NSHS Given Material From Famed White Horse Ranch

The little town of Naper, population about one hundred, nestles in the rolling hills of Boyd County on State Highway 12 in north-central Nebraska. From a casual glance at the map, it seems about as remote and ordinary as a town can be.

But for the past seventy years it has been famous among horse lovers as home of the White Horse Ranch, whose majestic white steeds have thrilled audiences throughout the United States and Canada.

Although its touring shows ended and the ranch closed to the public when founder Caleb Thompson died in 1963, the ranch reopened in 1989 and remained a tourist attraction through the 2006 season. With the retirement of its current caretakers it is once again closing, but part of the White Horse Ranch will live on at the Nebraska State Historical Society. The Thompson heirs have chosen the NSHS as the repository for a large collection of photographs, advertising and promotional materials, artifacts including performers’ costumes and props from the shows, and ranch business and breed-registry records.

The Nebraska State Historical Society collects, preserves, and opens to all, the histories we share.
A unique Nebraska enterprise, the ranch and its founders were widely recognized for their horses, their traveling shows, and their generosity to the many young people they took in and trained in the art of horsemanship. The collection, now being cataloged by Library/Archives and Museum Collections staff, will be a rich resource, said Tom Mooney, NSHS curator of manuscripts.

“Probably the fact that they developed two new recognized bloodlines makes the breed registry and breeding records the most significant part of the donation,” he said, “but I think the photographs will get the most use, because they are so nostalgic and graphically interesting.”

The White Horse Ranch grew out of a long-held dream of Caleb R. “Cal” Thompson. Born in 1890 near West Point, Nebraska, Cal and his twin brother, Hudson, became successful Boyd County ranchers. Cal had long dreamed of owning a pure white horse, and for years the brothers had searched for such an animal. Finally, in 1917, they acquired the perfect horse: Old King, a snow-white stallion with pink skin and dark eyes, then siring circus horses in Illinois.

The brothers began a careful breeding program and by 1934 Cal’s dream had blossomed into a herd of white horses, all descended from Old King. That year Cal met a schoolteacher named Ruth Hackenberg, who told him she, too, had always dreamed of owning a white stallion.

Married in 1936, they bought Hud’s share of the breeding program and moved to a ranch south of the Niobrara River where Ruth began training the white horses. Before long white dominated the entire ranch: The buildings were all white; the corrals and fence posts were white; a white spitz cavorted with two white Pekinese; there were trained white goats, a white skunk, a white deer, a white coyote, a flock of white peacocks, white geese, white chickens, white cats, white mice, and white pigeons. Cal and Ruth called the place El Rancho del Caballo Blanco, but their neighbors called it the White Horse Ranch, and that’s the name that stuck.

From their breeding program came two new registered bloodlines, the American Albino and the American Crème. In 1937 they opened a riding school for children, who not only learned to ride, but also to guide their mounts through spectacular tricks. Often called upon for local celebrations and shows, the performers’ reputation grew.
The white trousers of the Troupe had to be washed and hung to dry on makeshift clotheslines.

In 1938 the White Horse Troupe began touring, thrilling audiences in the United States and Canada with jumping (over hurdles, humans, and even a convertible), “Roman” style riding (up to six horses handled by one rider standing on their backs), balancing acts, and much more. They traveled in a convoy of seven all-white vehicles.

In 1963 Cal died, and Ruth, in poor health, ended the tours, leased out the pastures, auctioned the ranch equipment, and sold the herd. But she retained possession of the ranch and placed breeding stock with friends.

In 1989, an ex-student and member of the troupe, Carley Daugherty, and her husband, Dean, returned to Naper to help Ruth restore the ranch and re-open it to the public. Ruth died in 1990, but the ranch remained open, overseen by the Daughertys.

Placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1990, the White Horse Ranch saw its last tourist season this year, but its history lives on, preserved by the many fans of the Thompsons’ white horses, by former White Horse Troupe riders who return to the ranch for yearly reunions, and now by the Nebraska State Historical Society.

From the Director

Hello,

No doubt you have noticed changes in recent newsletters—changes that might stand for recent changes throughout the Nebraska State Historical Society: We are more accessible, more contemporary graphically and visually, and, though we continue to explore the past, we are more in tune with the twenty-first century.

Along with its new name, Nebraska History News has added color, redesigned its layout and adopted new paper stock for better photo reproduction. In our articles we are striving for a unified voice, a journalistic approach, and a relaxed style. Starting next issue we will begin quarterly distribution, with issues mailed in January, April, July, and October.

This schedule allows us to produce the new newsletter with no cost increases. Between regular issues we will keep you informed of “breaking news” with a new publication, Nebraska History News Flash. We will distribute the Flash by e-mail mailing copies only to readers without Internet access. An upcoming issue will include a mail-back coupon for readers willing to provide their e-mail addresses. Be assured that we will not share them, or any other membership information, with outside entities.

