

# A Blessed Man

by Crystal Nichols

The heavy sound of hooves beating on the track, the sweet smell of honeysuckle from the morning dew, the cool crisp mountain air, a fog that hovers and surrounds the mountain, horses nickering as they play on the walkers, and gallop boys taking horses to and from the track are all the elements that Bill Gray experiences each morning at Ruidoso Downs as he sips on his coffee. The 63-year-old race trainer, profound farrier and devoted Christian has enjoyed being in this atmosphere for as long as he can remember. Bill has had the pleasure of working with some of the greatest horses and trainers that the horse industry has had to offer.

Bill Gray's earliest memories seem to always include horses. The Texan native said that his father owned a brush track in Amarillo and remembered always galloping and working horses there even when he was a kid. His father was known for racing a paint mare on the weekends at the track without a rider on her. He would put her in the starting gates, and let her race and would win every time. It seemed that she was unbeatable and never had a rider, so in the win pictures Bill would be placed on her back. These moments were some of his earliest memories on horseback. Even when he was growing up and they had to move cattle to different wheat pastures, Bill would grab a trusty Thoroughbred for their journey that usually was about 10 miles long. "All we had when I was growing up to work cattle with was the Thoroughbreds that were off the track. It was unheard of but that's all I knew. They could definitely keep up the distance, were incredibly smart and ours were broke and gentle." It wasn't the most common way of working cattle especially back then, but Bill and his father weren't exactly just "race trainers", they had a special way about them, almost a natural way with a horse. Bill grew up exercising racehorses and galloping them as a kid. In the 1970's, he started working for American Hall of Famer and 2013 Kentucky Derby winner, Claude R. "Shug" McGaughey, III and recalls that he was fascinated by being around the best Thoroughbreds in the nation during this time. He also galloped for Multiple Graded Stakes Winning Trainer, Wayne Stanton and says that he learned the most about working horses out of the gates from him. Bill Gray



remembers one horse in particular that he had the honor of galloping that was called Requested Honor while he was in Sante Fe, New Mexico. Requested Honor went on to produce a lot of great racehorses.

Bill Gray has been given the opportunity to be around some of the greatest racehorses that have ever lived. His earliest memory of a "great" one was when he was nineteen years old sitting in the truck with Walter Merrick and Bill's father "HM" Gray. Walter Merrick and his father were sitting there discussing this upcoming race colt as they watched him turn the corner on Walter's training track. Bill remembers their exact conversation that day as Walter was telling his father how good this certain colt was going to be and how good he looked and galloped as a yearling in that very moment. He knew he was destined to be something great. That colt went on to be one of the most influential horses to grace the horse industry and was known as Easy Jet. Right after this childhood memory, Easy Jet went on to accomplish some of the greatest achievements that a racehorse could have. Bill says, "Looking back now, who would have thought that I would one day be shoeing Easy Jet as a standing stud for a profession?" Bill went on to being Easy Jet's farrier and still has one of his shoes to this day. Walter Merrick was one of the greatest breeders and trainers ever in the racehorse business. The horses that came from his program had so much influence on the industry. Bill remembers listening to Walter's way of training and feels that he influenced him in many ways. He can remember Walter talking about Easy

Jet's elder brother, Jet Smooth and comparing them and racing them against each other at their track in Oklahoma.

Bill has had the honor of shoeing some of the greatest racehorses such as Go Man Go, Six Fols, Easy Jet, Rocket Jet Bug, and many more. He says that his life experiences with these great stallions and geldings have taught him more than he could have imagined. He was asked by owner, Harriet Peckham of Go Man Go to come and look at the standout horse because he had an abscess. Bill said that it would be an honor to look at the stallion. He remembers still to this day as if it were yesterday, first looking at this amazing horse with his abscess. "Everyone was nervous to touch him or analyze his problem because of who he was and what he had accomplished. They basically didn't want to be the one to mess him up more. I knew that I could because the Lord gave me confidence to work on him and He allowed me to do my job. It was 50% infected and needed to be cleaned out. I basically built him a shoe with only one nail on one side of the wall and two nails on the other because we had to clean it out so much to get to the infected area." Bill shod Go Man Go for over one year and stayed by his side working on his abscess during his five-month recovery time. Another great racehorse that needed specific farrier treatments was the famous gelding Rocket Jet Bug by Showum Jet and and out of Miss Rocket Bug by Lady Bugs Moon. Owner Betty Shebester of Wynnewood, OK and trainer JB Montgomery called on Bill Gray for help. Rocket Jet Bug suffered from laminitis with slight rotation of the coffin bone. Bill knew that he needed Heart Bar shoes to



add lift and support to help relieve the pain from the rotation. Without the support, the rotation and coffin bone would want to drop. After Bill worked on Rocket Jet Bug he went right on to win the 1980 Rainbow Derby. He then was sent to the Champion of Champions in California and the trainer there and farrier decided he did not need the Heart Bar shoes. They thought they had found something else wrong. They pulled the shoes off and in the Champion of Champions, Rocket Jet Bug finished tenth in the race. He was sent back to JB Montgomery and to Bill Gray who did exactly what they knew he needed in the beginning. He was placed with Heart Bar shoes

**GO MAN GO** was "notorious for his attitude". So when "Mind That Bird's co owner, Leonard Blach's son (who won the Kentucky Derby-handling Go Man Go in this photo) threw Bill Gray's daughter, Rain Davis aboard for a photo shot", Bill was quite surprised.

