



DAVID STEPHENSON

CONSUMMATE HORSE WOMAN

Helen Kleberg Groves has carved a wide swath
in the equine world

By Maryjean Wall

From riding the range as a girl in her native Texas to standing in winner's circles at the country's major racetracks, Helen Kleberg Groves of King Ranch has lived a lifetime etched with memories of more horses in more pursuits than most of us will ever see.

Groves will tell you her six children are most important in her life. She might mention her pride in the family's foundation, through which the oil and cattle riches of King Ranch have benefitted so many beyond her family. But the constant in life, her *raison d'être*, most consistently has been the horse. The 89-year-old Groves has brought a passionate love for the animal to Thoroughbred racing, as well as to a wide variety of equine sports.

"I think she knows more about a horse from A to Z than anyone I ever met," said a longtime Groves acquaintance, Buster Welch. He's a Texan with an outsize reputation in the Quarter Horse world, a man people call the dean of cutting horse trainers. Long ago he recognized in Groves that rare and indescribable talent that separates a gifted horseman from the rest.

Groves, born Oct. 20, 1927, the only child of Robert Kleberg Jr. and Helen Campbell Kleberg, is the last of her kind: a hard-riding, tough-as-cactus cowgirl who grew up working right alongside the hands at the vast expanse of King Ranch in south Texas. This was the cattle empire founded about 1853 and once the largest operation of its kind in the United States. Though she no longer rides, Groves has a history with horses as vast as the mighty ranch where she spent her youth riding the range. She never limited herself to a single type or breed.

She has fox-hunted. She has won national championships on the very best cutting horses. She has cut, roped, and branded. In 1998 she was inducted into the National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame at Fort Worth, Texas. She has supported numerous equine organizations with her time and money. She has bred, sold, and raced some excellent Thoroughbreds.

She has purchased top-level hunters and jumpers for her children, and "I seem to recall she had a horse she sold that went on to the three-day [United States Equestrian] team and I think [Olympian] Mike Plumb rode the

horse," recalls her son-in-law, Michael Matz, himself an Olympian and trainer of Kentucky Derby winner Barbaro.

Matz has trained Thoroughbred racehorses for Groves and found the experience rewarding.

"For me, anyway, she couldn't have been a more loyal person," he said. "When she says something, she means it. You don't need a written contract. Her word is as good as gold. That's very rare in these times. With lots of these owners in the Thoroughbred business, you just don't see that any more. It's all 'what

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—Buster Welch

have you done for me lately.' "

Back in Texas, Welch said of Groves, "She's a great horsewoman, a great cow woman, a great ranch woman ... If she would take one I was training and go show it and return it some months later, it would be a better cow horse."

Known as Helenita to her family and countless friends around the world, Groves lives in San Antonio. She travels extensively, and early September found her in Lexington for the Keeneland September yearling sales. *Keeneland* magazine spoke to her at the home of daughter Helen Alexander, owner of Middlebrook Farm.

In the wide-ranging interview, Groves reminisced about some of the great Thoroughbreds bred and raised by her family. She also shared early memories of Keeneland as well as snapshots of



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Helen Groves and daughters Helen Alexander, left, and Cina Forgason, center, assess a yearling at the recent Keeneland September sale.

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her character-shaping childhood growing up on the 825,000-acre King Ranch.

Groves was so bred to ride horses that she cannot recall her first time in the saddle. It was all so natural, down in South Texas, deep on the ranch. She thinks her initial ride must have been when she was a baby: before the Crash, before the Great Depression, before World War II, before television and electric typewriters and the Internet and cell phones and every other modern turn American life took.

She does recall coming off a horse. Someone lifted her atop a little green pillow placed in a Western saddle, while a grown man sat with her on the horse. They set out on their ride. The horse stumbled and fell.

"And the guy kind of fell on me," said Groves. "So I was pinned there, briefly. And I

remember reaching for that little green pillow because I wanted that little green pillow. I remember a dun horse and the little green pillow."

She does not recall being afraid when that fall occurred.

She was meant for ranch life as it existed during the early 20th century, before pickup



trucks replaced horses in cattle work, before horses rode to their daily work in stock trailers instead of commuting on the hoof.



Groves was on hand for all the Triple Crown races of the King Ranch-bred and -born Assault.



From her earliest days, Groves was always at home in the saddle.

Ranch life

Groves' story goes back so far that it evokes the glory days of the Old West, or the nearest someone her age was going to get to those days. Hers is an American story rich in this nation's history, going all the way back to one Capt. Richard King. He was her ancestor, an orphan who rose above his circumstances and bought land within a Mexican land grant. His friend Robert E. Lee had advised him to buy land and never sell.

