

Neighbors

— THE PATENT TRADER Tuesday, December 31, 1985

Sam Savitt, Equestrian Artist



HORSE SENSE: Equestrian artist Savitt has spent a lifetime realizing boyhood dreams. Page 13.

North Salem's Sam Savitt is the premier contemporary artist of horses and the world of horsemen. He is the official artist of the United States Equestrian Team and is listed in "Who's Who" for outstanding lifetime achievement in the field of painting. Yet these and countless other distinctions are secondary to his greatest achievement. Mr. Savitt has spent a lifetime realizing boyhood dreams.

"I was born in Wilkes Barre, Pennsylvania," he said, "a coal mining town. Horses were something that I always really loved. As far as I can remember I had this thing about horses. There's something about the feel, the look, the . . . I don't know but for me nothing compares."

During his childhood he would follow horses around town that were pulling wagons, at that time the milk man had one." He leaned forward on the couch as his entire body seemed to smile. "A friend of mine's father used to peddle vegetables from a cart and he'd let us ride the horse that pulled it on Sundays.

"One day I tried to ride this horse across the Susquehanna River and it nearly drowned. Afterwards the horse would never go near water. Of course we never told his father why the horse had become so fearful of water. His father soon sold it and bought a truck." He laughingly added, "I guess I killed the goose on that one."

Though raised in the industrial north his boyhood fantasy stretched out to a different time and place; a place he still visits through his art. "Maybe I'm just a frustrated cowboy. I've worked on ranches in Colorado and mostly new Mexico during the haying season . . . I've always worn cowboy boots," he said.

"When I think back on it the big, successful things I've done have been westerns. Probably because it's closest to my heart. Somehow when I do a western something comes through . . . one of my favorites is of 'Midnight, the buckingest horse in the world.' In all her ten year rodeo career, no one stayed on for ten seconds. Think about that."

Although he's loved horses since childhood, Mr. Savitt was not always as sure about art. "I never had any interest in becoming an artist," he recalled. "But I had an art teacher who kept after me. I worked at the Dresseteria (in Wilkes Barre) for a year window dressing. I also had to scrub the floors, work half days on Sundays, and anything else they told me to do." He slaps his leg, "boy that cured me. After eight or nine months I saw my art teacher and said I'm ready."

Mr. Savitt entered the Pratt Institute and was about to receive his degree when World War II erupted, interrupting his career for four and one half years. He came back and "resumed my career mostly doing illustrations in pulp magazines, comics, adventure stories. Of course I did all sorts of drawings . . . but whenever horse stories came along the editor would steer them to me."

In 1957 Mr. Savitt completed his first book. "When foals are born they weigh 50 to 60 pounds," he said. "In a year they weigh 700 to 800 pounds. I wanted to keep a record of this transformation." Friends of his raised horses and when one was born on their Mount Kisco farm he was in attendance. "I visited every three or four days and drew pictures," he said. "After six months I realized this could be a book."

Mr. Savitt sent the drawings to a number of publishers and E.P. Dutton responded enthusiastically. Not only did they love the drawings but they also had a request. "They said when you finish the drawings write a little simple text to go along with it. I told them I wasn't a writer but they told me to just try. Well when I got that book and it said 'written and illustrated by Sam Savitt' I was hooked."

Since "A Foals First Day," Mr. Savitt has written and illustrated 15 books and illustrated about 130. In addition has completed innumerable drawings and paintings for magazines, private patrons, and art galleries. The most popular creations are his poster boards, such as "Sam Savitt Guide to Horses," and "The

Horse Through Time," which have adorned the bedrooms and schools of American children since the first one was completed in 1963.

Looking about his living room which is filled with his works Mr. Savitt shrugs, "it's exhausting to look at these things." He said that he looks at pictures he completed years ago and "I wonder how did I go about it: Did I paint the background first or did I work from one corner to the other. Sometimes," he admitted, "I can't figure it out."

He said that before starting "I procrastinate. It's scary and frightening. It takes a lot to sit down in front of a big white board knowing that in a few weeks some one is going to pay you \$10,000 to produce something that's really good," he said. "But pretty soon I run out of things to do and get down to work."

The excellence Mr. Savitt achieves in his work stems in part from a total absorption in his projects. "When you do something long enough it becomes your way of life," he said. "People often say that artists are absent minded. They aren't really. I know there are times I've been at parties talking with someone but my mind is really on a difficult problem I'm faced with in a painting. They may think my mind is blank but it's really totally tied up with that project," he said.

Sam Savitt has spent a lifetime combining two loves, horses and art. Perhaps none of his paintings reflect this testament better than his drawing of the champion race horse Secretariat.

"In 1982 I was invited down to Kentucky and a friend told me he would show me Secretariat. He was about twelve years old then but he still an arresting horse and a bit of a ham too. Well, I walked over to him and ran my hand over his head, down his mane, across his chest and his legs and down his hooves. The power and strength was amazing. When I came back home I would walk over to friends and say, shake the hand that went all over Secretariat."