

Tony Vagneur: Thoroughbreds, Abacus and Sumo: A natural mix for good times, fond memories

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Saddle Sore

Abacus. We all know what an abacus is, don't we? It's a tool used in the calculation of numbers, employed in the Far East before the adoption of the Arabic numeral system. We learned to use one in elementary school.

Yes, but what if it also was a ranch, a place where thoroughbred racehorses were raised and what if it was, at one time, located in our midst. Like a dream, it sits in my memory, something that was once so integral to my life, but with its existence so long ago, sometimes it seems possible it didn't exist.

Mary Frank, a famous Broadway producer ("Tea and Sympathy" and many others) bought the ranch in the 1960s. She had a grand vision — foaling and raising thoroughbred racehorses in the high altitude of the Capitol Creek Valley. Her theory, and a good one, was that training and conditioning such horses at altitude would give them an aerobic (and speed) advantage at lower elevations where the big races are typically held. Tracks like Belmont Park, Pimlico and Churchill Downs. Think Triple Crown.

It was not a lark, nor an amateur attempt to get into the business. She rounded up around 1,000 acres of prime ranch land, including the original McCabe Homestead, all of it with excellent water rights. Not only was it a horse farm, specializing in racehorses, but Frank ranched it as well, putting up enough hay to not only keep her horses fed, but having surplus to sell to neighboring ranchers and horse aficionados around the valley.

Nationally known horse trainer and show horse rider, Fritz Burkhardt, fresh off a gig at the Kentucky Derby, was in the area on vacation, pulling an 18-foot travel trailer. A friend said maybe he should call Frank while he was in the area. A deal was quickly struck and Burkhardt and his girlfriend, Barbara, were soon working at the Abacus.

Why Abacus? By what sort of unknown reason was it named that? Is there a mysterious clue in the fact that "abacus" might have originally meant "dust" in the ancient languages, or was there something even deeper? According to Burkhardt, Frank named it the Abacus because that would place it first in the telephone book listings, which it did, until some enterprising jamoke came up with AAA something or other.

My first wife, Caroline Off, worked there and we spent a lot of time, most of it after the work day, telling stories and talking horses. My God, what an education in thoroughbred lineage, breeding and performance. That was 45 to 50 years ago, if anyone is counting.

Mary Frank liked to throw great parties for whomever she thought would enjoy a good romp at the Abacus, and there is a house on the ranch still referred to as "The Party House." Mary Martin, a famous Broadway actress, was Frank's close friend and confidant; you might remember that Martin was the mother of Larry Hagman, who played the evil son on the ever-popular soap opera, "Dallas."

At one particular party, Buck Deane and I involved Hagman in an educational display of Sumo wrestling, consisting mostly of stomping at each other from opposite corners of the room and smashing our bellies together. A lot of grunting and groaning went with our moves. None of us had big bellies, but we put on a show. Good or bad, couldn't say.

Always innovators, Frank and Burkhardt built a unique racetrack; unlike an oval, this one has unusual curves, dips and hills. The track surrounds the original homestead cabin on the McCabe Ranch. The horses training there must have had a good time. Today, we pasture cows in that 80-acre meadow.

In 1967, the old gymnasium from Camp Hale's famous 10th Mountain Division, near Leadville, was put up for auction. Frank purchased the enormous building and had the local Diemoz brothers haul it to the ranch, a process that took two years. It was a major undertaking, but once the gym was reassembled at the Abacus, it was one of the largest and most modern arenas in the Roaring Fork Valley.

Mary Frank sold the Abacus to Harry Collins in 1980, after her daughter decided to move back East. Frank died in New York in 1988. Her daughter, Maud (a horse trainer) and her daughter, both were killed in a hit-and-run accident shortly thereafter.

The racetrack and the indoor arena are still there. Fritz Burkhardt never got far from the racing world. He is the Chief State Steward for the Delaware Thoroughbred Racing Commission.

The Abacus Ranch is still there; owned by the Collins family and called the McCabe Ranch, a producer of fine commercial, grass-fed Black Angus beef.

And for me and a few others (thank you Fritz Burkhardt), there are a lot of memories that will never be erased.

Parts are attributable to Lauren Vagneur Burtard and her college thesis "History of the McCabe Ranch." Tony Vagneur writes here on Saturdays and welcomes your comments at ajv@sopris.net .

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