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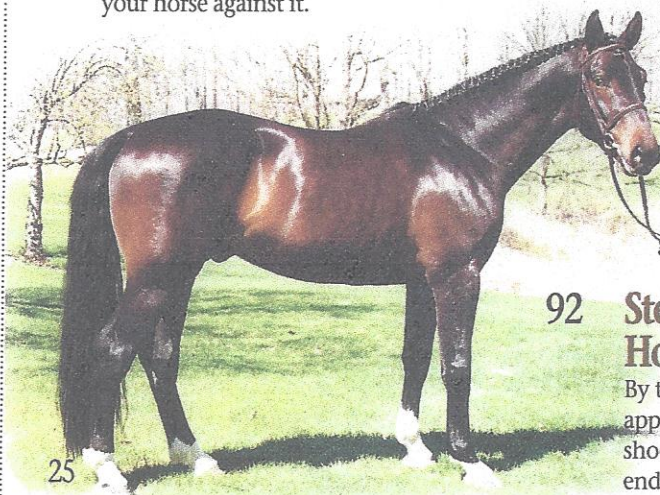
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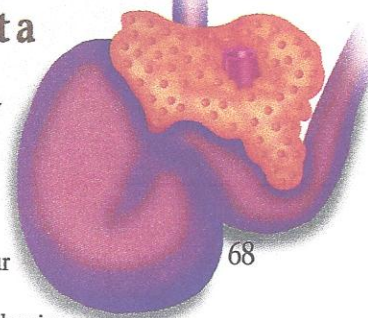
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## TRUE TALE

# Healing Hands

What can a young woman do when her father doesn't share her dreams?

By Elizabeth B. Herman

My 14th spring found me wandering the woods on my pony Warpaint's back, avoiding my mother's lectures and my father's reproofs—and seething because they wouldn't let me compete in the A-rated shows. I knew I was good enough, almost as good as my friend Gina, who was showing on the circuit that year. My trainer said I had a balanced seat and good hands.

Late one Monday in May, I trotted Paint along a pine-needled path, lamenting my fate. The weekend still gnawed in my gut. I was sick of following Gina and her new mare, Poco, around at the shows. At first I thought it was better to go and be part of the action, even if I couldn't ride. Now I wasn't so sure which was more painful, grooming for my friends or just staying home.

At the show grounds, my chest had collapsed with desire, seeing Gina lead her slick, taut black mare around with casual disregard, reins dangling loose in her hand. She never even glanced back at the elegant creature that trailed her. The mare's long, arching neck was accentuated by a neat line of braids; they perched along her crest like tiny bumblebees. Gina was invincible in her tailored navy jacket and her shiny black custom boots. I craved her coolness and everything else she had. Gina didn't throw up her breakfast before her warm-up class. She didn't care if she missed her lead in a flat class or if her horse pulled down a rail in a hunter event. For her there would always be another show—her parents made sure of that. It's easy to see shows as a place to school your horse when you know that next weekend you can go to another one and try again.

Those A-rated shows were what I needed to progress. It wasn't enough to

take my silly pinto pony to two local shows a year, no matter how big a sacrifice it was for Mom to take me. I could ride as well as Gina if only my parents would drive me to the equestrian center half as often as Gina's dad did, and if they'd just get me a horse that the judges would pin.

Riding along the sunny trail, I absently pulled the last of Paint's winter coat from his neck. It came away in mottled brown-and-white tufts. His lower lip hung loose like an old man's. He was good on the trail, but his stride was too short and his markings too flashy for a show judge's taste. He was just a backyard family pony—first my sister's, now mine.

"Anne showed him just fine," Dad had snapped at me more than once when I begged him to lease me a Thoroughbred

Warpaint was good on a trail, but his stride was too short and his markings too flashy for a show judge's taste.

from the equestrian center. I remembered his response one night as we sat in the kitchen, my young life hanging in balance: "You've got your own pony, your own barn and now lessons, too. But that's not enough for you, is it? Now you want another horse."

I did my best to make my case. He was silent. For a moment, I almost thought I had him convinced. Then he shook his head. "I didn't put in 12-hour days to move us to the country and build you a stable just so you could ride somewhere else."

