

WE'LL NEVER FORGET

MIKE ROBERTS

BY LEEANN MIONE

Mike Roberts' friends will tell you that he never forgot a name, or where he came from, or those who came before him and paved the way. Now, this industry as it goes on without him, will never forget his name.

Mike grew up in Missouri and was always horse crazy. He showed Missouri Fox Trotters or whatever someone would let him show until he was introduced to the American Saddlebred in 1961.

Mike saw Templed Hills, a big chestnut walk-trot horse, at a horse show waiting to go in the ring with Mel Gross in the irons. According to a 2006 feature story in Horse World Magazine, Mike said "In my little eyes that horse was the most gorgeous thing I had ever seen in my life."

Mike became a devoted fan of the American Saddlebred and two years later he purchased his first walk-trot horse, Jack B. Nimble, for \$750. Mike didn't know anything about showing a three-gaited horse but trainer Junior Mason, who worked for the doctor that sold Jack B. Nimble, took Mike under his wing and let him go with him to shows throughout the Midwest. The pair won some and lost some but their summer together resulted in Mike selling his horse for \$2500.

That was perhaps the moment that made Mike into the horse trader and trainer that he was. He kept going to horse shows and showing when he could throughout his high school years.

He went to the University of Missouri in Columbia, Missouri which would soon lead to his association with Dick and Alice Thompson of Skyrim Farm. Their daughter Lynn Frazee is quoted in the Horse World article as saying "Mike really learned to ride a saddle horse with my mother. When I first knew him, I think he wanted to be a lawyer, then he decided to be a teacher. But in the center of his heart, I think he always wanted to be a horseman."

When Mike was finally allowed to have a car on campus it expanded his horizons. He met more and more people and his knack of being able to pair a good horse with a good owner served him well. He was devoted to Alice Thompson and she helped him hone his craft by selling him a lot of nice horses he could in turn sell and make a little money. He was young and had a very small budget but he had an uncanny ability of matching the right horse with the right person. It was a trait that

would come to define him for the rest of his life.

Mike loved the Thompson's stallion Skyrim Bourbon Stonewall and learned to handle colts during his time at Skyrim Farm. He is quoted as saying "The Thompsons were wonderful, helpful, kind people."

