

Artist or cowpoke, he's drawn to horses

BY LYNNE AMES

Most people have a job that involves them in several areas of interest. North Salem's Sam Savitt has an interest — a sort of love affair, actually — which he's translated into a whole slew of jobs. For close to 30 years, Savitt has ridden, trained, discussed, sketched, painted, diagrammed, codified, and made into fiction, horses.

"It's absolutely endless," says Savitt, who looks like a Spencer Tracy gone west. "Every time you think you've learned all there is to know about the horse, the animals go and do something new. It's like the old joke about the guy who studied tomato bugs his whole life — no one could understand it, but it's not boring it's fascinating and endless."

Savitt began it all when he was a child in Wilkes-Barre, Pa. — "I grew up around horses, I thought I was a horse; I fed the milkman's horse and I rode my own." When he was graduated from high school he went to Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, and, although he completed the full program, he excelled at drawing horses. After Pratt came hitchhiking, cow punching, and a riding stint on a ranch in the southwest, an American frontier odyssey on the back of a horse.

"HORSES TAKE you across the full spectrum of American life," according to Savitt, whose paintings of Thoroughbreds have been shown in Palm Beach and commissioned and bought by the likes of Mr. and Mrs. William Randolph Hearst Jr. "There is the sophisticated society, the primarily eastern side of it, and then there is the West, with its cowboy image, and all the recreational and sports riders in between."

Savitt has studied horsemanship with equestrian teacher Gordon Wright, and has trained hunting and jumping horses. One of the horses he trained made it to the U.S. Equestrian Team, and Savitt himself is the team's official artist.

He also has illustrated more than 60 books, and his work has appeared in magazines such as Sports Illustrated, True, and Boy's Life. The walls of his home, a New England style colonial, are lined with pictures of horses in almost every situation and position. Physiology, genealogy, social history charts, which his wife Bette distributes under the Black Horse Press label, oils and watercolors of sedate, elegant Thoroughbreds in formal poses abound. Detailed head portraits and compositions of rodeo riders on their piebald horses, the animals' bodies twisted in sleek, perpetual motion, dust flying from their hooves, also fill the walls.



Staff photo by David Goldberg

Sam Savitt, horse specialist, surrounded by paintings and drawings he has made

and should be out like "other horses her age...earning her oats." Savitt doesn't anthropomorphize to an unbelievable degree, but he does imbue his animals with colorful, distinctive behavior traits.

"A HORSE is like a person," he says, speaking of his book "characters" and of the animals he's schooled. "He can be not so good, or average, or he can be excellent. Some horses are tremendously talented, they're born with it, and all you have to do is bring it out. As if you were training a person, you have to make a horse a balanced athlete."

Savitt, whose own horses had to be boarded out this winter, because he will be traveling, adds, "When you work closely with a horse, something happens. Your reflexes become like those of the horse, you almost spook with him."

"All of the things I find exciting, I can see by watching a horse. Motion, rhythm, coordination — a horse is motion. A horse, really, is beauty."

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SAM SAVITT

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"There is one horse portraitist," explains Savitt, "who does only formal portraits of the conformation of Thoroughbreds. To do that only, over and over, would bore me. This portraitist is an excellent technician, but to be an artist, you have to change and grow with your work."

SAVITT ALSO has written 14 books. The first, called "Step-A-Bit," written in 1957, is the story, in words and pictures, of a foal from the time she is born to the time she is weaned. "Midnight," a best-seller, is the "true account of the only rodeo bucking horse who was never ridden for the required 10 seconds." Other non-fiction works include "Around The World With Horses," "America's Horses," and "Sam Savitt's True Horse Stories."

The most recent book is "Vicki and the Brown Mare." A novel for older children and young teens, it is the story of a girl who trains a high-strung mare and comes to love the horse, only to discover that the horse is the superior teacher. "It's an unusual twist," says Savitt, "and it's realistic — it's really the story of a master and a pupil, and the pupil outshines the master and it's time to move on. In this case, the pupil happens to be a horse."

And a comprehensively described horse, too. Skylark is a "spooky green Thoroughbred" with "raw talent," who jumps "like an athlete," although she is 7 years old,

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