

How I Started an American Saddlebred Family

by Tracey Hawkins

Editor's Note: This is a continuing series exploring how people became attracted to the American Saddlebred, whether through showing, training, breeding, etc. The theme is "How I ..." as it relates to the breed. ASHA encourages its members to submit their own personal experiences, which may be e-mailed to the editor at d.rieffer@asha.net.

Somehow, American Saddlebred horses have quickly woven themselves into the fabric of our lives. This was not exactly planned, but it has brought us tremendous joy, truest friendships – both equine and human – and a renewed appreciation of life. My husband, Mitch, and I operate a large ranch in Lower Lake, California, for our extended family. This is a very all-encompassing way of life, and we are devoted to it. However, the demands it makes on our time and energy can be enormous. After seven years of managing the ranch, we were beginning to feel very stressed. We wanted to bring a fresh sense of joy into this life work we had chosen in a way that would bring our family closer together. We both loved horses and riding but had not ridden for several years – we were just too busy with the ranch and bringing up three children. Although we had horses on the property, they were well into a comfortable old age – near or past 30 years old! We decided to get our young daughters involved in horses to make our time at the ranch more fun and interesting for ourselves and the children. This would give us a shared family activity, which related to the work we love.



Photos courtesy of the Hawkins family

The Hawkins family: (left to right) Mitch, Francesca, Nina, Autumn Turley and Tracey with Cache Creek FF.

We discovered the Saddlebred breed quite by accident. A little over a year ago, we began looking for a pony or small horse for our five-year-old daughter. We heard about a place near our ranch where there were a couple of ponies for sale and decided to check it out. The happy little place was Argonaut Farms in Kelseyville, California. It is owned by a lovely lady who is enthusiastic about driving horses and ponies as well as dressage. We walked down a little breezeway at her place and cheerful equine faces poked out at us as we passed. We looked at the ponies, but none seemed just right as a beginner pony for our little girl. However, on our way out, one face in particular looked at us and actually purred – a deep happy throaty rumble. It was a beautiful bay mare. I asked the lady who that horse was. She said her name was *Diamond*, and she was also for sale. That was my first meeting with one of my new best friends. We later bought *Diamond* – for me! Her registered name is Gift of Diamonds – a Chubasco daughter out of Gift Certificate. It turns out that she is also a full sister to the reigning Western Country Pleasure World's Champion, ^{CH}Fiasco, and looks very much like him. She was my Mother's Day present last year – a true gem indeed!

After that first meeting with *Dia-*

mond, before purchasing her, I dove into research on this breed. I wanted to make an educated decision because she was the first American Saddlebred I had really even looked at. We owned an Arabian and a Quarter Horse, and I loved Arabians as a breed. Also, we were supposed to be looking at horses for our daughter. However, the more I learned about the American Saddlebred – and about this horse and her bloodlines – the more I fell for this horse.

In the process of learning about the American Saddlebred breed and getting back into horseback riding, we have gotten to know some amazing people – from a local Saddlebred breeder to our wonderful farrier and trainers – who have become true friends to my family and to me. Our purchase of *Diamond* has opened the door to something very special in our lives.

The small escapes from the stress of work and parenting that I took on *Diamond* recharged my spirit and gave me a new vantage point from which to view our ranch and the winery project that had all but consumed our lives over the past seven years. I gained a new appreciation for so many things. My newfound love of *Diamond* and of riding solidified my desire to find the right horse for our daughter. We were in no hurry, but put the word out that we were looking for a gentle Saddle-

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"We farm using both organic and Biodynamic farming practices, which keep us close to nature and in tune with the land," explained Tracey. "We make most of our own farming preparations on site, including compost and field preparations from native plants and minerals. Having working horses on the property adds to both the beauty of our ranch and the dynamic character of our farming philosophy – working in harmony with nature. We are so taken with this breed that we will feature them in our promotional material for our winery, including our wine label artwork, which we are having re-designed. We have always planned to decorate our tasting room as a Western tack room in keeping with the rustic elegance of a working ranch.

"Now, we have a genuine and deep connection with that concept. In fact, we decided to sponsor an equestrian entry in the Napa County Silverado Parade – our local Fourth of July parade – with a contingent of American Saddlebreds and riders. We felt this was the perfect way to celebrate the grand opening of our winery this summer. I rode *Miss Georgia Pearl*, our most gentle, bomb-proof and beautiful ambassador!"

For more information about Hawk and Horse Vineyards and Diamond B Ranch, visit their Web site: www.hawkandhorsevineyard.com.



Miss Georgia Pearl was adopted by the Hawkins from Saddlebred Rescue.

bred horse or pony for her. A few months passed with no real leads when a friend suggested that we consider a Saddlebred rescue. After some searching and much consideration, we adopted *Miss Georgia Pearl* through Saddlebred Rescue. She was formerly an Amish cart horse – and perhaps prior to that, a show-horse hopeful. She is about 18 years old and very kind. She was a little shy around the head and face at first and was not used to being loved. All of that changed quickly once she came to us. She took to the children immediately, rather like a watchful nanny. *Miss Georgia Pearl* is over 16 hands high – quite a horse for a petite, now six-year-old little girl. However, with her very mellow temper and willing disposition, *Georgia* is perfect for a child's first horse. I need to clarify that the horse does have some spirit, even at her age; however, when she is under saddle, it is all business.

