

Where Have All The Cowboys Gone?

Photography by: **Lance C. Bell**

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Winston Churchill once said, “There’s nothing better for the inside of a man than the outside of a horse.” That being said, where are all the men? Over the last couple decades the equine industry has flourished with mostly women who are buying, training, and riding horses. The American Cowboy seems to be teetering on the edge of extinction. Broken Spoke Stable is on a mission to change that and in this article you are going to meet three men who have discovered a love for horses in ways that have altered their lives.

Our equine facility lies in the heart of the beautiful community known as Pleasant Valley in Garrett County, Maryland. It’s an agriculture area where many farms have deep generational roots that have been passed down from one family to the next. The way of life in this community is peaceful and on Sunday mornings it is normal to see the Amish heading to church with their horses and buggies. Farm tractors travel up and down the county roads as frequently as automobiles and in mid-summer the aroma of fresh mowed hay fills the air. Grazing horses in our road front pastures attract many to slow down or even stop as they drive by. Since opening for business in 2007 our stable was a place enjoyed mostly by female clients but that is changing and it’s exciting to be a part of that change. I’d like to introduce you to a few of these inspiring “cowboys.”

PAUL —

Paul DeKraai has always loved horses and as a young boy he had family who trained them. He remembers that he loved visiting his cousins so he could sit on the back of a horse named McGee and just walk around the corral. Paul says he would read every horse book he could lay his hands on but never had the funds to actually buy his own horse. As he got older his interest turned to motorcycles and he became less addicted to the hope of ever owning a horse.



Fast forward from the 1970s and Paul was living in Colorado where the opportunity to hunt and fish was abundant. His best friend had two Arabian horses that Paul doted on every chance he could get. Paul moved to Baltimore when he retired and then onto Western Maryland. His brother had bought a ranch in Oklahoma and wanted to celebrate a brother week together. He even bought Paul a horse to ride while on the trip. Paul admits, “It was so emotional to finally own a horse of my own that it brought tears to my eyes.”



So at age 70 Paul decided that before heading to Oklahoma he wanted to take some riding lessons so he wouldn't look like an "idiot" in front of real cowboys. He put a call in to Tammy and the relationship at Broken Spoke Stable began. When Paul first came to the stable he just wanted to learn how to tack up and brush up on his riding. We had a lot of fun with those lessons but I really didn't think I'd see him again once he returned home from his trip. I was wrong, Paul was hooked. He came back and connected with a Quarter Horse named Hondo – a beautiful buckskin that he quickly fell in love with.

Paul says, "Hondo has been training me ever since that first ride. He has his moods and is a bit lazy if you let him, but Tammy is tough on me and brings out the best in us as a team. When I started lessons I thought I was learning to just ride a horse. That is different now; I'm learning about horses and how to behave with them and how to be a leader and a better man. I have learned that it's a relationship and it's about being humble. I've learned to be a horseman and that I have to change the way I look at people and the way I've treated myself."



As a musician Paul understands harmony and rhythm, which is the key to understanding a true partner relationship with your horse. This opened the door for Tammy to use musical terminology in ways he could relate to his riding. Paul was able to mingle the two together quite well in order to keep time with Hondo.



“Tammy is forgiving, she lets me spin on the hook until I get it. Hondo always complies with my fumbling and never complains. It’s become a part of me and who I am. I’ve become forgiving of myself and others. The other day I was walking back to the arena with Hondo and he was just walking along beside me, we were two guys just hanging out. I thought, this is my journey, my path. As long as I can throw a leg over I’m going to keep that relationship because I’m a better man for it.”

Paul says that every organization he’s worked for he has always ended up being in charge. “I have people who still call me boss. It’s nice to come into a situation where I’m the student and I take that just as seriously.”

RYAN —

Ryan Hoffman was 14 years old when he found his way to Broken Spoke Stable. His parents had been involved with horses several times over the years but after a search to find his dad a horse his mom found a Facebook group that was saving horses from the kill pen. They rescued one horse then another and then a third and then they bailed Major, a handsome black and white paint. When he was delivered Ryan quickly laid claim to him but his mom, Ellen, says that Major chose Ryan first.

Top: “When I bestride him, I soar, I am a hawk: he trots the air; the earth sings when he touches it; the basest horn of his hoof is more musical than the pipe of Hermes.” – *William Shakespeare*

Right: Ryan is one of a few students who wanted to learn the art of riding bareback and with his natural balance it made him a perfect candidate.



In Ryan's words: "When we first got Major he was just going to be another horse that we saved but he ended up becoming so much more. It was obvious that he was well trained but his first owner had used him up and then just threw him away. We took our time bringing him back to full health. At a certain point he was able to be ridden both bareback and under saddle. Once we realized how trained he was we decided I should take lessons at Broken Spoke Stable. That helped get the ball rolling. I was able to learn something with the lesson horse and then replicate it back home with Major. When I did this I could feel the bond growing between us. It gave me a strong emotional tie to him."

"Our family has saved many horses in our time but he was special! Yet sadly, all good things must come to an end. A few months after our photo shoot for *Mountain Discoveries* magazine, Major passed away and my whole family grieved his loss. But this is what makes life, life." Major was estimated to be around 25 years old.

