





ALICE'S WONDERLAND



*As Mill Ridge Farm Turns 50,
Its Matriarch Remains a Guiding Force*

By Vickie Mitchell | Photos by Lee P. Thomas

On paper, Hal Price Headley, Keeneland's co-founder, left his daughter Alice 286 unfenced acres, two half-finished barns, and five Thoroughbred mares.

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But the master of Beaumont Farm's legacy to his fourth daughter went far beyond Bluegrass land and bloodstock. Ever the horseman, he loosened the reins on his headstrong child.

"He let me do anything that I wanted to do," Alice Headley Chandler, now 86, remembered in early February. "He never said, 'Don't do that; you'll get hurt.'"

Perhaps Hal Price Headley realized that in an industry capable of knocking down the strongest of men and horses, the ability to get back up, brush yourself off, and go on would serve his daughter well.



ANNE M. EBERHARDT

Alice Chandler, shown with a Mill Ridge Farm yearling that sold for \$9.7 million in 2005, "has always put the horse first."



Guided by father's philosophy

Handed the land and the horses, Chandler spent little time mulling the future, even as she mourned the loss of her father, whom she adored. The then-36-year-old mother of four knew Thoroughbreds were her future.

"I just kept going. I knew there wasn't anything else to do, and nothing else that I wanted to do," Chandler said.

A childhood spent following her father as he raised and raced his own horses and oversaw the construction of Keeneland had schooled Chandler for what would become her life's work.

Her father's philosophy had been " 'always put the horse first', and that was her guide," said her son Headley Bell, who runs the affiliated Nicoma Bloodstock.

Said Chandler, "I had seen Beaumont Farm all my life; I knew about how to raise a horse."

Left, Alcibiades was a foundation mare for Mill Ridge.

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Fifty years for Mill Ridge Farm

This year Alice Headley Chandler's inheritance, Mill Ridge Farm, turns 50. It's a much different place than it was in 1962. At 1,100 acres the farm encompasses lands her brother Price and sister Patricia inherited, which are leased from them, as well as other land Mill Ridge has purchased.

The family home, built by Chandler with proceeds from the sale of an inherited mare, tops one ridge; the farm office, built to resemble a home, tops another. Other barns have joined those her father began.

Five decades ago the land that became Mill Ridge was the most rural section of Headley's 4,000-acre Beaumont Farm; today, it is edged by Man o' War Boulevard and the Palomar subdivision.

Like Hal Price Headley, a practical businessman, the farm is not showy.

"It has always been a farm that has had to pay its way unlike many that don't necessarily have to do that because the owners have other sources of income," said longtime farm manager Duncan MacDonald. "It is a working, functional farm."

Most of its barns are built of concrete, Headley's favorite construction material. "He only wanted to do things once," his daughter said. Other barns are converted tobacco barns whose vented sides bring in fresh air, as beneficial to raising horses as to curing tobacco. The barns mesh with the farm's goal to allow horses to live close to nature.



Alice and her father, Hal Price Headley, present a trophy at Keeneland, the track Headley helped found.

An impressive list of alumni

Though not as visible as Calumet nor as large as its neighbor Darley Stud, Mill Ridge has an impressive résumé. A diversified operation, it boards, buys, and sells Thoroughbreds. "Horses raised to race" is how Chandler sums up the operation.

To some extent that role takes Mill Ridge out of the limelight. As her good friend, Keeneland president Nick Nicholson points out, when a horse foaled and raised at Mill Ridge wins the Kentucky Derby, it is the owner, not Mill Ridge, who accepts the trophy. "But people in the industry know where the horses are raised," he added.

Among the horses Mill Ridge has raised are 2001 Horse of the Year Point Given, 2005 Kentucky Derby winner Giacomo, and 2011 Horse of the Year Havre de Grace. La Ville Rouge, the dam



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of champion Barbaro, is among its charges; Barbaro's brothers Nicanor and Lentenor were foaled and raised on the farm.

Mill Ridge has raised or sold 28 grade I winners since 2000; six have won Breeders' Cup races.

