

# The Claiborne Century

BY LENNY SHULMAN / ANNE M. EBERHARDT PHOTOS

**M**ergers. Acquisitions. Takeovers. In the world of business, companies—even the strongest and most-established—seem to be in a constant state of expansion, contraction, and re-branding. That is what makes the story of Claiborne Farm, now in its 100th year of breeding and raising Thoroughbred racehorses, so refreshing.

## *Historic farm turns 100 under the Hancock family*



The Claiborne Farm cemetery

Currently operated by the fourth generation of the Hancock family to immerse itself in horses—with the fifth waiting in the wings—Claiborne Farm spreads over 3,000 rolling acres just south of Paris, Ky. The paddocks each seem to reach out to the horizon; the barns, trimmed in the family's traditional orange ("closer to school bus yellow," said Dell Hancock) are solid and functional, not fancy; beautiful residences and historic buildings dot the landscape (near the main office is a stone building named the "Bullpen" where Bull Hancock held men-only card games); and the hoofbeats of Thoroughbred history make music to a visitor's ear.

The farm takes pride in its aversion to compromise on traditional horsemanship, a stance its president of 38 years, Seth Hancock, admits might come with a heavy price in today's commercial-first environment. But there is, according to the Claiborne credo, a proper way to breed and raise horses, and collapsing those principles would go against the generational wisdom of the Hancock family that has stood the test of time. Fifty years ago Claiborne, Spendthrift, and Gainesway were the three major Central Kentucky farms in the Thoroughbred business. While all three—joined by dozens of others—are still ongoing concerns, only Claiborne remains in the hands of its founding family. And the family relishes that history while it eschews much of the practices instituted

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COURTESY HANCOCK FAMILY

Arthur Boyd Hancock Sr. (right),  
and A.B. "Bull" Hancock II

in recent times to maximize numbers and profits if it feels they are not in the best interest of the horse.

"We're not gonna compromise our principles in order to compete," stated Seth Hancock on a recent morning in the farm's historic office. "I'm just not going to do that. I'm looking at stallions now that have bred a book of 100 mares this season, and they're tired. I can't imagine what's going on with horses that have bred 150 or 160 mares. In my view, that's not the way it should be."

Claiborne's main horse cemetery, located just a few yards from where Hancock spoke, lends gravitas to his words. The history of the North American Thoroughbred over the past century is etched into the stones that mark the burial places and pay tribute to the horses either born and raised on the farm, or those brought in later to serve at stud: Blenheim II, Bold Ruler, Buckpasser, Court Martial, Double Jay, Gallant Fox, Herbager, Hoist the Flag, Johnstown, Mr. Prospector, Nasrullah, Nijinsky II, Princequillo, Reviewer, Riva Ridge, Secretariat, Swale. Elsewhere on the farm's property rest Ack Ack, Conquistador Cielo, Cox's Ridge, Damascus, Drone, Easy Goer, Forli, Hawaii, Majestic Light, Sir Gallahad III, Sir Ivor, Tom Rolfe, Topsider, and Unbridled.

Obviously, there is no equivalent to Claiborne on this continent, if anywhere else. The history of the intertwining of horses

and the Hancock clan goes back to the Civil War. Alabama native Richard Johnson Hancock was studying law in Louisiana when he answered the call of the Confederate Army and joined a battalion fighting in Virginia. Hancock, who would eventually attain the rank of captain, was seriously wounded at least three times, and while convalescing at a Charlottesville hospital met Thomasia Overton Harris, daughter of a planter and shoemaker. After their marriage they settled on a farm that they called Ellerslie in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

Among the animals raised and bred at Ellerslie were stock horses. Captain Hancock had a fascination for horses and was able to purchase the successful racehorse Eolus, by Leamington, for stud duty. He bred his mare War Song to him and got Eole, and so it began.

The Hancocks' fifth child, Arthur Boyd Hancock, shared his father's affinity for horses and eschewed academics to return to the farm to work with them. Taken to the races at Pimlico as a child, A.B. Hancock turned Ellerslie into a major equine operation. He brought in the great stallion Celt, then revolutionized American bloodstock by importing horses such as Wrack and Sir Gallahad III from Europe. Sir Gallahad III would sire Triple Crown winner Gallant Fox, who would in turn sire Triple Crown winner Omaha.

Hancock, on a trip to Kentucky, met



Seth and Dell Hancock



Nancy Clay, whose family owned a large farm in Bourbon County. Eventually, the two married and, while maintaining Ellerslie, established a second horse operation on the Kentucky farm, which they would name Claiborne. Hancock forged partnerships with titans of the Turf such as New York banker William Woodward, and, fully funded, continued to purchase the finest bloodstock domestically and internationally. He also took on breeding, boarding, and raising young horses for acquaintances that didn't want the responsibility of establishing their own farms. Claiborne soon grew in size and stature, and trainers such as "Sunny" Jim Fitzsimmons were making the pilgrimage to Claiborne to purchase yearlings.

