

## 'UNSTABLE SITUATIONS'

### Excerpts From the San Francisco Chronicle Friday, February 21, 28, & March 7, 2003

Special thanks to Jim Doyle, San Francisco Chronicle Staff Writer, who spent a great deal of time interviewing numerous equestrians in the Bay Area. And more thanks to the Chronicle for publishing Jim's three in-depth articles describing the challenges facing equestrians if they are to preserve barns and trails in the Bay Area. E-mail Jim Doyle at [jdoyle@sfchronicle.com](mailto:jdoyle@sfchronicle.com).

The following excerpts are taken from each of the three articles; e-mail [BABTT@earthlink.net](mailto:BABTT@earthlink.net) if you would like to have us get the complete articles to you:

#### 'Unstable Situations'

Lack of money and space are nagging problems for equestrian centers

Byline Jim Doyle, San Francisco Chronicle Staff Writer

---

"Just give me land, lots of land, under starry skies above, Don't fence me in. Let me ride through the wide open country that I love, Don't fence me in." Cole Porter .

Plenty of shovels and spades were sold to Gold Rush pioneers, but not much shiny yellow rock was found. Just lots of raw land. Word spread, tracks were laid, a flood-tide of settlers moved West. Virgin forests gave way to towns and cities. Cars arrived. The taming of the Bay Area accelerated.

It's still a work in progress. One by one, hillsides are dug up. Barns and trails lose more ground to urban sprawl. A valley here, a stream there. Private lands are sold, subdivided, developed to make room for new houses. Trees are toppled. Brush is cleared. Aging barns are torn down. Fences go up. Trails are closed. All bits and pieces of our heritage.

So here we are, caught in the middle of crosstown traffic in a megalopolis of more than 6 million strong. What's a poor horse to do? Equestrians and conservationists have begun joining forces, speaking out and -- heaven forbid -- even working together in frets and starts to stem the loss.

---

"The quality of life in the Bay Area depends on opportunities for wildlife, farming and outdoor activities to continue and be supported by public agencies and the voters," said Barbara Weitz, founder of Bay Area Barns and Trails, a Marin nonprofit.

"If people don't have an opportunity to get out and breathe fresh air and restore their souls, then we'll be just another cog in the wheel," Weitz said. "Everyone who is able to get out and take a hike or bike ride or horse ride on these Bay Area open lands improves the quality of their life."

...Weitz bristles at the notion that only rich folks ride horses. "There's a perception that horse people have a lot of money," she said. "The ordinary trail rider does not have a lot of money as a rule. If they did, they'd be out there buying all those lands. Instead, they're selling land and moving up to places in the Sierra foothills."

Weitz grew up in Marin. "As a kid, I used to ride everywhere on my horse. That was my life," she said. "Now there are very few people who have horses that I can ride with. Fences go up. Opportunities are lost. Someone comes in and buys an old ranch, where the family let everyone use the land. Someone new comes in and locks the gates . . .

"Love of the land is the primary thing. Sitting on top of a horse overlooking the Pacific is the greatest thing," she said. "Even the horse enjoys it."

---

But it's hard times for horses:

---

Since 1978, the Westwind Community Barn has run a 4-H riding program for disabled children. The barn, which has a large arena, also runs an Ohlone camp to teach children about American Indian ways, as well as two summer riding camps. And it offers Pony Club lessons and pilot programs to introduce children to horseback riding. But the barn has had to struggle to keep its doors open. Maintenance has been deferred on its Mansard roof, and erosion on the road that leads to the turnout paddocks is a constant battle. Last year, town officials seriously considered selling the property to pay for a town hall and other pet projects. Town officials, looking to pony up cash for city agencies, eyed the property a year or so ago for potential sale.

---

In the horse town of Woodside, a group of equestrians are scraping the barrel for dollars to restore the historic yet dilapidated Folger Estate Barn next to the former country home of coffee mogul and hydroelectric developer James Folger II. Ten years ago, Woodside was home to 1,200 horses. Now, there are only 600. Atherton used to be filled with horses. There don't appear to be any now. Folks used to joke that there were more horses in Los Altos Hills than people. Not anymore.