I tried to cut in, but he wheeled around in my face. "When you're out having lessons, that pony gets bored and chews



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an electric scooter, but she does compete in carriage-driving events, and she's had a heck of a time just trying to find products that should be available," says Surr.

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## MICHIGAN UNVEILS HORSE PAVILION

The Michigan Horse Council's annual Stallion Expo is always noteworthy, but this year's event in mid-March was "the biggest news in animal agriculture since they cloned that sheep over in Scotland." Those were the tongue-in-cheek words of Michigan governor John Engler, an alumnus of Michigan State University, as he christened MSU's new \$15 million agricultural display complex.

Dubbed the Pavilion, the facility features a 66,000-square-foot showing next door to plenty of display space for both horses and horse-related items. This year, instead of just touring the stable area, visitors got to see cutting demonstrations, team penning, barrel racing and stallions exhibited in hand.

"It worked very well for us," says Expo co-chair Ann Louise Budd. "We were real pleased because it's the first time we've been able to have live demonstrations, and the demonstrations and the stallions were shown to full houses each day. That gives a whole different aspect to the Expo and the activities we can present."

And plenty of horse lovers came to see those activities: Attendance for the Stallion Expo totaled 25,000 people

over three days, an increase of about 7,000 from 1996 and the largest crowd in the 14 years the event has been held.

Barb Heyboer, president of the Michigan Horse Council, says the Pavilion is just one step toward integrating the horse industry with other areas of agriculture in Michigan. "It's been a real blend of all agriculture working together, which makes it special," said Heyboer. "Everybody kind of puts the horse industry in one circle and leaves it there, but the usage of the Pavilion will be a blend of horse and other uses."

The first three weekends on the new facility's books proved Heyboer's point; after the Stallion Expo, the Pavilion hosted an elk auction and a garden show. "This kind of completed the circle," says Heyboer. "They could see a demonstration, they could see stallions, they could

shop, or they could go to an educational seminar. What more could a person want during an event designed to promote the horse industry?"—*Jud Branam*

## PFIZER HELPS NRHA

The National Reining Horse Association (NRHA) has announced that Pfizer Animal Health, a leading supplier of veterinary health products, will help sponsor the association's 1997 NRHA Derby and Superstakes Show in June and the NRHA Futurity in November. In addition to monetary contributions, Pfizer has donated 100 tubs of its popular dewormer, Strongid C, to be given to the Futurity and Open Freestyle winners. □

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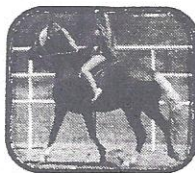
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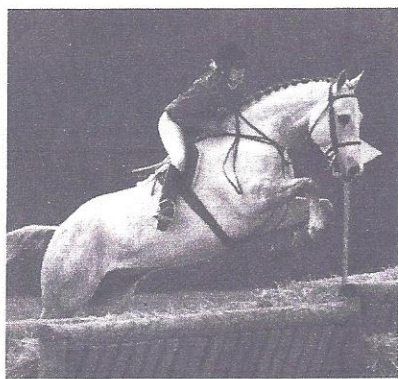
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his stall down." There was nothing I could say to that. At least for now, our backyard arrangement had blockaded my dreams.

So I trotted the trails on little Warpaint, pretending he was a big bay Thoroughbred and telling him about the courses we'd ride.

The scrub pines glowed orange as I grudgingly headed home. Plodding along on loose reins, I brooded and bit a hang-nail on my thumb until it bled. I could hear Dad telling me that I should quit this nervous habit and learn to take care of my hands.

Paint raised his head and went taut, reminding me that we had nearly reached the neighbor's field, his favorite part of the ride. He danced like the race-horse he wasn't. He pranced on striped hooves through the weeds. Anchoring the reins on his neck, I held him back like a parent.

Cumulus clouds swirled over the trees as we entered the field. The soft, warm spring air made Paint toss his head in gentle rebellion. The grasses smelled sweet. I leaned forward and let him go. We pounded through thigh-high swishing grass and circled a small copse of trees with the wind whistling in our ears. A rabbit shot away underfoot. The ebony woods drew near fast.