Hancock's empire was so far-reaching, sometimes one branch of it would defeat another. He and Woodward bought the stallion Jim Gaffney, who would sire a colt named Jim Dandy. In the Travers Stakes, Jim Dandy upset Gallant Fox, who happened to be foaled at Claiborne and bred and owned by Woodward.

When age and illness slowed Hancock down in the 1940s, his son Arthur B. "Bull" Hancock II took over running Claiborne, and the operation didn't miss a beat, as he, too, had a knack for acquiring the best stock available. Bull Hancock brought in Princequillo to set up shop in the breeding shed, as well as Ambiorix and Nasrullah, and Buckpasser and Damascus. Bold Ruler and Round Table were foaled on the same night in the same Claiborne barn. Blenheim II, Reigh Count, and Bold Ruler all

sired Triple Crown winners while standing at the farm under Bull Hancock's reign.

Bull Hancock married Waddell Walker, and they had four children: Arthur III, Clay, Seth, and Dell. Dell remembers childhood on the farm as a special time, when she rode ponies and listened to the famous sportsmen who visited regularly.

"People who came to the farm would stay a few nights," she said. "Back then, you weren't grabbing a flight in the morning and another one that night to leave. It was so interesting to see people like Charlie Englehard, the Phippses, the Perrys. I'll never forget Mrs. Allaire du Pont doing her needlepoint while talking about Kelso."

The two boys were paid two cents for each gate they opened for their father as he drove around the farm; they began work there by weeding under the fences and delivering hay to the barns. Arthur III, seven years older than Seth, rode with the yearling manager and broodmare manager to learn the business. Just as Bull Hancock

had been sent to Ellerslie for a couple of years by his father to see if he could cut it running a farm, so was Arthur III sent by his father to Stone Farm, up the road from Claiborne, to sink or swim on his own.

"My grandfather kicked Daddy's ass, and Daddy kicked mine," Arthur Hancock III noted.

Rebelling against his father's strictness, Arthur III lived a rather active social life that seemed to his elders beyond the ken. When Bull Hancock died in 1972, he left it to an advisory committee to choose his successor. For three months Arthur III (who would eventually create his own successful operation at Stone Farm) and Seth worked Claiborne together, and then Ogden Phipps, the most influential of the advisers, chose Seth, then 22, to lead Claiborne. It was a crucial moment, as a 2-year-old named Secretariat, a son of Bold Ruler foaled at Meadow Stud in Virginia, was just coming to prominence. And forming a syndicate to stand Big Red became Seth's first job in the captain's chair.

"It was all because of the relationship between my father and Mr. Chenery, and then, when Mr. Chenery got gravely ill, between Penny (Chenery) and Daddy," said Seth Hancock. "I knew Penny, but not real well. But because of the way she'd been treated around here by Daddy and the way her father had been treated by Daddy and the great relationship they had, she came to see me first, and we were able to get it done."

"I've had people since then comment that I stepped out on a pretty good limb there. I called people who were good clients at the farm and told them what the price was (to be part of the Secretariat breeding syndicate), and they said, 'Damn, you act like he's already won the Triple Crown.'"

"I'd like to sit here and tell you I knew he was going to accomplish that. I mean, he was by Bold Ruler and he was out of a helluva mare and he was a grand-looking horse and he was the 2-year-old champion, so he had a pretty good floor under him. Obviously, he went on to do things that were unbelievable. I never considered that it was any kind of a gamble or anything."

"I guess I didn't have time to think about it when I took over, and I was too young and too dumb to really know what I was getting myself into. As I look back, if Secretariat had stumbled and not been a success, I probably would have been toast. But I never even thought about that. I guess when you're young you think you're bulletproof."

Seth Hancock was only six months removed from college and a stint in the Army before his father died. So



Foaling barn where Bold Ruler and Round Table were born on the same night; inset, the "Bullpen"



Mares and foals romp through Claiborne's spacious paddocks

while he never received a point-by-point lecture of how to run the farm, he did have 22 years' worth of observing and absorbing the lessons of his father.

"You watched the way he operated and you thought, 'Well, that must be the right way to do it.'" he said. "We had great respect for him and for how he conducted himself and ran his business, so we figured that was the blueprint. I never got the 'Now, let me explain this to you and show you this' lecture. I think I was gonna get it; he had me set up on a program of riding with the various foremen and the farm manager. But watching him when I was a young boy and then in the summers, and seeing the way he treated the men and treated the clients and the horses, you pretty well knew what you ought to do."

