

Hidden Brook Farm

Bitless, barefoot, and often bareback

by Carolyn Wanamaker

Pam Allen-Leblanc lives by her beliefs at Hidden Brook Farm, located in Durham Bridge, in the scenic Nashwaak Valley north of Fredericton, New Brunswick. She says, "While the real focus is on raising children, we use our horses, dogs, poultry, and organic gardens to do this in the best manner possible. We attempt to live as sustainably and responsibly as we can, and while we are far from perfect, we believe every little bit helps. We use natural methods wherever possible."

Bitless, barefoot, and often bareback are the hallmarks of the 80-acre farm when it comes to the horses. Lessons focus on the nature of the horse in an effort to develop an understanding of horses, and how they think and react. Groundwork and equine body language are featured in initial lessons, and principles of Centered Riding are incorporated into mounted instruction.

Leblanc keeps her horses naturally. She says, "They go in and out as they please and their health and happiness improved dramatically when I let go of the accepted convention of keeping my horses in a barn. I stopped shoeing my horses long ago. Barefoot just seemed healthier and more natural to me... then, some 13 years ago, I started studying natural horsemanship in earnest, becoming absolutely amazed at what could be accomplished with a better understanding of the horse."

AN INTRODUCTION

At a recent holistic clinic at Hidden Brook, nine participants gathered for a chance to experience an introduction to the horse, focusing on horse communication, energy, and the use of essential oils. Most of the participants were middle-aged women; several had limited or no previous experience with horses, but all had a dream to better know equines. The day started with introductions, but not your average kind. Participants were asked to deeply examine the factors that drew them to horses—the beauty, spirit,

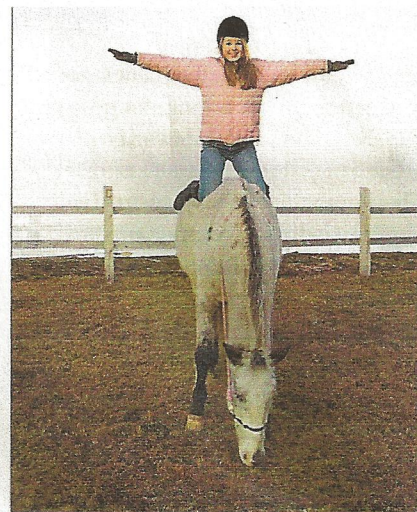
energy, etc. One woman described a connection to her late father and her memory of being led about her childhood farm on the back of a pony by her dad. It was a time of peace and tranquility for her, and she wished to reconnect with horses as a result. A recently widowed woman had tried to reconnect to horses after her husband's death, but the outing had resulted in a fall and she was now fearful; she wanted to overcome her fear. Several clinic members talked about their attraction to horses coming from a source they did not completely understand. One woman lived in an apartment in the city, but felt driven to get to know horses, something she had wanted to do all her life. Other participants were experienced horse people looking for a new or better way to communicate with their mounts. Leblanc says the right group of people always seems to gather for her events, and each learns from the others.

THE JOURNEY

Growing up, Leblanc joined her local Pony Club, learned the traditional methodology of horses, and became an instructor. Her family was into draft horses, so she was also very knowledgeable in that world. She was offered the opportunity to travel and groom for noted U.S. Dressage rider Lendon Gray, but turned it down to pursue an agricultural degree at university. She then went on to obtain her MBA, and entered the business world, achieving great success.

Eventually, persistent health problems left her struggling to find a solution. One day, a student offered to trade a riding lesson for a Reiki treatment, and the amazing results were the impetus for Leblanc's journey on the road to a more natural way of living; and a more natural way of interacting with her horses. With great enthusiasm and passion, Leblanc continues to study the philosophy of the leaders of the natural horsemanship world.

Leblanc describes some of her journey: "I learned to ride with a bit. When I instructed Pony Club, I taught people to put three wrinkles in the horse's mouth



Kathleen Leblanc, daughter of Hidden Brook Farm owner Pam Allen-Leblanc, showing trust in her horse Star. (Gorica Barudzija, Luminous Wave Photography, photo)

to adjust the bit properly. It never occurred to me to question this logic or to go against centuries—even millennia—of horsemanship principles that seemed to work. I tried to keep my hands light and thought that was sufficient to provide comfort to my horse."

She has strived to meet many of her mentors, including: Buck Brannaman, Ray Hunt, Tom Dorrance, Bill Dorrance, Craig Cameron, John Lyons, Pat Parelli, and Pete Ramey.

