

Animals Fascinate Artist

By FELICE BUCKVAR

WHEN Sam Savitt of North Salem demonstrates how he illustrates his many books — at the North Salem Public Library on Nov. 17, in honor of Children's Book Week — odds are that most of the portraits he will draw will have four legs. His fascination with animals is not new. "When I was a kid I had a thing about horses. In fact, I wanted to grow up to be one," he said.

Although frustrated in that particular ambition, he said he believed his intense interest in animals later helped him to draw them in all poses and in all aspects of their personalities.

Born in the coal-mining city of Wilkes-Barre, Pa., Mr. Savitt has lived, for the last 25 years in a 150-year-old house on a farm in what he calls "horse country." With their two children grown, he and his wife,

Bette, share the work of caring for their equine family of two, "a horse named McClaurey and a pony we call Moki," he said.

"It's a misconception that you have to be wealthy to own a horse," he said. "If you have land for pasture, it's more important that you're willing to do all the work involved, which usually means getting up at dawn." He added that, "horse people keep the countryside beautiful. You need a lot of space for horses and having them keeps the land fairly open."

Betty Savitt also runs the Black Horse Press, through which various educational charts drawn by her husband are distributed internationally. The charts include "Guide to Horses," "Horses Through Time" and "World of Ponies."

Although Mr. Savitt studied art and began working as an artist after his release from the service after World War II, he did not start writing until an editor suggested that he provide the text for drawings he submitted about the early life of a filly.

"I told the editor, I can't write, but I did get carried away with all the cute things the foal did, like jumping over hay and chasing a dog that had chased it before. Somehow I managed to write the blurbs to go with the pictures," he related. The resulting book, "Step-a-Bit," was published in 1957 by E. P. Dutton.

Mr. Savitt soon discovered that he was a good enough storyteller to write short stories and novels, in which animals are also prominently featured. He has also illustrated more than 150 books by other writers, sometimes being surprised at the mistakes of other authors who write about animals. "For example, a horse is not

like a dog in many ways. You have to treat a horse differently, but some writers don't realize that," he said.

One of Mr. Savitt's concerns is the destruction of mustangs in the West. "I've made some drawings for a painting I plan to do showing three mustangs, two adult and one foal, crowded together under a bleak sky, the mare looking back," he said.

But the artist is busy on other projects, too. A one-man show of his polo paintings will be opening at the Noroton Gallery in Darien on the day after his library talk, and he will be contributing about 10 paintings to a book by Austine Hearst, the wife of William Randolph Jr., entitled "The Horses of San Simeon." More locally, he is doing a painting depicting a hunt master in full dress for the Goldens Bridge Hounds, to be presented at the group's yearly hunt ball. ■