With Secretariat becoming the greatest horse of his generation and then a national folk hero, Hancock was off to a tremendous start, although he chalks that up to circumstance more than his own acumen.

"When Secretariat hit, people figured I knew what I was doing," Hancock said. "I was rolling. Flying. Everything was great, but it was nothing that I did. Good horses were coming off the farm. Wajima sold for \$600,000 to top the first summer sale after I took over. Hell, I didn't breed Wajima. I didn't buy Wajima's mother. I didn't bring Bold Ruler to Claiborne. I didn't set up the infrastructure that produced him. But people tend to forget. They just think, 'That guy just sold the top-priced yearling.' But it had nothing to do with me."

Although he inherited a top-shelf roster of stallions from his father, there is no doubt Seth Hancock augmented that population with some big-time moves of his own. In the mid-1970s he added a relatively lightly raced crack sprinter to Claiborne's stallion list that would become the most influential stallion of the next two decades. Mr. Prospector just kept churning out horses such as Gulch, Seeking the Gold, Forty Niner, and Woodman. Then, in the early 1980s, Hancock brought in a horse that raced just three times in his career. Danzig turned into a magnificent stallion that furthered the breed in the same way Claiborne horses had for the entire 20th century.

But breeding and racing horses was changing in the latter part of the century as family operations turned into business

enterprises. The days when sportsmen ruled the roost were over.

"There was loyalty before," said Seth Hancock. "If a good horse came off Claiborne, he was coming back to Claiborne (to stand). Mr. Combs (Spendthrift) and Mr. Gaines wouldn't even call the owner, because they knew they'd be beating their heads against the wall. Now, it's every man for himself. And it's not just three farms, it's 33, or however many there are. It's tough. It's a whole different world."

As all things ebb and flow, so it was inevitable that Claiborne would not stay on top of the breeding world forever. Mr. Prospector and Danzig have passed from the scene; Forty Niner was sold to Japan; Lure turned up sub-fertile; Coronado's Quest didn't hit big.

"You look up and you realize it's gotten thin," said Hancock. "There is pressure; I'd be lying if I said there wasn't. This place has been a going concern for a long, long time. We have 10 stallions here now; the oldest is just 16, so our roster is young, though it's obviously not as strong as it was when I took over. Pulpit is terrific, and we're excited about First Samurai and War Front and Flatter. Hopefully Blame (recent winner of the William Donald Schaefer Stakes, gr. III, at Pimlico) will come back here and the playing field will level out so we can compete for some of these big-time horses again.

"I have no regrets. We've done everything we can do to try to position ourselves for the future, and I think we are well-positioned. Having said that, we still need to have some things happen."

### Claiborne Farm's Leading Stallions

Sir Gallahad III — 1930, 1933, 1934, 1940

Chatterton — 1932

Blenheim II — 1941

Nasrullah — 1955, 1956, 1959, 1960, 1962

Princequillo — 1957, 1958

Ambiorix — 1961

Bold Ruler — 1963, 1964, 1965, 1966, 1967, 1968, 1969, 1973

Round Table — 1972

Mr. Prospector — 1987, 1988

Danzig — 1991, 1992, 1993

### Putting the Horse First

Modern economics has dictated farms pay large sums of money for potential stallions, necessitating those horses breed ever-larger books of mares so that the farm and syndicate members can recoup their money. It is a cycle that goes against the Hancock family's kind of horsemanship.

"We could start breeding stallions to 160 mares, which would make us more competitive in the marketplace," said Hancock, "and maybe we could do more screws and wires and PEs and this and that. We'd rather do things like blacksmith work and restricted turnout before we start doing surgeries as a last resort. If we bred to that many mares, we'd have more money to throw at stallion prospects, and we'd have 15 here instead of 10, but that hasn't been us, and I really feel like we've weathered the storm. People today are unhappy about having a yearling in the September sale and there's 50 or 60 others by the same sire, and they can't get the stud fee for theirs. There's a pushback on that, and now there's beginning to be a pushback on farms that want people to breed their mares at 10 o'clock at night and it takes two hours to get them bred.

"This is the only way I know to do things. Would Mr. Prospector have kept producing the last 10 or 12 years of his life if he had been bred that many times? Look at Seeking the Gold and Woodman. Both sons of Mr. Prospector; both went to stud about the same time; both got off to flying starts; both were high-bred horses. Six or seven years in, Seeking the Gold kept ticking right along, and, for whatever reason, Woodman started tailing off. At 13, Woodman was irrelevant and Seeking the Gold was still taking names and kicking ass. I'm not knocking Ashford; they are good horsemen, but they have a different philosophy than we do. That to me was a real trial run, and if Woodman had kept smoking along, I might have had to call a timeout. But when I saw what happened, I decided to keep doing what I was doing. There is no doubt we put the horse first."