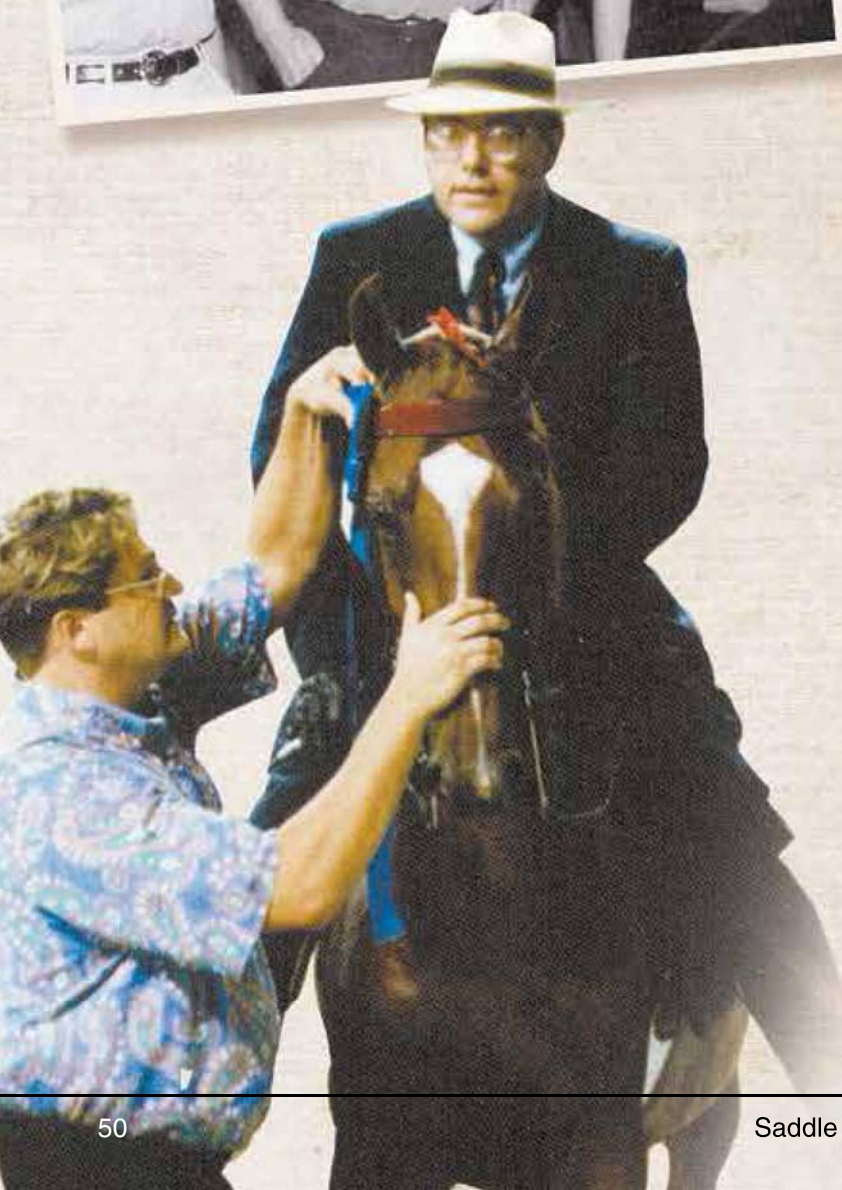
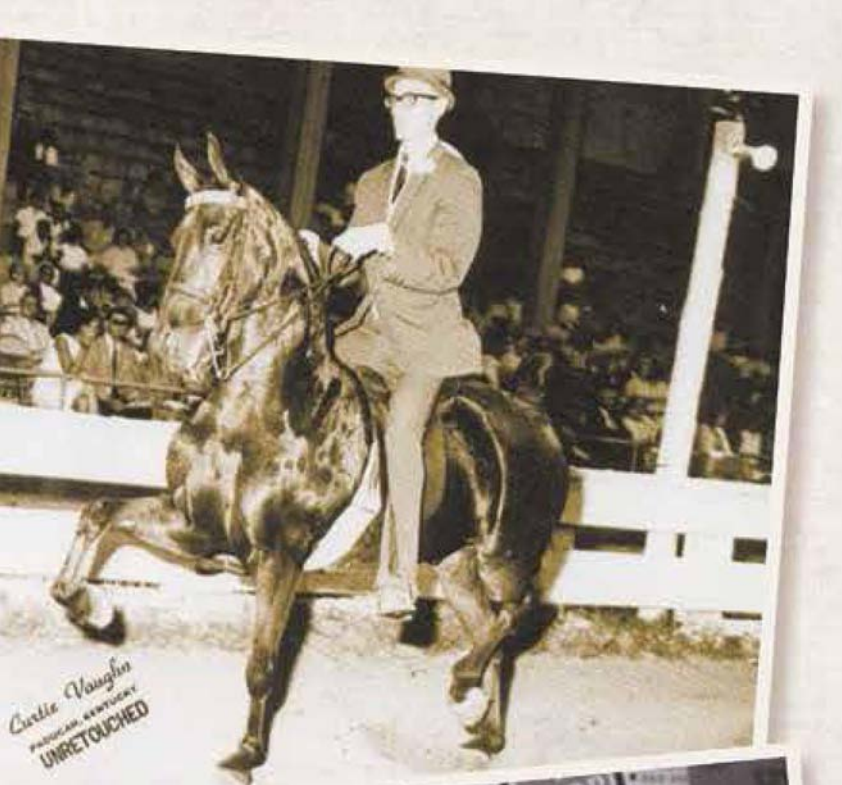
When Mike got his Chevy Impala his junior year of college, it afforded him the ability to spend his weekends at Callaway Hills in New Bloomfield, Missouri. His time there would prove to have a huge impact on his life because it was there at the Weldon's farm that he met trainers Dale and Glenda Pugh. He and William Woods University Professor of Equestrian Studies Gayle Lampe would spend their weekends watching great horses work including Rob Shriver and Gift Of Gold. Mike even occasionally was able to ride two-year-old (CH)Will Shriver and he learned to work horses and teach a horse to rack from the Pughs.

