

Reminiscing with Martin COCKRIEL



The original 50 stall barn in Parker, Colorado that Martin built.

by Farra Baker and Kelsey Baker

“Winners make things happen; losers let things happen.” These are words that Martin Cockriel has lived by for over 75 years in the horse business. Today, at age 91, Martin is still going strong and “making things happen.” He and his wife, Barbara, still live in the home they built in Parker, Colorado in 1964.

The original 50 stall barn has been converted into an antique store and it does a huge business being conveniently located on Highway 83 just south of the town of Parker. In 1994, Martin built a new, smaller barn at the top of the hill closer to his house.

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For over 20 years he showed American Saddlebreds, Morgans, road horses and ponies out of this barn. In 2016 Martin sold this barn to a dressage group and although there are no longer Saddlebreds or Morgans in the barn there are still lots of horses for Martin to watch over. The town of Parker has even named the street just north of his property Cockriel Drive.

Martin was born in 1926 on a farm near King City, Missouri just 100 miles north of Kansas City. The farm was 120 acres and produced all kinds of vegetables and fruit. Each fall, four or five pigs were butchered and cured in the smoke house. The family raised their own chickens as well. Twice a year they took the wagon to town to buy flour and sugar in 100 pound sacks. Martin’s father never owned a car or a tractor.

The family was connected to the outside world with a two-battery wall phone that rang when the

operator had a call for them. It was a “party line” and everyone could listen in to the conversations.

Martin’s father was a widower and his mother was a widow when they married. Each had older children and then they had a second family that consisted of Martin’s sister, Maude and his twin brother, Marshall. Marshall suffered from Epilepsy, a condition that plagued him for most of his life, even into adulthood.

When Martin was 12 years old his father died of a heart attack. At that point, Martin’s education ended because he was now the bread winner of the family. There was no time for school when you had to keep a farm up and running.

The beginning of Martin’s horse training days came when he was in his early teens. He rode his Saddlebred mare 28 miles to breed her to a five-gaited stallion named Beau Rose then rode her back home.



Martin with his first Saddlebred; a mare he bred to Beau Rose.

Her foal was the first horse Martin showed. He won the class and has never looked back. In all the years that Martin has been showing and training he has never had a riding lesson. He was completely self taught. He bought a book called *Riding and Training* written by Earl R. Farshler in 1945. Martin says that book really helped him in his youth and he continued to refer back to it in later years. He talked about training, gaiting, shoeing, feeding and stable management as well as breeding principles and horses’ different vices. Martin says, “I’m not bragging about it but I learned the hard way, by myself – watching and listening, mostly.”

Very few people realize that Martin was a welterweight boxer when he was 18. He entered a Golden Gloves tournament in St. Joseph, Missouri. The local newspaper stated that it was “one of the most entertaining fights on the 22-bout program”. He continued fighting for two more years and then decided he needed to do more with his life.

Martin volunteered for military service in the late forties but was dismissed from duty for medical reasons. At this point, he decided a decision had to be made about the family farm and its future. In the spring of 1949 the farm was sold and Martin’s mother moved into King City to live with his sister Maude.

It was also at this time that Martin began his career in the horse business, leaving behind the farm and the life he had grown up with. His first job as a horse trainer was in April of 1949. He became the head trainer at the Star Lane Farm in Lenexa, Kansas. The farm was owned by E.C. Rhoden who raised Saddlebreds and Palominos. A Star Lane Farm dispersal sale was held in the fall of 1949 and Martin then moved on to a job in Perrytown, Texas. He was the trainer and riding instructor at Haskall Hollard Stables, gaining experience not only

with the Saddlebreds but also Shetland ponies.

In April of 1950, Martin moved to North Platte, Nebraska where he was hired as trainer and manager of a private facility owned by L.A. Kelly. He worked mostly with Saddlebreds but on occasion, another breed of horse would come into the barn and he would work with that horse too. In his five years working for Mr. Kelly, Martin was able to get some tutoring from Billy Mountjoy, who trained horses in Omaha. "Billy taught me how to sit up straight and put a good mouth on a horse", Martin says.

While Martin was working for L.A. Kelly, he met the woman he would soon marry and spend the rest of his life with. Barbara was born and raised in North Platte and came to the barn one day to watch her friend ride.

Martin decided right away that Barbara was the girl for him and a few days later he showed up at the jewelry store where she worked "to get his watch fixed". Within a year they were married and are still married today after 66 years.

Barbara has been an enormous part of Martin's success in the horse business. Who could imagine that she was afraid of the horses. In spite of her fear Barbara still washed blankets and towels, packed for the horse shows and did all the bookkeeping for many years.

"She did all the bookkeeping. I would be broke today if she was not my bookkeeper and secretary for all those years," Martin says. He adds, "She has always been the biggest believer in my talent. She is the woman behind the man."

In addition to all the work she put into Martin's career, she also presented him with six children; three girls and three boys. The children are, of course, all grown now and following their own career paths. Two of the six have chosen to continue in Martin's footsteps. Mary Cockriel has an extremely successful Morgan training facility in Elizabeth, Colorado, that she runs with her partner Bob Kellert. They have a long list of world champion Morgans that they have put in the show ring over the years.

Eddie Cockriel has been training Saddlebreds in many different locations and has produced some of his own top notch Saddlebreds. At this time, he is working with Patty and Kayla Wooters at Longview Stables in Aurora, Colorado.



Martin trained his first show horse from the weanling he bred by Beau Rose out of his first Saddlebred mare. Their success in the ring encouraged him to continue his training career.



Martin as a child with his father Jim and brother Marshall.



Martin was a Golden Gloves welterweight boxer when he was 18.



Martin and Barbara Cockriel's children; (L-R), Charlie, Eileen, Eddie, Mary, Jim and Cathy.

Martin Cockriel has been a huge success in the horse business after starting with nothing. He is a perfect example of what you can do with your life if you live it the right way and "make things happen".

Martin has lots of interesting stories about his life in the horse business. In future articles, we'll talk about some of his training experiences and judging and hauling stories. He'll also share some of his memories of horses he's has trained, customers he has had and family tales.