King Ranch began its primary mission of raising cattle nine years prior to Lee's riding off to the Army of Virginia as a general in the Civil War. The ranch likewise began its work about 14 years before the postwar era of the great cattle drives, when cowboys herded some 20 million cattle from Texas to Kansas railheads for shipment north and meat processing.

The King Ranch founder, that risk-taking Capt. King, was a scrapper, as anyone venturing into sparsely populated Texas in the 1850s would have been. King had been born to Irish immigrants in Orange County, New York. After he lost his parents, he found himself apprenticed to a jeweler in New York. The apprenticeship involved mostly baby-sitting and sweeping up, neither to which he thought he was suited. His recourse was to run away when he was 10 and to hide himself on a ship bound

for Alabama. To shorten what could become a long story here, he rose up to pilot riverboats on Southern rivers.

Three generations following, Helen Kleberg (later Alexander, and still later, Groves) was growing up the cowgirl way. She also received an excellent education, attending the prestigious Foxcroft School in Virginia and later Vassar College.

"She'd get out there and cut cattle, help us round up cattle, the whole works," recalled Lavoyger Durham, former manager of Norias division of King Ranch. Norias was 230,000 open acres, and Durhamsaid, "It is what you saw in Western movies. No different."

He told how they cut cattle "the real cowboy way, not much of this arena stuff. We used to do it in the open, where the herd was being held by only cowboys: no pens, no wires, no nothing around ... At Norias we were the last ones, probably, in the United States, working cattle that way. And she'd be out there helping us."

During Groves' youth her father,

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—Helen Groves

Kleberg Jr., was developing the Santa Gertrudis cattle breed on the ranch. This was a cross between Brahman bulls and shorthorn cows. Kleberg also developed conservation practices. And he helped develop a new equine breed, the American Quarter Horse. Kleberg's homebred Wimpy, descendant of a King Ranch foundation stallion named Old Sorrel, was chosen as the first horse registered in the new American Quarter Horse Association upon its formation in 1940.

Passion for racing

In the 1930s Kleberg Jr. and his wife began purchasing Thoroughbreds, enlisting eventual Hall of Fame trainer

Max Hirsch to condition their runners. They acquired some in Kentucky. They also bought at Saratoga. Groves recalls attending Keeneland for the opening meet in 1936. She was 10. "Alice Chandler and Lucy Gay were my little friends, and we all were dressed properly," Groves said. "We had little white straw hats with blue ribbons and white blouses and skirts, and we had our white gloves and white socks and our Mary Jane shoes.

"And we bet. We really couldn't see very much [over the counters at the betting windows], but they would reach over and take our \$2, and we would bet. I don't remember how we came out, but we had a lot of fun."

She also remembers the old Belmont Park (prior to the complete rebuilding of the grandstand and clubhouse in the 1960s), although her visits usually were to Hirsch's barn and track cottage because children were not supposed to be in the stands during the races. That is, most children were not supposed to be seen trackside. Groves said, "I'd go over with Max's cook. She liked to go to the jumping race."

In 1937 Kleberg and Hirsch gave Groves the honor of leading in Dawn Play to the winner's circle at Belmont Park after that filly won the Coaching Club American Oaks. Groves was so taken with Thoroughbred racing that when the family returned to Texas, she and her cousins organized a horse race for their ponies at the Kingsville track, where the King Ranch Thoroughbreds trained and sometimes raced.



Champion Althea, shown winning the Santa Susana Stakes, early on validated the purchase of foundation mare Courtly Dee.

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Groves is joined by Helen Alexander, second from left, and Josephine Abercrombie, second from right, after Acoma's victory in the 2008 Pin Oak Valley View Stakes at Keeneland.

The prize: a box of Whitman's chocolates. Groves did not win.

She recalls Hirsch coming to Texas every winter to check on the Thoroughbreds before most of the 2-year-olds were shipped by rail to his New York barn. "They would lead them through town," she said, "down to the railroad station where they would be loaded into horse Pullmans, three and three and lots of space in between, where there'd be a barrel of water and hay."

Groves' timeline of "firsts" is a long one: She attended Keeneland's first-ever auction in 1943, during World War II, long before the modern sales pavilion was constructed. She was 15 and sampled her first beer. The beer was cold and the sales tent was "very, very hot," so, of course, she remembers that beer. "We stayed at the Lafayette [Hotel]. In the morning Daddy would get me up to go with him at 4 a.m. and we'd go to the coffee shop and have breakfast; then we'd start going to look at horses on the farms."



Groves has been described as a great ranch woman and the "Queen of Cutting."

Assault, the King Ranch-bred 1946 Triple Crown winner, came along three years later. "I saw all of his Triple Crown

“ Her word is as good as gold. That's very rare in these times.”

