

SUNDAY, MAY 28, 2000

# More people choosing the horse as a hobby

By LISA SINK  
of the Journal Sentinel staff

In eight years, Nancy Turner's horseback riding school in Hartland has gone from 30 students to 275.

And her operation, Knollwood Farms, is not alone in Waukesha County, where growing urbanization and upscale subdivisions have attracted people with an interest in embracing a bit of the country life — and the money to afford the often-pricey hobby.

"When the economy is good, we see it," said Turner, a former veterinary technician. "Business has been good."

The same development pressures that have squeezed out the bovine in what was once known as Cow County USA have had the opposite effect on the equine, at least in recent years.

"Right now, it's at its peak," said Al Gagliano, owner of Kettle Moraine Ranch in Eagle who has been in the horse business for 33 years. "As for boarding stables, they're everywhere. I've never seen so many boarding stables in my life. There could be 100. I'm not exaggerating."

Nonetheless, as farmland has diminished in Waukesha County over the decades, so, too, have the number of horses kept on farms here. In 1935, there were 8,308 horses on farms in Waukesha County, compared with 1,339 horses in 1997, according to state figures.

The difference is that 60 years ago, horses were still often used as beasts of burden or for transportation. Today, their use in the county is almost exclusively for recreation.

In addition, the state figures do not include the many horses being boarded at stables or kept at private homes, said Laura Ma-

son, statistician for the Wisconsin Agricultural Statistical Service.

Horses are "probably more off the farm than on the farm in Waukesha County," Mason said.

Although no group tracks the number of horses county by county, "the number of horses are increasing statewide, definitely," Mason said.

The number of horses, ponies, donkeys and mules in Wisconsin rose from an estimated 84,300 in 1992 to 120,000 in 1999, Mason said.

Just how many of those horses are in Waukesha County is hard to determine. But local stable owners report a surge of interest in riding lessons and horse ownership.

"It's really very vibrant," said Sue Bielinski, who breeds national champion Arabians at the 38-acre Shadowood Farm in the Town of Ottawa. "In Ottawa township, nearly every house has a horse," she said.

"Waukesha County reflects equine interest of all types and breeds."

But she added, "Right now we have less interest in breeding stock. The performance and pleasure stock has dramatically grown."

Businesses that provide trail rides are holding their own, in large part because of the patronage of Scouts and groups from churches and schools, said Gagliano and Bob Winzinried, president of the Swinging W Ranch in Eagle.

Riding lessons and show com-

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petitions are becoming more popular among teenage girls and even their mothers, Turner said.

"Adult interest is high in lessons and shows," she said. "I get adults who say, 'I always wanted to do this as a kid but never got a chance.'"

A real estate agent during the day, Jennifer Burton spends her free nights and weekends at Knollwood Farms, riding and taking care of horses. Her son, Keegan, 11, competes in shows.

"I started lessons when I was 6," said Burton, of Glendale. "I was a horse-crazy girl and just never left

it. Eventually, I'd like to have a little hobby farm of my own."

Holly Clark and her daughter, Courtney, 16, ride horses they board at Cornerstone Ranch in Palmyra, just across the Waukesha County line in Jefferson County.

"I never expected in my life I'd own a horse," Holly Clark said last week while watching her daughter and other girls practice riding. But Clark now joins about a half-dozen other mothers every Monday night, riding horses, cleaning stalls and socializing.

Jody Schuenke also spends many Saturdays on the Palmyra farm with her daughters. She watches from a safe distance, having ridden a horse just once.

"When we started coming here, I wouldn't even hold (the horse). I wouldn't walk behind it. I wouldn't do anything," said Schuenke, a Town of Genesee

hairdresser and self-avowed "city girl."

"My friends laughed at me," she said, when she announced she was buying a horse for her daughter, Lizzy.

The purchase came two years after Lizzy started riding lessons with use of a stable-rented horse. "I gave her a few lessons for her 11th birthday, thinking it was a girl thing and it would pass and that would be the end of it," Schuenke said. "But it never ended."

Now Lizzy has her own horse, Selah, a 3-year-old who is learning to jump. Lizzy, a volleyball player at Waukesha West High School, chose to give up basketball for horseback riding when she became pressed for time.

Teens like Lizzy, Courtney and friend Trisha Keller, 17, are "basically lifers" around horses, mother Holly Clark said. Lizzy's younger sister Anne, 11, who started taking Western-style riding lessons last fall, said that Lizzy was already making plans to board a horse near whatever college she attends.

"It's a lifestyle," Holly Clark said. "They've made really great friendships."

The teens often sleep overnight at the farm and help clean the stables and care for their horses, said Marianne Schulz, who opened Cornerstone Ranch two years ago.

Schulz, a riding instructor for 15 years who also breeds horses for sale, said she has seen greater teen involvement in horse shows.

"Five years ago, I'd have three or four kids competing in a show," she said. "Now, it's more like 10 to 15."

If Lizzy and Courtney stick with horses, they will be in the minority, Turner said.

For the most part, horseback riding tends to be a passing phase for teens and young children.

"Most get tired after six to 12 months," Turner said, adding that she discourages parents from buying horses. "I always say, 'Why would you want to do that? She's going to discover boys and move on. Don't be the parent who buys the 2-year-old Arabian stallion. Use the lesson horses the stable owns.'"

Turner said most of her income comes from lessons given to youths "who can't afford to buy or own a horse."



Riding instructor Nancy Turner (right) secures a stirrup strap as Stephanie Andringa, 14, of Oconomowoc prepares for competition at State Fair Park.

A 4-H-sponsored group called the "Horseless Horse Project" also gives children who can't afford horses a chance to work at stables in exchange for free rides, said Leona Jacobson, a member of the 4-H Horse Board.

At age 86 with decades of service in 4-H, Jacobson said she's seen an increasing number of teenage girls interested in the horse activities. "A lot of the boys, when they get 15 or 16, they like something with a motor on it," she said, laughing.

Said Turner: "The boys need to wise up: This is where all the girls are."

Last year, 157 youths participated in county 4-H horse projects, including shows at the Waukesha County Fair.

"It's one of our strongest projects with the most kids," said Grace Marko, 4-H coordinator with University of Wisconsin Extension.

Sales of horses are also strong in Waukesha County, said Bieliniski, the Arabian horse breeder who sells 12 to 14 horses a year.

"The prices actually have gone up a bit, because there are fewer breeders," she said.

A no-frills basic lesson horse is setting people back \$1,000 to \$2,500, compared with about \$500

a few years ago. An entry-level show horse costs between \$30,000 and \$50,000.

And that doesn't include the saddles, reins and show suits. The suits alone can cost \$1,000 to \$3,000.

"Horses do tend to be more of a luxury hobby type of activity," said Dave Williams, agricultural agent for the UW Extension office in Waukesha County. "It's not a cheap hobby."

Williams and Marko said that Waukesha County's affluence, coupled with the strong economy, has spurred the local growth in the horse business. Even though residential developments are pushing farms out of the county, many home buyers are able to afford 5-acre lots in the western half of the county that can accommodate a small barn and horse, Williams said.

Gagliano speculated that the boarding stable boon would be temporary.

"There's a lot of cash flow right now," he said. "As soon as the economy slows down, then these poor boarding stables are going to be hurting."

"I've watched horse stables come and go, riding and boarding stables. It's just like owning an airplane. It's a luxury."