For the Pughs and for Lampe, those weekends were perfect and began remarkably enduring friendships. "Mike made everything fun," said Lampe. "Mike has been my best friend since I started teaching at William Woods in 1968. We met at Callaway Hills and spent our weekends watching horses work all day and all evening. We'd have lunch and dinner together and going out to eat with Mike was a big part of why those weekends were so wonderful. He knew it was important that we all have fun."

Glenda Pugh is quoted in the Horse World feature as saying "He was there [at Callaway Hills] almost every weekend. He would go with us to help at horse shows and even though he wasn't officially on the payroll, he probably did more than some who were."

When the Pughs opened April Hill Farm in New Bloomfield, Missouri, Mike met Karen Coup who would go on to become a long-time customer of Mike's with her daughters Katie and Bets. Their beloved CH What's The Whoopla is just one of their champions trained by Mike. Karen is quoted as saying, "My big memory of Mike as a young man is his trading horses. He could come up with horses out of the back country, put some work into them and then sell them for a profit used to buy another."

After Mike graduated from college he went home to Fredericktown, Missouri to teach high school social studies. He worked horses in the evenings at a five stall barn



1 | Roberts' first Saddlebred was a three-gaited horse named Jack B. Nimble.

2 | Roberts trained several show horses sired by Santana's Charm who stood at Bridget Parker's Parkview Farm. He and Parker are pictured here at UPHA Chapter 5 Horse Show with Charlene Edwards (left).

3 | Mike Roberts won his first personal world's championship in 1993 with CH Champagne's Special Event. Jeff Vogel met them in center ring after the win in the Two-Year-Old Five-Gaited class.

there next to the Catholic school. At the time Sondra Moll had her Emerald View Farm in O'Fallon, Missouri and when weather kept Mike from being able to work horses outside he would take them to Emerald View. He spent weekends and summers there and showed some of Sondra's horses including Premier's Marionette. Mike showed and won the Amateur Three-Gaited 15.2 and Under class at Saint Louis National.

Gary Dickherber got to know Mike through Sondra and Emerald View. "I have had horses or ponies with Mike off and on since 1990 and I've had some very nice ones," said Dickherber. "Mike seemed to always select the right horse for me and all his other clients. He had such a keen eye and he was the best salesman around. Sondra told me a story once that she was on the phone with Mike talking about a horse and he made it sound so good that she thought she should buy it. It turns out it was one of hers."

"I will be forever grateful for Mike hooking me up with Wintersby and most recently my Hackney Rainforest. It was always a fun time with Mike at the barn and at the shows. I will surely miss hearing 'Where are we eating?' He was a true blue brother figure to me."

In the years that followed Mike made many friends in the industry and traded a lot of horses. He wheeled and dealt and picked the right horse for the right owner most of the time. He loved the process of finding something, trading up and then doing it all over again.

Mike Felty and James Nichols were friends of his and he traded with them when he made trips to Kentucky and Felty had this to say about Mike in the 2006 Horse World feature, "I think Mike's greatest asset is that he is a master salesman and horse trader. He can call me about a horse I know I don't like and by the time I get off the phone he has my mouth watering. I want to come see him. I wish I had his sales ability."

One of the horses Mike sold was to a lady who lived in Cape Girardeau, Missouri. She purchased the mare on the condition that Mike come to Cape Girardeau one night a week to help them learn to ride her. Soon, Mike's services were in demand as more people needed his assistance with their horses. He was still teaching school but he leased a barn so that he could work horses in the evenings. It was perhaps the beginning of his professional career.