Stallions that have stood there and made their mark on the breed include the late Diesis and Gone West.

Among the farm's high-profile clients are Roy and Gretchen Jackson, owners of Barbaro and his dam La Ville Rouge; and Jerry and Ann Moss, owners of Giacomo and champion Zenyatta.

Mill Ridge's record in Thoroughbred sales is equally impres-

sive. At the 2010 Keeneland September sales, for example, Mill Ridge sold an A.P. Indy colt for clients John and Jerry Amerman for \$4.2 million. Mill Ridge was, in 2010, the No. 1 consignor by average with more than four horses at the Keeneland September yearling sale. The Mill Ridge bloodstock firm also has proved successful in consulting with clients about matings for their horses. Kentucky Derby winners Street Sense and Barbaro, along with Havre de Grace are among the champions that stemmed from Nicoma's mating recommendations.

Hands-on management

Had Chandler listened to others, Mill Ridge probably would not exist.

"She has told me that almost all of her friends and all of her financial advisers advised her to sell or lease the land," said Nicholson. "No one thought a woman could start her own farm.



Alice Chandler developed Mill Ridge into a full-service Thoroughbred operation that spans 1,100 acres.



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At the time it was not the norm for a woman to play that role. She just toughed it out, based on the business principles that her father had taught her.”

Managing the farm was not a desk job for Chandler. “Years ago she was very much a part of foaling,” said MacDonald. “She trained her horses, too. I’m not sure if she did it just to prove she could do it, but she could and she did.”

Making international connections

Early on Chandler planned matings for the mares her father had left her. The most fortuitous was the mating of her mare Attica and the stallion Sir Gaylord. The colt that resulted, born in 1965, became Sir Ivor, sold by Mill Ridge as a yearling at the Keeneland sales for \$42,000.

In 1968 Sir Ivor won the English Derby, and heads throughout Europe turned toward Kentucky and the Keeneland sales. “Sir Ivor opened all the doors,” said Bell, now the farm’s managing partner.

“It [Sir Ivor’s win] got all the Europeans coming over here to the [Keeneland] sales,” said Chandler.

The feat also brought attention to Mill Ridge. “The rest of the world found out what Central Kentucky already knew,” said Nicholson. “Alice is a person who knows her way around a horse.”

On the heels of Sir Ivor came another important international connection for Mill Ridge. Alice met and, in 1972, married Dr. John Chandler, a veterinarian from South Africa with connections to horse owners and farms in Europe and in the Middle East. Soon Mill Ridge was boarding horses for Prince Khalid Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, for whom John Chandler had worked; Lord Howard de Walden, a leader of England’s racing industry; and Queen Elizabeth.

Horses and heartbreak

Raising horses does not come without heartbreak, and like all other longtime Thoroughbred operations, Mill Ridge has had its share.

“In this business the ups are the uppest and the downs are the downest,” said Chandler.

Ten years ago it was MRLS, a syndrome that caused mares throughout the Bluegrass to abort their fetuses. Researchers linked the epidemic to tent caterpillars in wild cherry trees that lined fence rows on horse farms, including Mill Ridge.

Another down, years ago, has stuck with Bell, not only for the low that it represented for Mill Ridge but for his mother’s steely reaction to it. “In 1978 we had bought a mare in foal to North-



From left, Headley Bell, Duncan MacDonald, Reynolds Bell, Patricia “Tish” Bell, Mike Bell, John and Alice Chandler, and Price Bell.

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ern Dancer for \$500,000, and we really couldn't afford to buy a mare in foal to Northern Dancer," Bell explained.

While in England with his mother and his brother Reynolds, Headley got a call. The mare had lost the foal.

The brothers trudged to their mother's hotel room to deliver the news.

"I still remember seeing her expression, reflected in the mirror, when I told her. She went right on brushing her teeth. She didn't flinch."

The Headley family heritage

The family's involvement in the Thoroughbred industry did not begin with Hal Price Headley. Headley's father, Hal Petit Headley, was a horseman, as was his father, George W. Headley, pushing the family's ties to Kentucky Thoroughbreds to the mid-1800s.

