

STEWARDS
OF THE

Land

By CHRIS MCGRATH

The answer, with one subtle difference, is right there in the song:

**Oh give me land, lots of land,
and the starry skies above
Don't fence me in.**

The difference being that if you want to keep land, lots of land, you can't seal off the world beyond.



Nor can you raise thoroughbreds, of course, without post and rail—often mile after mile of it. But every fence has two sides. From the inside of a horse farm, its first purpose is to keep mares and foals off the freeway. From the outside, a fence can seem a symbol of a more fundamental segregation.

As the tide of urban expansion laps arounds their ankles, moreover, Bluegrass horsemen have often shared their neighbours' sense of alienation. Country is country, town is town, and never the twain shall meet. The only ground uniting them tended to be that which divided them.

Happily, here on the very city limits of Lexington, you can discover a new enlightenment.

On the face of it, nobody should feel more defensive, more jealous of their heritage, than the custodians of Mill Ridge Farm. But sit down a while with Headley and Price Bell, respectively son and grandson of the venerable Alice Headley Chandler, and you will take the pulse of a brand of conservation that is all dynamism; you will see swords of cultural resentment being forged into ploughshares of co-operation.

Some other time, it would be fun to come back and hear more about Mill Ridge's own story; to go back to the 1964 mating, between Attica and Sir Gaylord, that persuaded a generation of Europeans to dismantle barriers of another kind. (The result was Sir Ivor, the first American-bred colt sold at auction to win the Epsom Derby.) Diesis stood here; Gone West, too. Never mind all



the big horses raised here, Point Given and Giacomo and Havre De Grace and all the rest; or the horses sold from here; or the generations of insight condensed by Alice and her husband, Dr John Chandler.

Not this time, though. Today is not really about Mill Ridge at all—except as a snapshot of the way Bluegrass breeders are responding to a challenge that could not be more literally concrete than in the suburban gardens pressing right against their farm

boundary.

With Headley nowadays sitting on the Lexington Planning Commission, he allows his son to lead the way in presenting Horse Country—an inspiring example of rival farms working together—as an ideal mechanism for flinging open the gates that previously divided rural and urban communities here. Matching fluency of thought and word with a breadth of perspective (extending to an MBA) rare in the Bluegrass heartland,

Price proves a highly effective advocate.

“As horse farmers we have not done a good job in reaching out our hand to the city, in engaging people, in helping them learn about the industry,” he says. “It’s easy for people to see a headline horse sold for \$2 million at Keeneland and think of the industry as being in this frothy place. Whereas it’s actually filled with people working really hard every day, trying to make a living. We haven’t been telling that story.

“On a national basis, we have to find ways for the horse to mean more than just a number running in a circle, to bet on. As breeders, we always thought it was the racetrack that gave that engagement. But it’s hard to fall in love with the horses when you only see them such a limited time. Whereas here in Kentucky we have the whole story of the horse, the whole cycle.”

The local horsemen were fortunate, then, to find an exemplary template on their very

doorstep. Kentucky's bourbon distillers had a product with a richer heritage than its existing marketplace understood; they were also, much like the horsemen, splintered across so many sites that their collective story was not terribly legible. In 1999 the Kentucky Distillers' Association duly devised the Bourbon Trail, enjoyed during the past five years by nearly 2.5 million visitors from all 50 states and 25 different nations. Those whose Trail "passport" is stamped by all member distilleries are rewarded with a tee-shirt testifying to their stamina. More importantly, they will also take home a heightened sense both of bourbon's history and its continued economic impact.

The horsemen noted how historic divisions in the surrounding community—from bootleggers to Baptists—were healed by the Trail's coherence of structure, message and indeed revenue.

"Bourbon were 18 years ahead of us," Price says. "With this single point of contact, they had all these people staying in rural hotels, eating in rural restaurants; and their lobbying association found that the switch had flipped in all the surrounding counties. They'd fought the tax on ageing bourbon [as against bottled for sale] since Prohibition, but it wasn't until the Trail that they managed to get it repealed.