It was while he was training at that little barn in Cape Girardeau that Joan and Tim Alexander stopped to look at horses. They lived in New Orleans but after meeting Mike and seeing his horses they decided Mississippi and Missouri were close enough for them to become customers and begin a long relationship with Mike.

Joan Alexander was another customer of Mike's and owned CH Magic Deliverance. The three-year-old was one of the first young horses that Mike trained.

Some of the other horses under his tutelage include Champagne's Special Event, Champagne's Rough And Rowdy, Oskee Wow Wow, Glendale's Radiant Duchess and Glendale's Radiant Princess. World's champion Hackney Pleasure Driving Pony Seamair's Dear Sir also had tremendous success with Max Kaplan under Mike's direction. Max's mom Chris Kaplan and her striking black mare Lady Vol were the Ladies Fine Harness World's Champion of Champions and ladies class world's champions in 2007, 2008 and 2009 and also earned the Amateur Fine Harness National Championships in 2007 and 2008.

Meanwhile, as Mike was working hard on his training career and teaching social studies during the day, Jeff Vogel was working summers with Marilyn Macfarlane at her Walnut Way Farm. One year at Louisville, he and Mike met.

That fateful 1984 meeting would lead to a 35 year personal and professional relationship. "Mike asked me if I wanted to come work for him," said Jeff in the 2006 Horse World feature. I was in college and couldn't work for him full time but I worked for him that first summer and ended up transferring to Southeast Missouri State so that I could work for him during the school year.

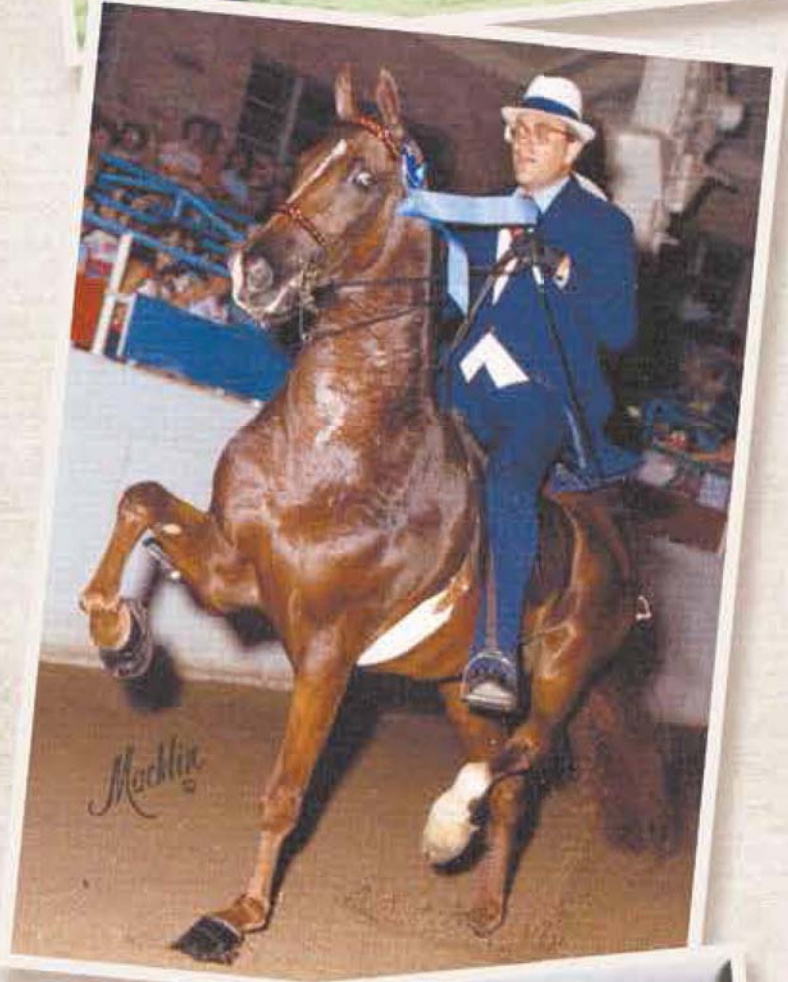
"In Cape Girardeau we were off the beaten path," said Jeff. "If someone wanted to come look at a horse it didn't matter what time it was, we showed them a horse."