She goes on to say, "I followed Monty Roberts for some time, and a few years back, he introduced me to Joe Camp's book, 'The Soul of a Horse.' This is a wonderful book for anyone interested in keeping horses naturally. Joe confirmed my beliefs about natural horsekeeping, and gave me the gift of a new mindset—one that began to question the accepted practices that I had grown up with. I thought of the first pony I ever rode—in a heavy curbed bit. She was completely out of control. She's the only horse I have met since who could run away at a full gallop with her nose bent and touching my leg. I realized the control I gained with that pony eventually had nothing at all to do with her bit—and everything to do with her training and our work together."

FINDING THE SPIRIT

Leblanc has immersed herself in studying the spirit of the horse and the

human-horse bond. She believes that horses, through their authenticity, make us face our fears, allowing us to move out of our comfort zone. She says that Linda Kohanov's book "The Tao of Equus: A Woman's Journey of Healing and Transformation through the Way of the Horse," has been very influential. A very short excerpt provides a sense of the book's message: "As prey animals, the volume of this recently discovered 'sixth' sense is turned way up in horses, who become noticeably agitated in the presence of people who are incongruent, who try to cover anger, fear, or sadness with an appearance of well being. This is not an equine judgment of our tendency to lie about what we're really feeling; it's a reflection of emotion's physiology—and its contagious nature. Horses, who exhibit heightened stress when a human handler tries to suppress emotion, also show signs of relief the moment this person acknowledges a hidden or simply unconscious feeling, even if the emotion itself is still present. By making the fear or anger conscious, by becoming congruent, the handler effectively lowers his own blood pressure, even if only slightly. But it's enough to drop the horse's blood pressure in response, which the animal demonstrates by sighing, licking and

chewing, and/or lowering his head." The holistic clinic continued with a viewing of the incredible documentary, Such is the Real Nature of Horses, produced and narrated by noted equine photographer, writer, and artist, Robert Vavra. This film should be on the must-see list for all horse lovers.



Hidden Brook Farm owner Pam Allen-Leblanc with one of her favorite horses, Big Buddy. (Susan Young photo)

Filmed in the Camargue marshes of France, the subjects were a feral herd of horses untouched and unfettered by humans. Following this study of herd behavior, participants headed out to watch Leblanc's herd, where similar behaviors could be seen in action.

The next step was interaction with the students and the horses – horses and people were matched (with horses choosing the human partner) and everyone moved into the arena. All the horses were incredibly quiet – from two-year-

olds to older horses, they were calm and relaxed. Even when separated from the herd the horses showed not a sign of anxiety or anxiousness, never raising a head or looking back or neighing. Perhaps due to the placidity of the horses, or the calm and focused energy, those who had expressed fearfulness were

soon patting and leading the horses with ease. Before working with the horses, Leblanc did an exercise to heighten awareness of personal energy. She noted that everyone has a bioelectric field, which you might want to call an aura, emanation, spirit, or higher-frequency vibration. We all emit heat and energy. She then went on to explain the interaction of human and equine energy.

We tend to assign human attributes to our horses when trying to deal with them, and then ask our

equine partners to meet these very human expectations. It's the most basic (and often ineffective) way we try to communicate – by putting something into our realm of thought, then pursuing it on our terms. To genuinely relate to a horse we must enter the world of the natural. Hidden Brook farm is a step on this journey of experiencing your horse in a brand new way.

(Carolyn Wanamaker lives in Bairdsville, N.B.)

Using nature to heal

The day ended with an investigation of essential oils, which are known to have an impact on humans and animals. Different essential oils affect the body differently, influencing our emotions, mood, physical health, energy, mental health, and hormones. They can reduce stress. If a horse needs an essential oil, it will sniff deeply for as long as necessary. Essential oils should never be forced on a horse, and the oils should never be placed on the horse's tack or skin.

Some examples of essential oils for horses include: bergamot, which relieves anxiety and aids digestion; eucalyptus repels insects, and opens the respiratory tract;

frankincense strengthens the immune system and heals the skin; garlic repels insects and opens the respiratory tract; lavender soothes and nurtures frazzled horses, provides general pain and stress relief, aids breathing, and repels insects; lemon provides focus, regulates temperature, strengthens the immune system, and relieves arthritis and muscle pain; peppermint stimulates circulation, rejuvenates emotions, aids breathing, helps with joint discomfort, eases muscle tension, and helps remove toxins; violet leaf is used for horses undergoing a major change, such as a new owner or home, the loss of a stable mate, etc.