A fallen scrub pine blocked our path. I thought of circling, going around it, even getting off, but that would take way too long. It wasn't that high, and Paint was keen. I leaned forward, weight in my heels, and gathered rein for the count. He strode, huffed, shrank, leaped. I heard his hooves breaking branches. Then he landed in the deep needles and nearly folded. His head dropped low. He stumbled and crow-hopped until I pulled him up.

I swung down to take the quivering foreleg he held up, dainty as a cat. The blue oval in his brown eye widened with fear. Nothing seemed broken, but the hoof and pastern joint flamed in my hands. I searched the frog of his foot with my thumbs but found neither cut nor stone. Together we headed home, Paint limping at my side, inarticulate in his suffering.

We arrived as dusk fell. Dad had just pulled into the driveway; his car hood was still ticking. His back was turned as

A fallen scrub pine  
blocked our path.  
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too long. It wasn't  
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was keen.

he drew his medical bag and briefcase from the trunk. I approached, reins in hand, panicking, already mad because I knew he would be.

You have to approach my father carefully. A high-pitched voice makes him balk. You never know when he's got the names of new drugs or dying patients balanced in his mind. You have to go easy, come at him slowly and gently. You can't explode into a room or run up from behind, or he might spin around and start firing. And you get a lot farther if you don't show how desperate you are.

"Dad." He straightened, tired and flushed from his hour's drive in a hot car with no air. "We need the vet. I don't know why Paint's lame, but he's limping real bad. I can't see anything in the foot."

You could brace yourself, but you could never really prepare.

"What is it this time?" Dad turned and took in the pony's heaving flanks, the quivering brown-and-white map of his hide and the pain in his eyes, so quiet compared to the dramatics of sick humans. "All right. Let me look."

I willed Warpaint to stand. He grunted and jerked only once as Dad's clean, tanned fingers prodded the hoof. "Well, hell, I can't see what it is." He sighed out loud. "Go put him up and call the vet. I sure as hell didn't need this today."

I called, but Dr. Mouser was at the state fair. So we got his son, Ted, who knew anesthesia and little else. Swinging out of his father's white truck, Ted said he wouldn't charge if he couldn't help.

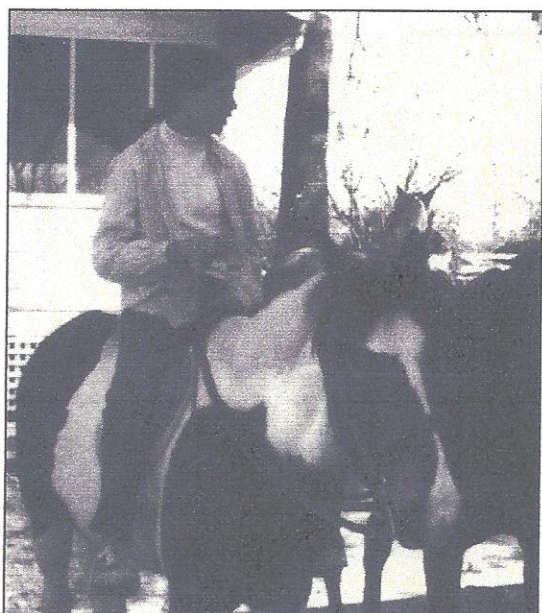
The stable lights gathered moths. The



night sang with cicadas and crickets, and the forest thrummed all around. My sister's mare munched hay and stamped in her stall as we stood in the aisle around the cross-tied pony. His head hung way too low. His flanks were hot and wet. I prayed that the stable was clean, and that Dad wouldn't notice the fresh chew marks on the top edge of one white-crossed stall door.

"I can't see why he's swelling," said Ted, slouching against a post and shining a flashlight on the raised hoof I held. He turned to spit black tobacco juice in the dust. "It's puffing up good now."