"We're going to do our darndest to make sure the numbers don't continue to decline," said Susan Lang, who is among those spearheading the drive to save the Folger Estate Barn next to the 942-acre Wunderlich County Park. "Part of what makes Woodside so special is that you can see horses walking down the road." The Folger Estate Stable Committee raised \$120,000 to conduct a preliminary assessment of the barn, which is owned by

San Mateo County. The restoration project - which will include roof work as well as seismic and code improvements - is expected to cost millions of dollars.

"This building is too valuable from an historic perspective to let it fall apart," Lang said. "The county has so been so hit with budget problems that this can't be a priority for them. We understand that. I think the county hasn't known what to do with this. There hasn't been a long-term vision for the facility."

---

-The (65) year-old Alum Rock Stables in San Jose was closed in 1999. Bay Area Barns and Trails is attempting to purchase the site, then turn it over to a nonprofit group with similar conservation interests.

---

-- In San Francisco, the Golden Gate Park Stables closed last fall. City officials have vowed to reopen the long-running concession, but those efforts have been moving along at a bureaucratic snail's pace. For decades, the Golden Gate Park Stables offered riding lessons on dozens of horses, including lessons for children and "lead-line" lessons for tots. There was a summer riding camp for kids. Parents could throw a birthday party with pony rides for groups of children. And at Christmastime, boys and girls could go on a trail ride that ended at a horse trailer where Santa Claus was waiting.

"It was a fantastic place. It had a good environment, a good feel," said Sarah Mallas of San Francisco, who manages the Westwind Community Barn in Los Altos Hills. "I taught (at Golden Gate Park Stables) for a while, and it was so much fun to have the urban people come and ride and be able to enjoy the horses." But, she said, the facility's three arenas get muddy in the winter. There is no covered arena. Its three barns are in fair condition. Its grandstand is deteriorating rapidly. Politics and business factors, including the enormous cost of liability insurance, led to the facility's closure in September.

"There are quite a few people who've been left with nowhere to ride, and that's their chosen activity," Mallas said. "There's virtually nowhere via public transportation that you can go to ride."

San Francisco officials formed a task force, which included veterinarians, equestrians and experts from the horse industry. They hope to put the concession out to public bid this year. The San Francisco Stables Foundation is preparing a proposal to operate the facility.

---

- "There's an e-mail stream of equestrians who are panic-stricken because most of our trails are being taken away from us," said Nancy Dupont, the founder of Heritage Trails, a group based in Walnut Creek that, among other things, wants to increase public access to trails on public parks.

Dupont complains that many public parks are not horse friendly. "I think they perceive a horse as a pain to deal with," she said. Park rangers voice concerns about erosion from horses, the introduction of alien plant life (such as weed seeds found in grains fed to horses and deposited on trails via manure), and point out that only a small percentage of park users are horseback riders.

Still, the Mount Diablo State Park gets rave reviews from equestrians. The park preserves trails for horsemen, who play an active part in clearing trails. . .

---

- "The concern I have is disappearing ranchlands," said supervising park ranger Shelly Miller, who looks after the Shadow Cliffs, Brushy Peak, and Tassajara parklands. "I grew up in Livermore, going to the rodeo and working in the rodeo every year. And basically, my concern is that everything is being built on, all the hills surrounding Livermore. Regional park officials are searching for conservationists and equestrians who wish to become partners in an effort to preserve a historic ranch just outside the city limits of Livermore that includes hay barns, a grainery and a blacksmith shop. Established in 1870, the Samuel Laughlin homestead (later known as the Bosley-Weaver ranch) was operated as a cattle ranch for 130 years. "So many things that I grew up with are gone. The old dairy that I used to go to as a kid is now a shopping center. There's nothing for the kids to grow up in this valley to see as far as ranches. I'd like to preserve the old ranch site for kids to go on tours and see and to learn the living history of agriculture in this valley. Livermore was founded on ranching. A lot of these lands in the Livermore and Pleasanton valleys were ranches not too long ago."