"And here we were, with a similarly authentic culture. So we said let's figure out if we can work together to tell our story, too. About 25 of us went to Disney to see whether we had one, and they said you absolutely have."

Before exploring how Horse Country has



stitched it back together, let's consider how the narrative had become frayed. Again, take Mill Ridge as a sample. Alice Headley had grown up on Beaumont Farm, stretching 4,000 acres west from the Mason-Headley Road—which nowadays unites two principal arteries of downtown Lexington. One, Harrodsburg Road, was subject of an instructive wager between Alice's parents. "Her mother bet her father that there would never be a stop light on Harrodsburg," Price smiles. "It's now four lanes running all the way down to the river."

Because Alice was keenest among her siblings to continue raising horses, the 250 acres she inherited from their father comprised the parcel farthest from the city. (The four mares she also inherited, incidentally, included Attica herself, the dam of Sir Ivor.) Her childhood home is now the centerpiece of Sullivan University, surrounded by malls and developments. The question, throughout, has always been a very literal one: where do you draw the line?

Price feels you can't begin to answer that question without some depth of perspective on Lexington, right to its very origins. The year of its foundation is not hard to guess—the settlers were inspired by their compatriots' victory in the first battle of the revolutionary war in 1775—and nor were their grounds for coming here, in the

wake of Daniel Boone through the Cumberland Gap.

"Here was this woodland pasture ecosystem, all this freshwater, all these springs," Price explains. "The land was also on a migratory path of the buffalo. So they set up a fort, they made peace and war with Native Americans as they're coming through. One of the first camps was actually round here—set up by the Bowman family."

In time the town founded the first university west of the Allegheny Mountains:

Transylvania, literally "through the woods". But the pioneers had kept going and—in contrast with Louisville, which had built up from portage required around a fall in the Ohio River—Lexington found itself limited by a want of navigable water during the Industrial Revolution.

"So it maintained as an agricultural-based trading outpost," Price says. "Our cash crop was tobacco, otherwise corn and cattle, with horses really just a pastime. But it's always had this really good land to raise graz-





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—Price Bell

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Even so, Lexington could not remain immune to broader trends. In the postwar boom, with the G.I. Bill and the rise of the automobile, urban expansion proved as irresistible here as elsewhere. The challenge was to avoid the kind of suburban assimilation Price characterises as “Anywhere, U.S.A.” So when Lexington designated its

girdles of development, it did so with due vigilance. An Urban Service Boundary was established by the New Circle Road: within, there could be subdivisions, housing, offices; beyond, a limit of one house per ten-acre tract. (As it happens, it bisected the old Beaumont estate.)

“Ever since the City Planning Commission was founded, in 1930, there has always been this tension,” Price says. “Our driver

has always been our farmland. So the city was saying: ‘If we keep growing out, we’re going to grow into what makes us unique.’” From time to time, there might be a fresh compromise: notably the new outer ring, Man O’ War Boulevard, played off against an expanded minimum acreage, beyond, of 40 per house. Then there are 30,000 acres held in conservation easements, purchased jointly by city and federal government; or

others donated to the Bluegrass Conservancy as a tax break.

Last year the Planning Commission rejected proposals—made on the basis that land was too expensive to bring jobs to Fayette County—to let out the reins on a new boundary. Instead the city is being urged to rejuvenate those urban zones that might have become outdated in aspect or utility.

Wearing his commissioner’s hat, Headley




permits himself an interjection in those deep, considered tones of his. "It's a balance between maintaining the uniqueness of Lexington and accepting growth, and asking how does that growth look?" he says. "We have to keep in mind those surrounding counties with less expensive land, which allows them a broader base for development—all being feeder communities for Lexington. You can't lose sight of the fact that 12 miles from this town is the largest Toyota manufacturing plant in North America, in Georgetown, Scott County. The University of Kentucky is a huge base, not just with its students but also the hospital and so on.