"We've got to hurry this up. Your mother's holding dinner," my father snapped. "Here. Let me see." I tucked my bloody thumb into my fist as he leaned in to look. He nudged me aside and held the hoof high, wrapping his palm around it to find the source of the heat. At the coronet band, where leg meets hoof, his thumbs brushed the fringe of hair against the grain. "Here it is," he



The author and Warpaint

said quickly, pointing to a small clot of dried blood. The human patients in his mind walked away. "He's gotten a stick wedged in here, and it's broken right off."

Now Dad the surgery professor turned to me. "It would be like getting a stick up under your fingernail," he said.

"No wonder he's lame."

Ted blinked and chewed in the silence that followed. Guiltily, I thought of the pine tree, its branches snapping. We stood there a moment, our hands resting on Paint's geographical sides. My father lit a cigarette, something he'd kill anyone else for doing in the barn.

"Go up and get my black bag, Beth. It's by the car."

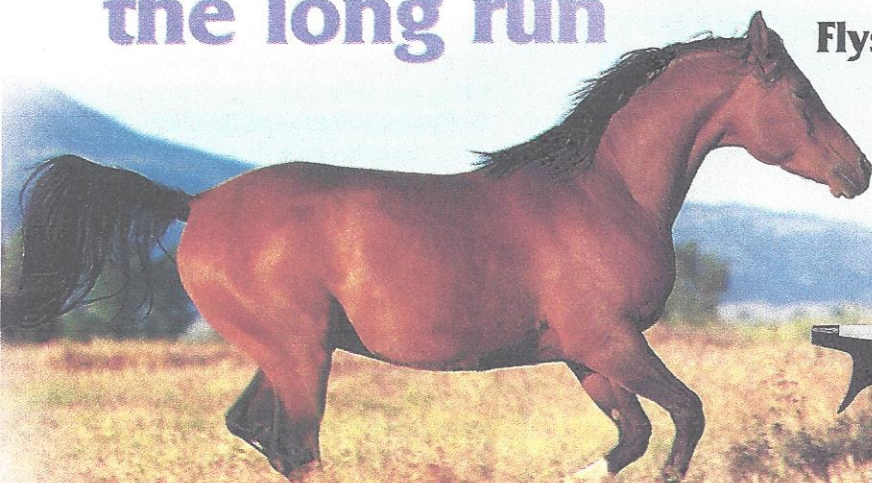
Ted happily pulled 10cc of Lidocaine into a syringe. "Better twitch him," he said, holding up a stick with a loop of chain attached to the end. I waved it away. Paint was no hotheaded Thoroughbred. You didn't need to twist his lip to keep him in line. There were simpler ways. I nuzzled the pony's big Roman nose, then wrapped my hand in one of Dad's gauze pads and reached into the side of his mouth, back where the teeth stop, and grabbed his tongue. I pulled it out like a fish, grayish pink, slick and huge. Paint gaped and gawked. He slobbered on Dad's desert boots. He squealed but stood still as

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The stick came out in toothpick-sized spikes, bloody and crumbling. Dad labored until every last speck was picked out.

Ted slid the needle into his foot.

My father drew from his yawning black bag a squirt bottle of golden disinfectant, along with a small scalpel, long tweezers that made me think of butterflies and more squares of gauze. He laid them neatly out on a cloth. Next he took out his hemostats, thin-nosed clamps with notched handles. The instruments glinted in the soft light and deepened Dad's mystery.

It took two long hours under the bug-crazed light. Warpaint's limp leg rested on my father's bent knee. I stood by quietly, watching the man bend his curly red-gray head to the task. The stick came out in toothpick-sized spikes, bloody and crumbling. Dad labored until every last speck was picked out. He flushed the hole with peroxide, dabbed on antibiotic ointment and snugly wrapped the numbed pastern in gauze. Ted spat tobacco and smiled his respect. Finished, Dad patted Paint's wide, flat cheek. The pony closed his eyes.

I tasted hot tears.

Small birds rustled in the eaves. I looked up at the rafters of the barn, so precisely canted, so carefully nailed. I looked back at Dad. I'd always admired his neat, square hands, with their smooth, clean half-moons. They wielded tools and cameras precisely. They dove into blood and saved people's lives. They prodded our strep-ridden throats gently. They played Beethoven softly.

They built a beautiful barn in the woods just for me. □

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