

A Man for All Horses—Sam Savitt

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by FOXY GWYNNE

Children and adults alike will not want to miss master artist Sam Savitt give one of his celebrated chalk talks at the Hiram Halle Memorial Library in Pound Ridge this Friday, Dec. 14 at 4 p.m. sponsored by the Friends of the Library.

Sam Savitt, official artist of the U.S. Equestrian Team, is a very centered man. In the den of his cozy North Salem home hang his many oil paintings and pencil sketches of horses; his illustrated horse stories line the corner shelf. The windows look across a country road toward the pastures of a neighbor's farm, while out back in the Savitt's barn, a new thoroughbred gelding, McClory, is taking his ease in fresh, deep bedding.

Sam and Betty Savitt are content in their world where they have lived for over 20 years. Sam organizes his studio at the top of the house with the same meticulousness that Betty employs in running the mail order business of Savitt Books and horse charts. Everything runs like clockwork—except maybe once in 1972 at Badminton, England, when Betty was filming the Queen who passed only a few feet from them only to find she had no film in the camera.

Sunday Horse

"My life as a child was not about horses," said Sam, who is tall and soft-spoken and grew up in the coal mining area of Wilkes Barre, Pa. "There were only horses there and (they) belonged to a mounted policeman and a fruit and vegetable huckster." He and a friend persuaded the latter to let them take the cart horse, a good natured mare, to the park on Sundays where they could play cowboys and indians.

"There was the day I tried to swim her across the Susquehanna River and almost drowned. The water was too swift and she soon became exhausted from the swim. I was off her back and hanging onto the tail swallowing great amounts of the black river water—black from coal dust. When we were finally able to get on land. We cleaned her up—as she was black from the coal too—and put her away without saying a word about our adventure. But the next day I heard the vegetable man complain to his wife that the mare refused to go through a little puddle and he couldn't figure out why. The upshot was that he sold the horse and bought a truck and I had just done myself out of anymore riding just because of that attempted river swim," Mr. Savitt said.

It wasn't until much later in his career that he met Gordon Wright, who instructed at equine clinics and wrote books on horsemanship. Then Sam began to ride seriously. "He taught me what an art riding is." Through Wright he met hunt and show people and later Mr. Savitt illustrated books for him. Mr. Savitt has hunted for years with the Golden Bridge Hounds which in addition to the pleasure it gives

provides him with easy access to the viewing of horses in motion.

Mr. Savitt's high school art teacher, Alexander Murray, had advised Sam to go to art school after graduation, and following a brief stint as dresseteria (window display) and elevator floor scrubber with only a half day off on Sunday, he took his teacher's advice.

Crayon Exam

"Pratt will make you work," said his teacher. So after taking an entrance exam with crayons, Sam was accepted. "The first day at Pratt when I heard the other students discussing values, half tones, gouache—I realized I didn't know from nothing, and thought I'd made a terrible mistake in going there.

Mr. Boudreau, the school director convinced him the only difference between him and the students with fine arts knowledge was that he'd have to work harder.

"The first time there was a nude model I was so embarrassed I couldn't look and drew horses all over my page instead."

When Savitt realized that no one at Pratt could draw horses as well as he could he was inspired to study more horse anatomy charts and go to wherever there was a horse to sketch. "What motivated me was success. Before that I always felt that I was at the bottom of the barrel."

"At the end of the week we would line our paintings against the wall at the front of the room. It was the big thing to be placed left of center by the teacher so I would try to sneak my picture there, but he would always move it over to the right. It wasn't till the end of the year that I accomplished getting moved to left of center."

Harold von Schmidt was a guest teacher at Pratt whose work Savitt admired so much that he likened being in his classroom as "being in heaven with him." When Schmidt invited the student to visit his

Westport studio Mr. Savitt was able to get a free ride with a trucking company, but arrived at 11 p.m. Without directions to his house he went to the police station who urged him because of the hour to spend the night in jail on a cot in a cell. The police drove him to von Schmidt's house the next day in time for breakfast.

At graduation art directors came to look at the students' work. "The pulps (magazines) were big at that time and if you could draw well enough you could make money sketching ads". Fiction House hired Savitt for half-page black and white drawings at \$7 each. "I made about \$35-40 a week that way and later on drew my own comic called "Sun-down Saunders."

A patriotic Mr. Savitt felt it his duty to enlist in the Army in 1942 as an engineer. He was sent to Burma for two years where he acquired a Rhesus monkey for a pet. He later fictionalized accounts of the monkey's adventures for Dodd Mead in the Sadie stories.

In 1957 he kept a record of a foal whose dam was Step North and whose sire was Wait-A-Bit. "After five months of sketches I could even see the development of the foal through the pictures. Sharon Banningan, my editor at E.P. Dutton liked the drawings so well and asked me to write a little text to
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