First published in July 1948 as a mimeographed monthly called Historical News Letter it has changed often in its nearly sixty-year life. This design replaces one that appeared in 1988—the first to replace “news letter” with “newsletter,” following the trend in English for open compounds to evolve, with continued use, to closed form. Like the language, NSHS also continues to evolve, but we will never forget our core mission, collecting, preserving, and providing access to Nebraska’s history.

With best regards,

Michael J. Smith
Director/CEO

“NSHS will continue to evolve, but we will never forget our core mission, collecting, preserving, and providing access to Nebraska’s history.”
Marlene Roesler Retires After Twenty-seven Years Service

In October 1979 the Capital View Room in the NSHS headquarters was abuzz with activity. Then the NSHS library reading room, it was filled with patrons reading microfilm, using library materials, and confering with the reference staff. It was also the workspace for newspaper indexers, interns, and library volunteers, and it was the beehive into which Marlene Roessler stepped as a newly hired part-time word-processing specialist.

Retiring from her most recent position as assistant library collections curator in October 2006 after twenty-seven years of service, Marlene saw the NSHS trade its typewriters for word processors (her first was the venerable Xerox 800), helped introduce machine-readable cataloging, and was in the thick of the innovations brought by the Internet, online cataloging, databases, and online public access.

At a farewell lunch on October 3, Cindy Drake, library collections curator, reported that Marlene had not only typed hundreds of cards for the old card catalog, but also had become proficient at each stage in the evolution of automated record keeping. In describing Marlene’s years of service, Drake noted that among her many achievements Marlene had contributed to the cataloging of more than 90 percent of fifty thousand titles in the NSHS Library—an amazing forty-five thousand records.

Attendees at the retirement gathering also celebrated Marlene’s less easily quantified qualities: efficiency, dedication, expertise and a gracious personality that will be missed by coworkers in every division.

NSHS Board and Staff Hold Retreat

Participating in a tipi-building demonstration at the September 25 retreat are Joan Clare (kneeling at left), Carissa Martin, Lana Hatcher, Lisa Grotrian, Linda Hein, and Sheila Siegler.
NSHS Awards Honor Scholarship, Service, Historic Preservation

Three individuals and an organization were honored by the NSHS at its annual meeting Oct. 6–7 in Lincoln.

The honorees, Jim McKee, Melissa Marsh, and Dick Harmon, all of Lincoln, and 2020 Omaha, an Omaha preservation organization, were special guests at a luncheon on Friday Oct. 6 where they were presented plaques commemorating their awards.

McKee received the Addison E. Sheldon Award, given for "outstanding contributions to the preservation and interpretation of Nebraska History," for his tireless research, writing, publishing, and public presentations related to Nebraska history over several decades. Known for his expertise on Lincoln’s history and his sparkling wit, McKee is the author of *Lincoln, The Prairie Capital: An Illustrated History* and a host of other publications and articles.

McKee served on the Nebraska State Historical Society Board of Trustees from 1997–2002, and currently serves on the Nebraska State Historic Preservation Board. The award is named for Addison E. Sheldon, the superintendent of the NSHS from 1917 to 1943.

Melissa Marsh was winner of the James L. Sellers Award for the year’s best Nebraska History article. *Nebraska History* is the quarterly journal published by the NSHS.

Marsh’s article, “‘Still the Old Marlene’: Hollywood at the Fort Robinson Prisoner of War Camp,” was chosen by a panel of judges from the Wayne State College History Department faculty. A 2004 UNL master’s degree recipient, Marsh is an editor for iUniverse. A $1,000 prize from the Nebraska State Historical Society Foundation, made possible by Catherine Sellers Angle, accompanies the award in memory of longtime University history professor James Sellers.

Dick Harmon, of Lincoln, was recipient of the Robert W. Furnas Award for his three decades of expert assistance with the NSHS firearms collection. A nationally known expert on firearms of the Civil and Indian War eras, Harmon has been involved in numerous excavations at the Little Bighorn Battlefield, and is co-author of several books on the subject. He recently helped in a federally funded project to catalog and rehouse the hundreds of firearms in the NSHS Museum of Nebraska History collections.

A group dedicated to the preservation of Omaha’s 20th century built environment and cultural landscapes, 2020 Omaha received the Nebraska Preservation Award. The group focuses on education, documentation, advocacy, and landmark designation for 20th century treasures, and has nominated properties to the National Register of Historic Places. 2020 Omaha helped neon signs achieve landmark status, and organized “Restore Omaha,” the largest preservation conference ever held in Nebraska. 2020 Omaha president Cynthia Tooker of Leo A. Daly Architects and Engineers accepted the award.