At the time of this writing the Hoffman family has financially recovered 5 horses themselves and have had 9 more stabled with them that others have bailed at their expanding facility in Bruceton Mills, WV. They currently have one girl that is doing a foster sponsor on their farm. She rides, grooms and helps care for horses and in exchange covers all the vet and farrier bills. The goal is to get a few more

Rescue horses often come with hidden issues so the best way to approach any training with them is to begin with ground work and build on that. We teach natural horsemanship in a way that promotes trust and confidence. Ryan and Major bonded very quickly with this technique. We begin by desensitizing with the lead line gently thrown over the back and wrapping around the girth area to telling your horse "whoa" and have him stand, unsecured while lying across their back and rubbing all over them until they relax. These exercises create the ultimate trust between horse and human.



horses that can be ridden and place them with a foster sponsor. It's definitely a family endeavor as everyone is involved. The Hoffmans have just completed a beautiful new barn with added stalls and enlarged pastures so that they can continue to rescue horses from the kill pen.

Horse rescue is one of the hardest endeavors in the equine industry. These horses can come with great mental and physical challenges. Some have been so traumatized that they find it hard to ever trust a human again. Many are extremely underweight once they find themselves in a kill pen. The sad fact is that often times very good horses, by no fault of their own, take this path and if it weren't for people like the Hoffmans these horses end up being slaughtered. I encourage all horse owners to include your horses in your will. Have a plan for them in the event that they outlive you. Often family members who know nothing about horses are left with the decisions of what to do and then these



"Until one has loved an animal, a part of one's soul remains unawakened." – Anatole France

horses begin a new journey that more times than you may think end in a bad place. Fortunately many are saved and adopted and live out their lives being well cared for. As for the horses who find it difficult to ever trust a human again, life can be a constant circle of in and out of auctions until one day there is no one to bail them out.

Rescued horses are expensive to care for; you may

need constant vet care in the first few delicate months. Special food must be given in small amounts several times a day to ensure that the horse won't colic. Many of these horses make a full recovery and some even go on to do great things in the show ring. Others have injuries that prevent them from being ridden but still make great companions. A handful succumb despite every effort to nurture them back to health. We've had many rescue horses board at our stable and I can say that these horses are the ones who steal your heart, there's just something about a horse that has been rescued. They seem to know that their lives were saved, that a second chance has been afforded them. Then there's that day you reach up to stroke their neck and they don't flinch or they begin following you back to the gate after you've unhooked the lead line and they could have turned and run away. Or the second they press their face against your chest and just stand there in a moment of silence. I believe if you listen close enough between their breaths you would hear them quietly say, "thank you for saving me!" It takes special people to rescue special horses. If you are interested in becoming a foster sponsor to a horse living on the Hoffman farm, please call Jeff at 304-282-4779.

AIDEN —

At age 11, Aiden Helton had no idea that he was about to discover a love for horses. His sister Clair was on the Broken Spoke Stable show team and like any good brother Aiden went to that first show with his family to cheer and support Clair as she participated in her first youth western

Aiden on the trail with Cissy, one of our most popular lesson horses.





By far the favorite part of Aiden's lesson is getting out on one of our beautiful trails.

pleasure riding class. Aiden soon found himself liking everything about the show; he liked seeing all of the different horses in the different classes. With each show Aiden says it got harder and harder to just sit there and watch. But horseback riding was Clair's "thing" so Aiden continued to keep quiet and support his sister until eventually he just couldn't take it anymore. He finally asked his parents if he could also take lessons, which they agreed to and after just one ride on Frosty, Aiden was hooked.

"Riding is so much fun," Aiden says. "I feel very relaxed and happy on a horse. I like learning new things and I want to learn even more." Aiden progressed so well that he got to enter his very first show at the end of the season last summer. It was the annual Hoof Prints 4-H show and even though it was pouring rain, bitter cold, and mud everywhere, Aiden was the only one participating who was smiling the entire day. Aiden is the first young man to ever participate on our show team and he has spent all winter working on improving his skills so he can be better prepared once show season begins this coming year.

The Helton family has a lot of medical stress with their youngest daughter Sophie. Many trips back and forth to Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore sometimes keep Aiden and Clair from attending their lessons. They take

their lessons together and there is absolutely no sibling competition between the two of them — it's amazing how well these two get along. Aiden is pretty quiet by nature and usually keeps his thoughts to himself. But a few months ago Aiden had something happen that really scared him. At age 12 he had two strokes and a mass was found on his brain along with a hole in his heart and a clotting disorder. This was a total shock to all of us! So when Aiden's mom called to schedule lessons for both he and Clair I was pretty surprised. I knew the best thing for all of us was to make sure we didn't treat Aiden any differently but still horseback riding does come with some risk.

Aiden has also fallen in love with the Quarter Horse named Hondo and I felt very secure in allowing Aiden to ride him for that first lesson back after being diagnosed. His mom stayed close by that day and gave me a few special instructions and once we got started I could feel all fear melting away (I think I was more fearful than Aiden). Aiden says that when he's riding he doesn't think about anything, he just rides. Sometimes I will question if he's hearing me. He says he is always really listening to what is being taught


but sometimes just needs to take it all in. His favorite part of riding is at the end of the lesson when we take what we've learned and go out and put it to practice on the trail. There's nothing any more relaxing than a ride through the trees, going up and down hills while maneuvering over rocks and showing your horse that you are a leader he can trust. Aiden is becoming that kind of a leader and we all look forward to seeing where the future takes him.

These three men — Paul, Ryan and Aiden — have been such a blessing in my life. Watching them transform into the successful horsemen they have all become is the joy of every riding instructor. They each had a different agenda when they started but each has discovered the very same inward emotions that are very hard to put into words when it comes to a man and his horse. I think Aiden said it best when I initially asked him to expound on what riding horses meant to him. His reply, "I just love it!"




There is always a big smile when this young man is near a horse!

**If you want to learn more about our stable and all that we do, please visit our website: brokenspokestable.net
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