By Denise Quirk

Sam Savitt Taught a Generation How To See the Horse

Through his illustrations and books, he brought horses to life on paper.

When asked about favorite equestrian illustrators, especially those remembered from their childhood, many members of a certain age immediately mention Sam Savitt, Paul Brown, C. W. Anderson and Wesley Dennis. Each produced a lifetime of work: illustrating horse stories by others, creating commercial artwork for magazines, horse show programs and advertisements, fulfilling commissions for private clients and even writing their own books.

Savitt often rises to the top of many people's lists when pushed to describe the impact these favorite artists had on them. Even among younger generations, and those who may not remember Savitt by name, many can recall a series of horse charts he created and any number of the 130 books he illustrated as having taught them fundamentals of horsemanship.

Many go so far as to state that Savitt's distinctive way of depicting horses' majesty, nobility and yet humble fragility inspired their own love of horses. His illustrations are at the same time works of art, commercial successes and influential in creating a greater understanding of the nature of horses. What was so special about his style?

KNOWING THE INSIDE AND OUTSIDE OF THE HORSE

In interviews throughout his career, Savitt, who was born in 1917 and passed away in 2000, talked of growing up in a non-horsey family in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. The only live horse he knew drew a milk wagon. Like a lot of kids, Savitt dreamed of riding horses.

Even more, he wanted to *be* a horse. He spent his days acting as though he were a horse, pulling neighborhood friends around in a wagon and holding a rope bit in his mouth "for the sake of realism." He was, he said, "forever imitating horses. To imitate, one must observe, and observing and remembering were my first steps in learning to draw horses."

Savitt often told the story of arriving at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, New York, and finding himself amid students whose education about color, tone and other formal aspects of art was far more developed. When he approached the dean with worry that Pratt had made a mistake in admitting him, he was assured that there had been no mistake and that he would just have to "work harder."

Savitt realized that he could draw horses better than anyone else—and he set out to work harder at it. Inspired by the 1930s-40s popular movie Westerns and the legendary cowboy painter and author Will James, Savitt traveled through the Southwest, riding, drawing and getting to know how horses think and act. His raw artistic talent and riding ability fueled a passion to understand horses better in order to draw them better. He developed a lifelong habit of drawing in the moment while with horses and later producing drawing after drawing by memory back in a studio.

Savitt graduated from Pratt in 1941 and served in the army during World War II. Back in New York, he found work illustrating outdoors and adventure magazines and explored English riding at Claremont Riding Academy on Manhattan's Upper West Side. His opportunity to focus on drawing and painting horses came when he was hired by Dell for a number of comic-book series featuring movie cowboy horses. His action-packed paintings of horsey derring-do appeared on more than 140 covers.