Vogel taught lessons and turned out some top equitation riders. Mike trained the performance horses at night after work. They became a formidable team and produced numerous champions in both the performance and equitation ranks. That went on for years until finally in 1991 Mike made the decision to move to Columbia, Missouri to train at customer Maxine Glenn's farm.

The move to Columbia brought customer Doris Marks into the fold but Mike and Doris knew each other from their days with the Pughs. Marks had several show ring stars including amateur fine harness champion CH Mercer Raceabout. In his last show under the direction of Mike Roberts, he was the 2002 American Royal Fine Harness Stallion/Gelding Reserve Champion with Mike driving.

In their long trainer-customer relationship Doris appreciated Mike's training method with her horse and she appreciated that he too was a teacher. "We taught when you could still paddle kids. Mike had a paddle that was cracked and taped together. He could give them a good whack and the paddle would break. It made a big impression on the others."

The list of customers who trusted Mike to train their horses back in the day when he was just starting out and the list of customers who came to Mike Roberts Stables just within the last few years all seem to agree on the special qualities that Mike possessed that drew people to him.



4 | Gayle Lampe called Mike Roberts her best friend for 51 years. Together they had amazing success in the show ring including her six UPHA/American Royal Ladies Five-Gaited National Championships and multiple world's titles with CH Callaway's Born To Win.

5 | Roberts showed CH Magic Deliverance for customers Joan and Tim Alexander, from New Orleans, Louisiana, when he was training in Cape Girardeau, Missouri.

6 | Chris Kaplan and Lady Vol were the 2007, 2008 and 2009 Ladies Fine Harness World's Champion of Champions as well as the ladies class winners and won two national championships. Son Max Kaplan and his pleasure driving pony CH Seamair Dear Sir were also world's and national champions under Roberts' direction.



Leon Richardson (left) and Mike Roberts were fast friends and fellow horse traders. Both could sell you a horse that you didn't think you wanted until they talked you into it. Deborah Richardson and Tommy Richardson (rt) were always involved in the fun.



Jeff Vogel and Mike Roberts were together for 35 years and were a great team.



Jeff Vogel (left) and Mike Roberts joined Austin Hazelwood after he rode With Luck to win this year's Junior Five-Gaited Mare World's Championship for Gayle Lampe.

"Mike made it his mission to keep it fun and affordable," said Jeff Vogel. "Over the years we had lots of people in and out and a lot of great horses. Mike also mentored young trainers because he knew it was important to help them learn and keep the industry moving forward.

Trainers such as Zach Duffy started working for Mike while he was a student at William Woods. He joined the Mike Roberts Stables staff full time in 2005, less than a year after graduating and it was a job he was very proud to get.

"Mike was a very brilliant and clever man. He had an uncanny way of remembering any phone or credit card number, as well horses and breeding. As a young horse trainer in the beginning of my career, my best memories are those of working alongside Mike. He had a real talent for picking out a horse of any age that we could work and develop into something more. This is a trait that many young horse trainers were blessed with from time working for Mike Roberts."

"He taught me how to identify quality, type, and 'pretty' in a show horse. A talent I only acquired by having spent so much time with Mike looking and shopping for horses across the United States."

"I valued these times; road trips to barn after barn and hearing his perspective on each horse we evaluated. I often called Mike later in my career before purchasing horses to see if he approved and to get his perspective. He loved finding "diamonds in the rough", and was very proficient at it. I know many clients and trainers trusted and benefited from Mike's ability to read a horse's talent and scope."