"Fritz Farm was 58 acres on a key intersection on Man O' War. It was one of the first developments in the country after the '08 recession, and no small thing: \$120 million. And we had prospective retailers come here to Mill Ridge to hear about the uniqueness of Lexington; to hear that we remember who we are, and what we are, yet without burying our heads in the sand; that we wanted people who could improve our city with something sophisticated and fitting."

"We want this to remain Lexington, Kentucky, as opposed to Anywhere, U.S.A.," stresses Price. "You don't want to commoditize your entire town. To me, that's what's important about the Urban Service Boundary: it makes you more creative how you use space.

"We see the thoroughbred as representative of Lexington, Kentucky; if you pave us over, you pave over the identity of Lexington. But unless that is a shared identi-



ty, you're preaching from the pulpit as opposed to being in the congregation. We have this incredible land to raise sound horses. But the only way to protect that environment is to be relevant to the local economies."

And that's where Horse Country comes in. Mill Ridge is one of 35 outfits, including two veterinary clinics and a feed mill, that have staked money and time in the project. Each ticket sale is divided between the non-profit body itself, and redemption of individual farm investments.

"So here's a one-stop way to see all the farms, or see all the bourbon distilleries—and that's more tourists, higher hotel occupancy, more restaurant choices, including for all of us who live here, making our quality of life better too," Price says.

"There are 350 farms in central Kentucky. Before, we were very scattershot: someone would show up at the visitor bureau wanting to see a farm, and someone might say: 'Well I've got a friend who works at that farm, let's try them.' Coming under one

umbrella allowed us really to invest and work together."

Horse Country was galloping flat out almost before its members were mounted up: there was a Breeders' Cup at Keeneland round the corner, and along came a first Triple Crown winner in more than a generation to top the bill. "The timing was amazing, even if we weren't ready," Price says. "We're now written up in Vogue magazine as a Top Nine destination in the U.S. Those are eyeballs we might never have thought about for our industry. So now we're associated with growth, as opposed to being typecast as the emerald choker on the city's growth: 'Oh, you're just rich horse farmers who want a cottage industry.'

"It's the quest to become relevant—not just to the 35 or 40 people we employ on the farm, but to our neighbours. We have a long way to go. We've done 50,000 tours in two and a half years and, while we're very proud of that, we need to be doing that every year. It needs to become part of our daily routine. We've proven the boat can float;

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now let's put a motor on it."

Claiborne, always cognisant of the duties accompanying its heritage, had offered tours long before Horse Country. But their involvement now means they have a visitor centre; Taylor Made has a restaurant; Darley and WinStar have invested in shuttle carts. It's all about engagement; about showing, in Headley's words, that "this community's horse is everybody's horse." Price berates the complacencies of the past, when racing coasted along as the only legal form of gambling; and the obstructions of the present, as faced by a Texan who might want to open a wagering account.

"Texas!" he exclaims. "A major population center that's historically invested in agriculture: the rancher, the Texas ranger, horses there are probably even more prevalent than here. But the horsemen cannot come together to pass ADW (Advance Deposit Wagering). That's no Houston, no Dallas, no Austin. Now there are horseplayers in those places, but they have to set up accounts in places like Delaware. We're looking for a casual fan, for someone to be able to log onto their phone and get that palm-sweat pulling for their horse."

And Horse Country is a mass-transit vehicle for intimate engagement. Things have come full circle since the days when the farms required no gates, just cattle grids. That era ended with discarded cigarettes razing ancient tobacco barns, and trash strewn across paddocks. The Kentucky Horse Park has done a sterling job, taking up that slack—but the Bourbon Trail clarified a modern taste for authenticity.

And, as Price's grandmother likes to say: "Let a horse breathe on you, and you'll fall in love." One lady was so captivated by her visit to Mill Ridge that she ended up working a yearling sale for the farm.

"People are so respectful, so appreciative," says Price. "There'll be days you're full of headaches, and you think: 'Do I really want to take round a tour right now?' And then, every time, it's just incredibly energising. I end up getting as much out of it as the guests. People ask: 'Do you realise how lucky you are?' And you're filled with appreciation. That's the reward we have. To remind you never to take it for granted. To have humility. It's very motivating."