Michael J. Smith, NSHS director/CEO, with Board of Trustees President Patricia Phillips. Departing board members Phillips, Margaret Allington, Samuel Rankin, Jr., and T. J. Secret were honored for their service at the October NSHS annual meeting.

Michael J. Smith, NSHS director/CEO, with Board of Trustees President Patricia Phillips. Departing board members Phillips, Margaret Allington, Samuel Rankin, Jr., and T. J. Secret were honored for their service at the October NSHS annual meeting.
You may feel very up-to-date when you pull up at the pump to fill your tank with ethanol, but Nebraskans seventy years ago were doing exactly the same thing.

On Thursday November 16, at the Great Plains Art Museum in Lincoln, Dr. William Kovarik of Radford University, Radford, Virginia, will reveal the long, little-known, and intrigue-filled history of ethanol. His presentation is co-sponsored by the NSHS and the University of Nebraska Center for Great Plains Studies.

Kovarik teaches science and environment writing, media history, and media law. His books include *The Forbidden Fuel: Power Alcohol in the Twentieth Century*; and *Mass Media and Environmental Conflict* (with Mark Neuzil).

“Back to the Fuel of the Future: Exploring Ethanol’s Lost History,” is at 7 p.m. in The Great Plains Art Museum, 1155 Q Street. Free. For information call 402-471-3270 or visit www.nebraskahistory.org.

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**NSHS Annual Meeting Features Advocacy Workshop**

Dan Hunter, Executive Director of the Massachusetts Advocates for the Arts, Science, and the Humanities (MAASH) conducted a workshop for Nebraska history, humanities, and art advocacy groups on October 7.

The session focused on strategies for increasing awareness and financial support of not-for-profit organizations.
October 27, 2006 - October 27, 2008

“Quilting A to Z” Rotating exhibits from NSHS
& International Quilt Study Center
Museum of Nebraska History
15th & P streets, Lincoln 402-471-4754

November 5
“Laureate’s Feast” John G. Neihardt
Foundation annual dinner & auction fundraiser
Metropolitan Community College
Fort Omaha Campus
Reservations required by Oct. 28. Call 1-888-777-4667; 402-648-3388; or neihardt@gp

November 12 • 2 p.m.
“The Edges of Genius: Nebraska’s Visionary Artists”
John Carter, NSHS senior research folklorist
Sunday at the Museum Series
John G. Neihardt State Historic Site
306 W. Elm Street, Bancroft
888-777-4667 neihardt@gpcom.net

November 16 • 12 p.m.
“Army Posts of the Northern Plains: 1864–1948”
Tom Buecker, curator, Fort Robinson Museum
Brown Bag Lecture Series
Museum of Nebraska History
15th & P streets, Lincoln 402-471-4754

November 16 • 7 p.m.
“Back to the Fuel of the Future: Exploring Ethanol’s Lost History”
Dr. Bill Kovarik, Radford University, Radford, VA
Center for Great Plains Studies Art Museum
1155 Q Street, Hewit Place, Lincoln

November 20–January 2, 2007
Victorian Holidays Past
Thomas P. Kennard House, Nebraska
Statehood Memorial, 1627 H St., Lincoln
Mon.–Fri. by appt. (Admission charged; NSHS members free.) 402-471-4764

November 29 – December 1
Heritage League’s Holiday of Trees Annual Fundraiser
Westminster Presbyterian Church
2110 Sheridan Blvd., Lincoln
Theme trees decorated by local organizations including NSHS. (Admission charged.)

November 19 • 6:30–9 p.m.
Fantasy of Trees Holiday Tour
Burt County Museum
319 N. 13th St., Tekamah

December 10 • 1–5 p.m.
Free Open Houses
Kennard House
1627 H St., Lincoln 402-471-4764
Ferguson House
700 So. 16th St., Lincoln 402-471-5417
Atwood House
740 So. 17th St., Lincoln 402-438-4567

December 21 • 12 p.m.
“Treasures From the Collections of the Nebraska State Historical Society”
Brown Bag Lecture Series
Museum of Nebraska History
From the Collection... One hundred ten years ago a thirty-six-year-old Nebraska politician rose to national prominence as the Democratic candidate in the 1896 presidential election. At the convention in July William Jennings Bryan, “Boy Orator of the Platte,” had electrified delegates with his “Cross of Gold” speech denouncing the gold standard and supporting free coinage of silver, and won the nomination over incumbent President Grover Cleveland.

After a heated campaign (Bryan was called a madman, fanatic, anarchist, and more) Bryan lost to Republican William McKinley. Running again in 1900 and 1908, he never became president, but his influence on Nebraska and national history is enormous.

This stickpin from the NSHS Museum of Nebraska History is from his 1908 campaign against William Howard Taft. It illustrates three of the campaign’s positions: peace, faith in the common man, and support of agrarian interests.