Of course, most people in the business make that same claim, but none have the track record that Claiborne does in proving it. Consider the Phipps family, which has been entrusting Claiborne with its stock for 80 years. Eighty years!

"I think my grandparents went with

Claiborne in the 1930s, and my father in the '40s or '50s," noted Ogden Mills "Dinny" Phipps. "I remember being there as a child and Bull Hancock going around looking at the horses with my father. He knew every horse on the place.

"We've had all the cooperation in the world. There's never been anything I've done with the Hancock family, or my father did with the Hancock family, where we weren't treated fairly. And that's a wonderful thing to be able to say about somebody in racing, or in business, or anywhere else.

"Through the generations it's been terrific. When I was ill last year and my daughter Daisy was running things, Seth was tremendously helpful to her. They take a mare slipping or a horse having a problem as personally as I do. You know you're at a place where all the attention is paid to the horse, and he has the best chance he can get."

Adele Dilschneider's relationship with the farm goes back 20 years and has been filled with success. The granddaughter of John Olin, whose homebred Cannonade won the 100th Kentucky Derby (gr. I), Dilschneider came to the farm through meeting Clay Hancock in St. Louis. Since Seth began buying mares for her, she and Claiborne have co-owned runners such as Arch, Mighty, Yell, Congrats, and now Blame.

"The day we bought Wild Applause (the eventual dam of Yell) from Mr. (Paul) Mellon's dispersal, that was the real beginning of it," said Dilschneider. "We were at Keeneland sitting on hay bales outside the stalls and Seth said he wanted to buy this one, and we shook hands, and that was it. There's never been a contract; it's just trust and it's really special.

"They care. The horse comes first, and that's the only way to do this, in my opinion."

Other prominent clients include Bruce Lunsford; Ramona Bass; Bob Raphaelson; the Kelly family; Joe Allen; Peter Brant; Kirk Butenhoff, breeder of Florida Derby (gr. I) winner Ice Box; and DD Matz, who competed on the show jumping circuit with Dell Hancock.

"The folks that get in, if they stay the course, a good horse will come along and over the long haul they can break even," said Seth Hancock. "Back in my dad's day, I'm not sure they really cared whether they made money because they were true sportsmen who loved the game. Now, you don't see that many people who just love the game. If you tell them they won't



Claiborne's rich history of sires is reflected in the stallion barn

make money, but hopefully they'll break even and have fun, they're out the door as soon as you finish the first part of that sentence."

Good horses always seem to come along for Claiborne's racing stable as well. The current stable star, co-bred and co-owned by the farm and Dilschneider, is Blame, a son of Claiborne stallion Arch (who also raced for the partnership) and the Seeking the Gold mare Liable. Hancock has an ambitious schedule of grade I events picked out for the multiple graded-stakes winner of more than \$676,000 to date. As far as memories on the racetrack, there, of course, is the farm's homebred

win 25 stakes races there.

Although Claiborne has prided itself in the army of help it has traditionally employed, changes have come recently. For the first time, there were layoffs last year. Longtime farm manager Gus Koch retired, and many of the current managers are in their 30s. Bernie Sams has been brought onboard to deal with business operations, freeing Seth up to be out on the farm.


"If a client asks me how their foal is doing, I don't want to be saying to them, 'Let me call somebody,'" Hancock said. "I want to report to them based on what I just saw myself."

At 60, Hancock is concerned with setting the operation up for the next generation, namely his son Walker, who will turn 21 this summer. Like the generations before him, Walker started by cutting the weeds and putting hay and straw in the barns. He's studying equine science at the University of Florida.

"Certainly, it was a baked cake when I took over," Seth Hancock noted. "I wouldn't say it's a baked cake now because we need more stallions, but it's set up pretty well for Walker the way it was set up for me, and he's right on schedule. I'm not sure he knows the whole history of the family,

but when the TV ads come on talking about the 100 years, there's a silence in the room and you can feel like he's absorbing it.

"You know, the 100 years don't surprise me; it feels like this farm has been here for 200 years. But the 38 years for me? That surprises the hell out of me. I think, 'That can't be.'"

Added his sister Dell, "Seth has run it longer than anybody, and I think he's done a great job. We're so proud of everything Claiborne has been and still is." 



The next generation—Walker Hancock flanked by his aunt and father

1984 Kentucky Derby winner Swale; one of Dell Hancock's favorites, Lure, who took consecutive runnings of the Breeders' Cup Mile (gr. IT) in 1992 and '93; and Seth's biggest thrill, Forty Niner's epic battle with Ogden Phipps' Seeking the Gold in winning the 1988 Travers Stakes (gr. I), both horses having come off the farm. Both siblings also point to the 2003 Raven Run Stakes (gr. III) at Keeneland, where their mother accepted the gold bowl from the track as the first owner to