"I will always be appreciative of the time and care I received from Mike. He was committed to my success just as much as I was. He was always so good at selflessly promoting me as a horse trainer, introducing me to many influential people in the business, and always made sure I didn't "Cut my nose off to spite my face"! (A quote he told me regularly). He was a compliment to my high strung nature, much like a father."

"Numerous memories exist in my head, but some of my favorites are when Mike would make me "Chicken and Dumplings" for dinner, Town Topic burger after the American Royal Horse Show, Ladies Harness Horse six-times world's champion Lady Vol, trips to Debbie and Leon Richardson's, our love of

small dogs, Glenda and Dale Pugh, and how much he loved his clients and friends. Mike was undisputedly "One of a Kind" and I am so thankful to have known him."

Mike Aponte was a young assistant trainer in California when he got the opportunity to work for Mike Roberts Stables and he agreed with others comments about Mike. "Mike always mean well and he always cared about the horse business. He knew how to get that extra wow factor from a horse to win a class or get them sold."

"Mike gave me opportunities when no one knew who I was and he introduced me to everyone. Even though he thought I was crazy for being different he let me do my own thing at least half the time."

TJ Santaferra also benefitted from his relationship with Mike and had this to say about him. "I will always value Mike as a friend and mentor. He was quick-witted and always had a way to make every situation entertaining. He was an extraordinary horseman but an even better friend. He will be missed greatly and I'm holding the memories of our time together close to my heart."

Deborah Richardson lost her husband Leon in 2015 and that was a loss that Mike felt too. Mike and Leon were horse traders through and through and the three of them were great friends. "Mike Roberts loved three things; a nice horse, a good horse deal and food!" said Deborah. "He was a great friend who was very giving. He would give you the shirt off his back then try to trade you out of it."

"He had a great sense of humor and lived life for today. Mike mentored many young trainers. Many times he would go on horse buying trips with Leon and when the two of them were eating they would start planning where they were going to eat next," she laughed.

"He often said 'To get your handsome prince you have to kiss a lot of toads' and if someone was showing a horse he wasn't fond of he would turn around and whisper 'Toad' and we would giggle."

"I will always be grateful for his friendship and all of the nice horses I got from him and because of him as well as the horses his customers purchased from us. I will miss him."

"Mike's training style really suited me," said Gayle Lampe. In all the years I never saw him lose his temper with a horse. He knew when to end their training session and he never drilled and drilled a horse."

"It was so much fun showing for Mike. He never screamed at me when I did stupid things. He really loved his customers no matter how good or bad their horse was. Beyond being my trainer, Mike was the person who was the most fun to be with of anyone I have ever known. I don't know how I will fill my life without the fun of going on horse shopping trips, going to horse shows and going out to eat with him. He was my lifeline to everything about horses, especially bloodlines."

"He was the life of every dinner party with his humor and his knowledge and he made me chicken soup when I was sick. What more could a person ask for? I'm not sure what I will do without him in my life."

So many are facing that same question: What do we do now? Not the least of which is Jeff Vogel. "Everyone liked Mike; kids, dogs ...everyone," he said. "He was the socializer of the group and the people person. It's going to be difficult to navigate a future without him but all of us who loved him will never forget him."

"There is now an ASHA Youth Scholarship in his honor to celebrate his desire to help and mentor people and bring them together," he added.

The scholarship would make Mike very happy and knowing how well so many spoke of the kind of person he was would make him very happy too.

Editor's note: The ASHA Mike Roberts Memorial Scholarship was created by Chris Kaplan in his honor for any ASHA youth pursuing post-secondary education or skills training. Contributions can be made online at: <https://saddlebred.networkforgood.com/projects/86664-mike-roberts-memorial-scholarship> or by sending a check to the ASHA Attn: Mike Roberts Scholarship. For more information or to see the qualifications required contact the ASHA.

"WHEN IT STOPS BEING FUN, IT STARTS BEING EXPENSIVE."

- MIKE ROBERTS