Simbara's Samba Jamba, Alluring, CH CH-EQ Callaway's Royal Request, CH The Bachelor Prince, Simbara's Cara Mia, Boutonniere, CH Tipitina, Sing My Song, Simbara's Exclamation, The Stradivarius, The King's Lady Anne, The Great Gaspar, CH Photo Prince, CH Be Advised, My Sweet, and many, many others.

One of Merchant Prince's sons, I'm The Prince, was a reserve world's champion in harness with Eddie B. Womble. When moved to the breeding barn, I'm The Prince produced, among others, twice world's grand champion CH Grande Gil.

Bit also added reserve world's champion Harlem's Friendly Conversation (CH Harlem Town x Conversationalist BHF) to the stallion line up and crossing him with Merchant Prince daughters, as well as several other top mares at the Valley, proved to be extremely successful. Some of his top offspring include world's cham-

pion of champions Questionable Conversation, CH Graceful Surprise and CH Spread The Word and world's champions With A Friend, CH Fascinating Conversation, Kalarama's Delightful, and CH De La Hoya.

Then tragedy hit. Every horseman's worst nightmare is a barn fire and on June 23, 2013 that nightmare became a reality that the farm never really recovered from. The main barn burned claiming 35 horses, including her beloved stallions Merchant Prince, I'm The Prince and Harlem's Friendly Conversation.

Bit was devastated as not only were those horses her family, they were several generations of family all gone in a matter of 20 minutes. The American Saddlebred community rallied around her, but you don't replace decades of work in a few years. She persevered; pushed on, breeding a few mares each year, while trying to rebuild the barn and still sell top prospects as she had done for the past 30 years.



Bob Gatlin drove Allegre to the World's Champion ASHA National Three-Year-Old Fine Harness Futurity honors and Greg O'Kelley took him to the Junior Fine Harness Reserve World's Champion of Champions title before he became Bit's partner in the open and ladies divisions.

Bit's work had been previously honored by the American Saddlebred Horse Association as its Breeder of the Year and Breeders Hall of Fame inductee but her greatest satisfaction was selling a Happy Valley prospect and watch it go on to do great things for its new owner and trainer. She followed them like her children, long after they left her ownership. Her knowledge is going to be hard to replace, but her caring soul is what is really going to be missed. She loved her horses, her homestead and her friends.

Josie Forbes spent several years around The Valley when Nelson Green was the head trainer there. She too has great memories of a time gone by.

"I believe we mourn, not just Bit's death, but also the end of Happy Valley Farm, aka "The Valley," said Forbes. "Although the farm had suffered major setbacks in the past decade, which kept it out of the forefront, its name was synonymous with Saddlebreds of the highest sphere.

"The Valley will always be associated with the grand days of show horses and all the good memories of that era. The green and white drapes of HVF attended horse shows from Montgomery to The Garden for almost half a century. The breeding program and its client's entries were at Futurities throughout the south, some no longer in existence, others now barely supported.

"The Valley makes you think of a time when every stable had a stake horse, every show had a sit down party, the trophies were silver and the presenters wore heels. People owned horses for the love of the sport and the comradery, not as an investment.

"So many people feel a connection to The Valley. Many worked there, had horses in training there, sent a mare to be bred there, bought horses there or perhaps own horses with bloodlines tracing to the breeding program. The loss is personal to so many."

Bit's ashes were spread on a beautiful hillside where many of her mares are buried. With her goes a golden era in the American Saddlebred world and a person many of us loved dearly. Thank you, "Bitski" for all that you did for the breed we love. And for me personally, I'll never forget the words of encouragement, the well thought out advice, sitting with you at Louisville watching young horse classes, and most of all, the walks over The Valley looking at the mares and foals you loved more than oxygen. Rest well my friend, you've earned it.



Bit's greatest joy came from raising exceptional horses that went on to do well for others. Grande Gil, a son of I'm The Prince and Steel Hearted Woman, was sold to Joan Hamiton as a two-year-old and he won his first Three-Gaited World's Grand Championship with Neil Visser riding in 2007. Purchased that fall by Misdee Wrigley Miller, she rode him to the same title in 2010.