**GO MAN GO** was also notorious for turning his head as the race gates opened leaving 'behind' the pack. The handler would snap his head back around and let him go and he would still catch up to them and win!



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again and won his very next race in New Mexico.

Bill has had the honors of shoeing not only some of the greatest racehorses but also some of the greatest barrel racing and cutting horses as well. He was asked to shoe 4-time National Finals Rodeo Qualifier, Rackum On Man. Rackum On Man was owned and ridden by Lee Ann Guilkey and qualified for the National Finals Rodeo together and earned the Reserve World Champion title. He was a producing stallion that left a mark on the industry. Another great barrel racing horse and multiple NFR Qualifier that Bill was honored to shoe from time to time was The Key Grip also known as "Llave" for Kay Blandford. Bill had the honors of shoeing and working with AQHA Hall of Famer and cutting trainer, Buster Welch. At one time Bill was their main farrier and worked with some of the greatest cutting stallions and broodmares in the industry. He worked with the likes of Haidas Little Pep, an earner of over \$425,174 and 1983 NCHA Futurity Open Reserve Champion; and esteemed broodmare Peppymint Twist, earner of over \$221,000, 1983 NCHA Cutting Horse Derby 1<sup>st</sup> place, 1984 NCHA Finals 3<sup>rd</sup> place and produced over \$393,000 including the 1997 NRHA Tradition Open Futurity Champion stallion, Dun It With a Twist. He was also blessed to work with another great cutting stallion, High Brow Hickory, who is the sire of High Brow Cat, the #1 Top Cutting Sire of all ages and all divisions. Bill states that more than anything he has been humbled during his lifetime when he has been asked to shoe for these great trainers and for these great horses. "These owners and trainers look at their horses as their own kids. It's an honor to be asked, trusted and respected enough to take care of their children," Bill states. He has enjoyed his many experiences with the greatest horses in the industry.

Not only is Bill an accomplished farrier, but he is also an accomplished trainer. He has trained many race winners from Quarter Horses to Thoroughbreds mainly racing in New Mexico. Another great stallion that Bill had the honor of working with in the beginning of his racing career was Financially, who went on to sire a NFR Qualifier, Skip the Finances, with Jody Sheffield. He was able to train and learn under cutting trainer, Buster Welch while he was at

their ranch in Texas. He also gives credit to his father, "HM" Gray who influenced him with his easy way with horses. Bill has traveled to Germany and many places giving horsemanship clinics and has learned so much from other cultures and their way of training. Bill had the opportunity to train Andalusians at the Bar X Ranch in Texas with Randy Guilkey, an elite horse trainer. While working at the Bar X, Bill was asked to start and train three Andalusians for actress and model, Bo Derek and her trainer. He states that these horses were incredibly smart. They were known with the Spaniards as a "mobile throne". He can remember one horse in particular there that was an Andalusian stallion and in thirty days of breaking and training, Bill had him switching his leads with every other stride. Bill says that four out of five that he trained and rode had the best minds and were smarter than anything he has ever worked with. He remembers their hoof wall being thicker than most horses and were extremely good footed horses. He said that this was a memorable time for him in his life and taught him many things. He was asked to stay at the Bar X Ranch but he knew his calling was to cutting and racehorses.

Still to this day you can find Bill Gray walking into the Ruidoso Downs track kitchen and into the training barns and swapping stories with all time leading trainers Cliff Lambert, John Stinebaugh, Carl Drapper, Dwayne "Sleepy" Gilbreath and many more. Bill feels that these gentlemen have been influential trainers and are impressed with what they have accomplished. Bill is a man that lives on a daily basis by the Word of God and truly cares about horses. He has limited his clients to only a select few now and focuses on shoeing for them on a regular basis. Bill says that his natural horsemanship and training comes from many influences. He believes that he has gained a little from each person throughout his life lessons and experiences and has learned to stay open to new ways. He has learned more than anything to listen to the horse and to allow the horse to teach you. Bill believes that he has always been pulled or drawn to the horse business and industry. "In a way it chooses you," he says. The Lord has been involved and kept Bill interested in horses and has helped him to evolve. The shoeing and necessary angles have kept him intrigued. "It takes a family or



Bill Gray working with a Shawne Bug Leo filly.



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team to keep everything running in the right direction and that fascinates me, from the farrier, to the trainer, to the jockey and owner and so on.” Bill Gray has been blessed with a natural way with horses and has learned to understand them through many different avenues and professions—which is what makes him great!

While visiting with Bill, BHH found him to not only be an exceptional farrier but an accomplished trainer as well. Over the next several months Bill will share many of his experiences and expertise with the viewers of “The Futurity And Events Connection”. If you have any questions you would like us to forward to him, please send them to [R3Turns@yahoo.com](mailto:R3Turns@yahoo.com).