—Michael Matz

“races,” Groves said. However, she is not going to retell the story of Assault. “We have all read that,” she says about Assault's stepping on a sharp object in his youth, injuring a foot, and becoming known as the “Club-Footed Comet.”

But there are other Assault stories. In 1947, a year following the Triple Crown, Groves was standing down by the rail at Empire City track in Jamaica, New York, watching Assault race in the Butler Handicap and realizing just how much courage this horse had. “Stymie was on one side and Gallorette was on the other side and ... those riders on each side were beating Assault across the nose with their crops.” Assault won by a head. Stymie (foaled on King Ranch) ran second and Gallorette finished third. The past performance line reads “hard drive” but a more descriptive comment might have been, “won bravely.”

After Assault won the Derby, King Ranch opened a Kentucky division for Thoroughbreds in 1947, some 650 acres on Old Frankfort Pike that remained in operation until it was sold in the 1990s. Helen Alexander served as general manager of King Ranch in Kentucky from 1974 until 1991.

In 1950, King Ranch and the Kleberg family won two-thirds of the Triple Crown when Middleground captured the Kentucky Derby and the Belmont Stakes.

Among Groves' racehorses, Saidam stood out. He was a stakes winner (Grey Lag Handicap and Quaker City Handicap) she bred and raced in the early 1960s. The

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sire was Never Say Die, the 1954 Epsom Derby winner. The kindergarten teacher for Groves' children came up with the name, relying on a quote from James Edward "Pa" Ferguson, an impeached Texas governor: "Never say die; say damn," Groves said, recalling the quote. "We had to spell it Saidam."

Her proudest moment with Saidam was when he ran second to five-time Horse of the Year Kelso in the 1963 Suburban Handicap.

And so it went. Some of the best Thoroughbreds in the United States raced for Groves or her partners. Groves was competing on her cutting horses and fox hunting and racing her horses at the same time she was raising her six children. Welch, that dean of cutting horse trainers, found this remarkable. "I think her most outstanding accomplishment was she raised the best bunch of rich kids I ever saw," he mused.

Groves saw that her children all were exposed to horses. They all rode. Some chose to continue their interests and joined her in Thoroughbred racing.

Groves summarized their equine interests this way, beginning with the filly Althea, which she, daughter Helen, and their English partner, David Aykroyd, bred in 1981. Althea's dam was Courtly Dee, Kentucky Broodmare of the Year in 1983, and cornerstone of the family's contemporary breeding dynasty.

"She was by Alydar," Groves said of Althea. "She got a gravel and was lame right before the Keeneland summer sale, so we kept her. She won the Eclipse Award at 2, and at 3 [won] the Arkansas Derby and was favorite for the Kentucky Derby."

Althea led for the early furlongs in a Derby that Swale won. Earlier that spring Althea had become the first filly to win the Arkansas Derby.

Like Courtly Dee, Althea proved an exceptional broodmare. Her granddaughter Acoma won the 2010 Juddmonte Spinster Stakes at Keeneland for Groves and Helen Alexander.

Another Groves daughter, Emory Hamilton, raced a graded stakes-winning daughter of Blushing Groom, named Too Chic. Daughter Caroline (Cina) Forgason raced a daughter of Lemon Drop Kid named Somali Lemonade, also a graded stakes-winner of nearly \$1 million.

Still another daughter, Henrietta Alexander, trained Serape, bred and raced by Groves.



From left, Forgason, Groves, and Alexander share a common bond in their love of breeding and racing Thoroughbreds.

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Serape was the winner of the 1992 grade I Ballerina Stakes at Saratoga. In the grade II Genuine Risk Stakes that same year, when Serape finished second to Parisian Flight, the filly that ran fifth was Aurora, a daughter of Althea bred and owned by Groves, Alexander, and Aykroyd.

Her son John rides and plays polo. Youngest daughter DD Matz owns Thoroughbred mares and rode jumpers on the U. S. Equestrian Team. She competed in the Pan American Games in Cuba and Argentina. She is married to trainer Michael Matz, trainer of a number of good horses for the family.

Outstanding horses continue to embellish Groves and her family's racing and breeding successes. This year Hawkbill, the Kitten's Joy yearling Groves bred and sold as a yearling at Keeneland, has been a major

stakes winner in Europe. And Groves is particularly excited about her newest hope, a 2-year-old Thoroughbred named Confederate, a son of the Matz-trained Belmont Stakes winner, Union Rags.

And, Matz is trainer of Confederate, which brings the story full circle, to another good 2-year-old holding out promise for Groves.

Just as her horses always have. And just as the first American Quarter Horses and Thoroughbreds held out their initial promise for King Ranch.

The all-around horsewoman, cow woman, and ranch woman thrills to a good horse the same as she did as a child with her ponies.

"You'll never see another one like her," remarked Durham, the former King Ranch manager. "Those times are gone." **KM**



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