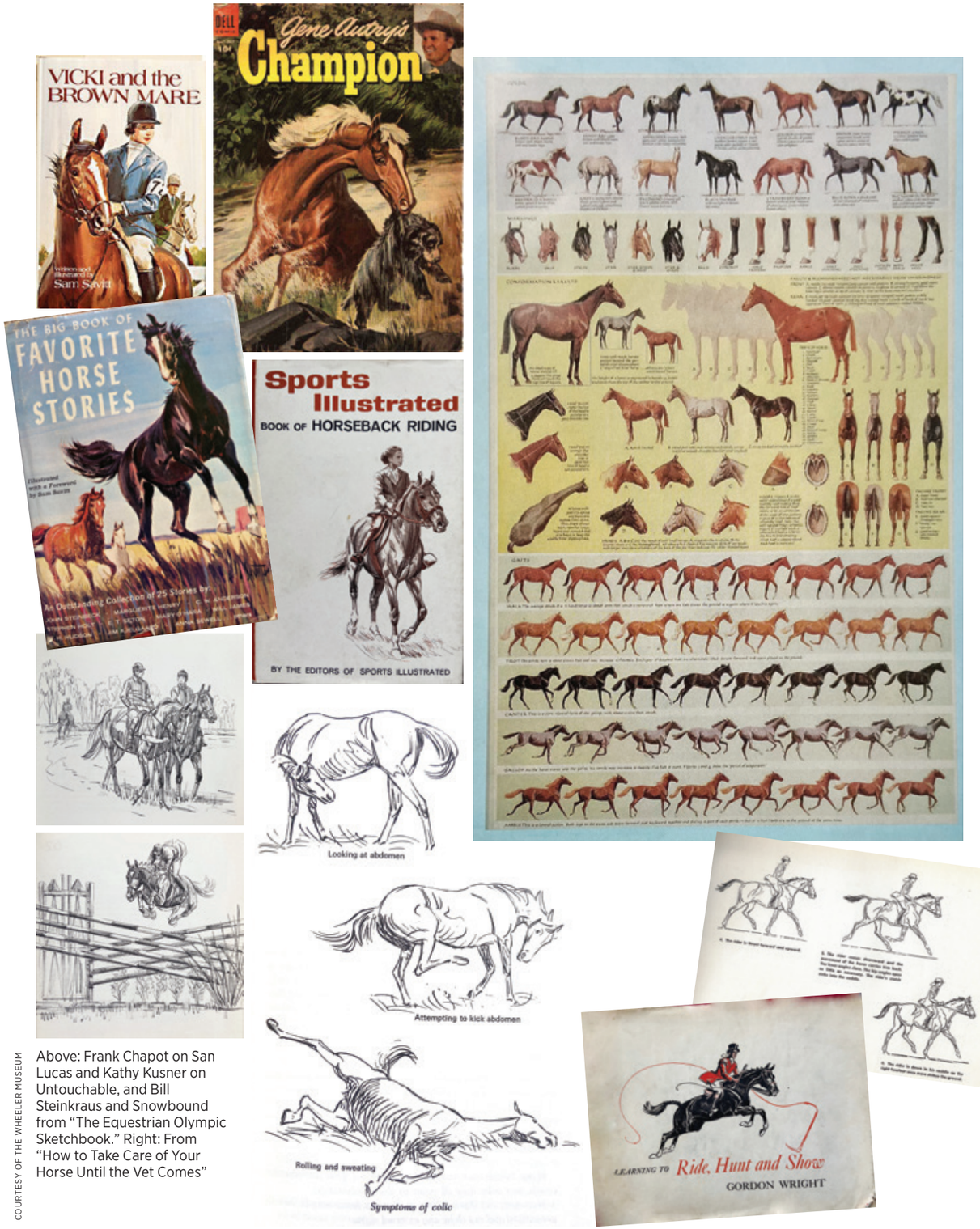
'LEARNING TO RIDE, HUNT AND SHOW'

Studying under Paul Brown helped Savitt hone his craft and open new career doors. When Gordon Wright asked Brown to illustrate his book, Brown recommended Savitt. It was a mutually beneficial arrangement. Recognizing Savitt's raw talent in the saddle, Wright traded teaching Savitt to ride for Savitt's illustrations. In 1950, the partnership resulted in Savitt's first illustrated book and his own firsthand successful experience: "Learning To Ride, Hunt and Show" according to Wright's system of instruction.

Savitt and his family moved to North Salem, New York, not far from Wright's Secor Farm, and eventually had horses at home. Savitt foxhunted with Golden's Bridge Hounds, trained a Thoroughbred named War Bride well enough to capture the attention of the U.S. Equestrian Team, and accumulated enough horse show ribbons through the years to "line the walls of his enormous studio," according to his son, Roger Savitt.

The time in the saddle gave Savitt a sense of a horse's movement and what proper position actually felt like. He collaborated with Wright on books on horsemanship and riding instruction and was named U.S. Equestrian Team official illustrator in 1965. His routine of making numerous sketches a day to accumulate a choice of images for later projects was just like the daily repetition and incremental training of horse and rider preparing for a horse show. For Savitt, art didn't just imitate life; each mirrored the other.