Nor does the family's involvement end with Alice Chandler. Her four children, the fifth generation, all have connections to the farm. Mike Bell, a well-known trainer, serves as a sales consultant. "Everybody knows Mike and loves Mike," said Headley Bell.

Reynolds Bell, for 15 years the farm's manager, is now a bloodstock agent who sends many of his clients the farm's way. Sister Patricia "Tish" has in recent years begun directing farm maintenance. In the late 1970s Headley Bell founded Nicoma, and the farm branched into sales. His 29-year-old son Price, an agent for Nicoma, is the sixth generation to be associated with the farm.



"Everyone contributes," said Headley Bell. "Their roles are defined. You aren't there as a token. And we don't rest on those who came before us."

There are, however, reminders of those familial roots around Mill Ridge. The farm's racing silks are those of Hal Price Headley, navy blue with a diagonal white stripe. A farm road is lined with walnut trees that he planted by pushing walnuts into the soft ground. The two barns he'd begun building before he died remain. More than physical reminders though are the philosophical ones. "He left a huge imprint," acknowledged Bell.

Headley's impact came through actions more than words. Given his personality, Alice Chandler would not expect an outpouring praise from her father at what she and his descendants have accomplished. "He didn't express a lot, but he would be pleased."

Headley Bell agrees: Hal Price Headley was not effusive. Nonetheless, he is sure his famously gruff grandfather would be moved by the Mill Ridge story. "You can only imagine how proud he would be. He would be over the moon."

By staying true to her father's philosophies and through the force of her own personality, Chandler has done the same. "She's our motivating force as her father was her motivating force," said Bell.

Like her father, who led and prodded his peers and others to create Keeneland, Chandler has also been visible in the community and the industry. She's a longtime member of Keeneland's board of directors. She served the Kentucky Racing Commission and the Grayson-Jockey Club Research Foundation and

Above, the Chandlers enjoy watching their Jack Russell terriers have a romp. The dogs are part of the family.

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chaired the board of the Maxwell Gluck Center for Equine Research at the University of Kentucky. She was president of the Kentucky Thoroughbred Association.

"From the very beginning Mill Ridge was founded on a strong philosophy — to do what is best for the horse," said Nicholson, "but laced in with that was also to be involved in the industry and in the community."

The contributions of many

As with all successes, Mill Ridge's is not single-handed, Chandler and Bell are quick to point out. Early on, Arthur "Bull" Hancock, a longtime friend of Hal Price Headley, sent overflow clients Mill Ridge's way, a boost to the farm's budding boarding operation. "He was a huge, huge help," said Chandler.

Like Hancock, other industry leaders lent their assistance. The "very kind bunch," as Chandler describes them, remembered her as the precocious preteen who rode her pony from Beaumont Farm to the Keeneland construction site.

At the farm long alliances are also the case as staff tenures tend to be counted in decades, not years. Case in point is MacDonald, who landed at Mill Ridge by accident 34 years ago. He had left his home in England, planning to spend six months at Spendthrift Farm to gain a better understanding of American Thoroughbred operations. Visa problems sent him to friend Dr. John Chandler for assistance. After those problems were solved, the Chandlers offered MacDonald a post. He's been there ever since.

"Quite a lot of us have been here a long time," he said. "That speaks for itself. Not only is the horse taken care of, the people are taken care of as well."

And so, as the farm begins its 50th year, many will celebrate — from the blacksmith who shoes its horses to longtime clients whose racing success can be credited to their association with Mill Ridge.

There is also cause for the Keeneland racegoer to applaud the farm and its family members. Mill Ridge's ties to Keeneland will be visibly acknowledged this spring, when the farm's silks grace Keeneland's commemorative pin, sure to touch Chandler, who after spending much of her young years at the track with her father, calls it, "my place."

"I've always watched it very carefully all the years since then," she said. "And I think Daddy would be absolutely thrilled with Keeneland today. I feel we have grown and risen with great taste."

Said Nicholson: "Without that family there would be no Keeneland. It is as pure and simple as that." 