Taking *Georgia* was a risk, but we wanted to help save this horse, and we so admired the work being done by Saddlebred Rescue. When making the decision to adopt a rescue, we understood the risk involved. However, we felt it was a valuable opportunity to teach our children kindness and to instill a caring attitude for all of God's creatures. Because she was coming to us from another state, there was no

opportunity to see her in person before we made our decision to adopt her. We were sent photos and had conversations with the kind people at Saddlebred Rescue. We also consulted with a local breeder. We decided to take her and to love her and try to heal her, whatever her condition.

We will never forget the day *Georgia* arrived. Though she was in a very depleted state, she held her head high and proud, and her eyes showed nothing but sweetness. She had traveled over one week, from New Jersey to California. She was 300 pounds underweight and had other health concerns. We weren't sure at first if she would ever be able to carry a rider, but she was so kind and brave and willing. My daughter, Francesca, loved her immediately; we all did. The lessons of patience and caring we gained from this experience have been intangible. Now – in a surprisingly short time and with lots of good food, care and love – *Miss Georgia Pearl* has become an excellent schooling horse for our little girl. And her gratitude shows in everything she does. The people at Saddlebred Rescue were wonderful, and the work they do is that of true angels.

So, Francesca and I had our horses and began to happily outfit ourselves and them and, more importantly, to enjoy the experience of riding and



Tracey aboard Miss Georgia Pearl, whom she rode in the Napa County Silverado Parade on July 4th.

relating to them. The new problem was, seeing how much fun we were having, my husband wanted to ride too! I did not let him ride *Diamond*. Chalk it up to a combination of covetousness and the fact that he does not ride English. And *Georgia* was also to be ridden English – not to mention, we did not want to put his weight on her in her first year with us. So, we began looking for a horse for Mitch.

We never dreamed that we would one day own beautiful Cache Creek FF, bred by Barbara Molland. Barbara had become a friend and had helped us in our quest to learn more about this breed. She was also very instrumental in our adopting *Georgia*, advising us on her selection from among a number of worthy and needy horses. When I was just learning about Saddlebreds, I had contacted Barbara, and she invited us out to her Far Field Farm. What an honor and a fabulous treat! That day, Barbara brought out two stunning chestnut geldings that she had bred and raised. When she led them out, it was as if sparks danced off their hooves; their presence was magical! One of them was Cache Creek FF, by Radiant Sultan out of Sugar Moves – very good breeding, which showed in the appearance and manner of this horse. Both were for sale, but we did not consider them at that time. We felt they were beyond our reach somehow. Besides,

Mitch thought of himself as more of a Quarter Horse man.

Months went by, and we had not found a horse for Mitch. In the meantime, we had completed a very good year on our ranch and vineyard project, increasing our wine grape sales and bottling our first wine vintage under our own label: Hawk and Horse Vineyards. After Christmas, I happened to visit Barbara's Web site for Far Field Farm and saw *Cache Creek*. He was still for sale. His image resonated with me in a special way. A few days later, I showed the picture to Mitch, and we decided to look at this horse again – this time with the thought of purchasing him in mind.

The question was whether or not he would be a good match for Mitch and our intended use of him. We wanted a horse that Mitch could ride as a working ranch horse. Our ranch has miles of fence line, not all easily accessible by vehicle. Having a horse that could handle the hills and rough terrain – a horse with athleticism, stamina and a good deal of intelligence – would be useful.

We looked at *Cache*, and Mitch and I both rode him. He was a little high-spirited, and Mitch was a little out of practice in his riding skills. Still, we both took to this horse and decided to buy him. I think Barbara was a little hesitant at first; she is a very fine horse breeder and wanted to be sure the horse

would be a good fit for Mitch. I think she was also a little hopeful that it would be, as I believe she wanted to see this horse used in this manner. He had even been given some Western training just prior to our purchasing him.

Within the space of one year, we have become the happy owners of *three* American Saddlebred horses, all used for very different purposes. We have also been sold on the merits of this breed. We find each of our horses has unique qualities, but intelligence, kindness and beauty are a part of each. There is also a special mixture of spirit and good sense, which we very much admire about this breed.

Our American Saddlebreds have proven to be extremely adaptable. Mitch and I both ride *Cache*. I have gone deep into the ranch property with him, and he loved it and was very willing, alert and levelheaded. Mitch takes Western riding lessons with a very good local trainer on *Cache* and is regaining his former riding ability with ease. *Cache* is all flash and spirit but very well-behaved when it is asked of him. I ride him English, and Mitch uses an endurance saddle on him. I have been taking Dressage lessons on *Diamond*, which she seems to look forward to as much as I do. *Diamond* easily goes from the arena lessons to a hack in the woods and is like a puppy after a ride, wanting to follow me around the ranch on a lead rope like a puppy on a leash. And dear *Miss Georgia Pearl* is the love of Francesca's heart – all of our hearts, for that matter.

One quality I especially adore about this breed is their desire to be with people. It is delightful how they all love human company, especially that of the children, and seem to understand that a special gentleness is required when they are nearby.

Our ranch seems to have bloomed with the addition of these horses. Walking past the paddocks is always a delight, with the happy faces seeking us out and each horse following as we go by. A life which includes American Saddlebreds has given our family the shared passion we so wanted. This passion plays into our devotion to farming and ranching. Our days at the ranch are now full of an unexpected joy and richness, which come with an equestrian lifestyle. **as**