Connections forged through the years in the North Salem community led to numerous projects, including writing his own "Step-A-Bit: The Story of a Foal" that grew out of a collection of near-daily sketches of a foal whom Savitt visited at a nearby farm. More books followed that are among those that influenced the dreams of horse-crazy kids: "Midnight: The Champion Bucking Horse," "Vicki and the Brown Mare" and "Vicki and the Black Horse."



COURTESY OF THE WHEELER MUSEUM

Above: Frank Chapot on San Lucas and Kathy Kusner on Untouchable, and Bill Steinkraus and Snowbound from "The Equestrian Olympic Sketchbook." Right: From "How to Take Care of Your Horse Until the Vet Comes"

These and Savitt's later books made an impact on readers. One fan recalled, "Not just the books he wrote and illustrated, but his illustrations anywhere are captivating and put you in the scene." Looking at a horse drawn by Savitt gives both an immediacy to what's depicted in the scene and a moment of reflection to ask, "What is really going on here for that horse?" and "What is that horse feeling?"

Perhaps the most profound contribution Savitt's drawings made to an understanding of the nature of horses was to convince people that horses were thinking and feeling. He did not do this in the fantastical way of the talking TV horse, Mr. Ed, or even the horse characters in stories like "Black Beauty," who tell their own tales. Savitt's style gave horses an artistic realism that allowed them to express themselves in ways that viewers could learn to see if they just took the time to observe. One reader recalls what she learned: "I could always tell a Savitt drawing because of the horse's crisp ears and soft eyes that said so much."

> "The artistic thing comes first, but accuracy is very important to me."—Sam Savitt

'DRAWING WITH SAM SAVITT'

Through the decades, Savitt spent hours watching his horses at home to continually refine his rendering of a horse's neck while grazing or the look of alarm when spooked in the paddock. He accepted a job to illustrate the Miller's Harness Company catalog because he would learn to create accurate details of tack and attire.

Savitt was quoted about his aim in all his work, whether for mass publication or one-of-a-kind private commission: "The artistic thing comes first, but accuracy is very important to me."

In covering major events, such as the 1968 Olympic Games or England's Grand National steeplechase, he would sketch quickly to capture the intricacies of equine bodies in action. The years of observing horses allowed him to capture and project fleeting expressions. Since he couldn't be at all places at one time, he did rely on photographs, but his style was to look at them and then put them away, drawing from his mind's eye. "I watch and remember," he was noted to say, words of wisdom passed along to artists and riders alike.

In addition to various books of horse stories, he created or collaborated on detailed posters of horse breeds, as well as books and magazine articles that were explicitly educational. Two readers remembered the effect of Savitt's work: "When looking at horses, we looked for a 'Sam Savitt' head! Gold standard." "His illustrations developed my eye for conformation."

In 1981, he published "Drawing with Sam Savitt," insisting that "drawing is a skill that can be learned." His advice for drawing holds true for riding and horsemanship: "Watching horses is the best way to learn about them ... Now let me show you how to look at a horse, and remember that sight is a faculty, but seeing is an art."

Fortunately for the current generation, Roger Savitt has bequeathed the publication rights of "Drawing with Sam Savitt" for re-issue to the American Academy of Equine Art. His father was an inaugural member in 1980, among others that included Jean Bowman, Marilyn Newmark and Richard Stone Reeves. Roger wrote the foreword for the new edition and offers his father's artwork through the website SamSavittArt.com.

Just as Savitt passed on his enormous range of knowledge about horse anatomy and psychology in all his illustrations, he also traveled widely, giving lectures and demonstrations at schools, riding clubs and community centers. In addition, he offered workshops for budding artists.

Whether turning to Savitt's illustrations for drawing instruction or simply to appreciate horses, those who come to know his work can gain a newfound sense of the principles, joys and challenges of horsemastership. This is something they can then look for in their own relationships with horses.

More than a few people who cherish their Savitt illustrations have speculated, correctly it seems, "He really must have loved horses to get them so perfect."