---

-- In Marin, development of the French Ranch subdivision in the 1990s crowded out the horses in San Geronimo Valley. Some were relocated to historic barns at or near Dickson Ranch in Woodacre. But those lands are also vulnerable to future development.

---

- Since 1937, the Marin Stables in Fairfax has been on the trailhead of the Deer Park Area. The land is now owned by the Marin Municipal Water District. "I've had a lease here since 1980," said Jim McDermott, the proprietor of Marin Stables, "and I would hope that the district will continue to see the value of keeping horses here for many years to come."

---

-The number of horses at the Golden Gate Dairy Stable at Muir Beach has fallen from 35 to 11 in the past several years due to federal park regulations to prevent overpasturing in an environmentally sensitive area, which includes coho salmon. The old barn, built before the 1920s across from the Pelican Inn, needs refurbishment.

---

-On a positive note, the Golden Gate National Recreation Area has backed the restoration of the Miwok Stables at Tennessee Valley near Mill Valley, adding an indoor arena and new stalls.

---

-In Napa, an old barn and riding facility is operated by a nonprofit organization at the Skyline Wilderness Park, located on land owned by the city of Napa.

---

-The Greater Vallejo Parks and Recreation District is looking for ways to restore and open the McIntyre Ranch, for trail use. There are no horses on it now.

---

-"Like everywhere in the country, barns are disappearing," said West Marin historian and author Dewey Livingston. "They're expensive to maintain, and they often outlive their usefulness. Almost all these barns were built as milking barns, and they haven't been used as milking barns for 50 years or so. So the venerable California barn still seems to be endangered.

"It can take a lot of money just to re-roof a barn," he said. "If it's not cost-effective, it may be just torn down." Livingston credits the National Park Service with trying to maintain barns on its Marin lands. "But elsewhere in the county, it takes the landowner to have some dedication to the barn to keep it from falling down," he said.

---

-Children are among those hit hardest by barn and trail closures.

"There's something about a kid, when he works with a huge animal. It transforms the child. They develop a partnership," Weitz said. "You can't do it with a bicycle or a baseball bat. It works with disabled kids, at-risk kids, emotionally disturbed kids and ordinary rich kids."

---

-...Many of the Bay Area's barns and trails are situated on public lands. That sounds good in theory. But public agencies are increasingly ambivalent about the need to protect these natural and cultural resources. Most people don't ride horses. Open space is scarce, and there are competing uses for it. Cyclists, hikers and others are vying for trail use and program funds. Equestrian facilities and trails on public lands "may be subject to the whim of that particular public agency," Weitz said. "The public at large does not recognize equestrian activities as a bona fide public recreation benefit. And if there's a dollar to be spent, there's a desire that it be spent on a baseball field, skateboard park, tennis court or swimming pool -- and not an equestrian facility."

---

-As one solution, Weitz's group is encouraging its affiliated projects to form partnerships with hiking groups, bicycle groups and nature groups. "Partnership is a key. Equestrians can't do it alone." Too often, preservation attempts are hobbled. Grassroots organizations can easily become mired in their own local campaigns and lose sight of the big picture and fail to seek support from, or take advantage of, the knowledge gained from similar efforts in the next valley. "A key issue I think is communications. With the Internet and e-mail, you'd think it'd be better," Weitz said. "The equestrian trail groups have been so focused on the internal that there isn't much awareness of what's going on. "It is our goal to help all these stables and barns survive and thrive in the Bay Area. However, our function most of the time has been publicity, outreach and networking. People tend to be kind of like islands in their own territory and not reach out . . . (or) learn from others." ....

'Unstable Situations'

Excerpts From the San Francisco Chronicle Friday, February 21, 28, & March 7, 2003

Byline Jim Doyle, Chronicle Staff Writer