



PENNING ✦ THEIR LEGACY

Agriculture, horses,
and love of the land are
in the DNA of brothers
Frank and John Penn,
whose Penn Sales is
a longtime Keeneland
sales consignor

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Generations of Penns have farmed in Central Kentucky. Pictured from left are baby Ella, Kendra, John, Alex, and Frank.

The horse farms that tobacco built were once a common Bluegrass story. Tucked in among emerald pasturelands where Thoroughbreds grazed were acres of burley, the crop that helped pay the bills. Like many other farmers raised in Central Kentucky, brothers Frank and John Penn grew up straddling these two worlds.

John, 61, continues with horses and general farming on his Pennland Farm northeast of Paris. Both started out this spring hopeful of seeing a pair of Pennland graduates, Blended Citizen and Flameaway, embark down the Kentucky Derby trail. Last year they got within 2¼ lengths of bragging rights when Lookin At Lee, raised at Pennland, ran second in the Derby behind Always Dreaming. And oh yes, John also raised 17th-placed Fast and Accurate.

In addition, John had raised Arklow, winner last year of the grade 2 American Turf Stakes run on Derby Day, giving the brothers and their families a thrilling afternoon. They celebrated again this year when Maraud, a Penn-bred colt and half brother to Arklow, won the American Turf. The Penns have raised and sold numerous other graded stakes winners over the years, including two Breeders' Cup winners: Fort Larned (Breeders' Cup Classic) and Success Express (Breeders' Cup Juvenile).

For all their achievements, you would think the Penn brothers would be as recognizable to racing fans as Bob Baffert or Todd Pletcher. But they're not. Insiders know the brothers and their Penn Sales, which sells primarily young horses the Penns have raised for their clients. But to casual fans of the sport, the Penns remain among the most successful horsemen that most people have never heard of. The Penns say that's by design. They're not given to crowing. Most family farmers aren't.

"We don't advertise," said Frank. "We get our glory out of seeing our horses run."

Like their late father (Frank Sr.) and their late uncles (W. E. "Pete" Penn and Oscar Penn), these brothers raised tobacco and Thoroughbreds outside the spotlight, keeping a low profile while growing up as old-school Kentucky "hard boots." Historically, this term referred to horsemen who got their hands and hard leather boots wet and dirty working in their barns and fields. They did not spend their days sipping juleps on verandas. Those were the absentee capitalists, romanticized into myth that accompanied their ownership of some of the grandest horse farms.

The newest Penns to become involved with horses also share the hard-boot ethic. They



John and Frank Penn are a longtime but low-key presence at the Keeneland sales.

"We're farmers who like horses," said Frank Penn, 73, best known in the horse business for his longtime relationship with clients Janis Whitham and her late husband, Frank Whitham. Among the many Whitham horses boarded at Frank's Pennbrook Farm on Mt. Horeb Pike was champion mare Bayakoa.

Frank Penn retired three years ago from working his Pennbrook Farm while brother

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The original Penn brothers, from left, Frank, W. E. "Pete," and Oscar, shared a love of the land and a strong work ethic, which Frank and John inherited.

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—FRANK PENN

are John's son, Alex, and his wife, Kendra. They have taken on day-to-day horse care, the prepping of sales yearlings for Penn Sales, and help with foaling the mares. "We do it the hard-boot way. We're very hands-on," said Alex. Like his father, he considered going to veterinary school but decided he wanted to stay on the farm.

Love of the land

A love of land has always been the driver behind the Penn family's success. Frank, John, and Frank's wife, Rita, and John's wife, Kris, all share this love for the land — expressed in a back story of hard work. The wives "have been very much involved," Frank said. "It's very much a family deal because if you lived on that farm you worked on it."

The Penn operations originally produced food and income for a family partnership when Frank Sr. and his brothers began buying land during the Great De-



Kendra and Ella Penn enjoy the mares and foals.

pression of the 1930s. The extended families formed a virtual village of uncles and cousins, adding to their land holdings un-

til they owned four farms totaling 1,064 acres in what were then the rural netherlands of northern Fayette County.

Newtown and Russell Cave pikes bounded the four farms. Tobacco was their major crop although the families also farmed cattle and horses, hay, and whatever else would bring in cash. They even tried growing cabbages and making goat cheese, but these short-lived experiments failed to stay much of a course.

When Frank and John were growing up, their parents assigned them to assist farm laborers. Their father would pick up day laborers in Lexington and transport them in a truck he'd outfitted with benches along each side of the truck's bed. Frank experienced more of these old ways than did John, given their age difference. But John grew up working as hard as Frank did.

"We became economic assets at about age 14," Frank said.

John recalls a youth spent driving a



The original house on Pennland Farm looks out on grazing horses and unspoiled countryside.

tractor from one farm to another “over and over and over. And over.”

With their father and uncles in the steer business, Frank can recall driving cattle from one family farm to another at daylight on Sunday mornings before going to church.

“We’d take them out the gate and down Mt. Horeb across Lemons Mill to Russell Cave,” he said. “We’d have several people walking and two or three on horses. We did that in the 1960s.”

Happily, automobile traffic was sparse. No one got run over. But the point is the family wasn’t giving young Frank a morning off even if it was Sunday. Frank and soon John were assimilating a work ethic passed along by their elders. They have carried these lessons through their lives.

The Penn families were smart businessmen as well as hard workers. In 1950 an opportunity arose for the Penns to buy the Clay No. 1 Tobacco Warehouse from Floyd Clay and an entity representing horse-industry interests for an estimated price of more than \$400,000.



E. MARTIN LESSEE



FOUR FOOTED PHOTOS

Frank Penn raised Success Express, 1987 Breeders’ Cup Juvenile winner, and also boarded champion Bayakoa for longtime clients Janis and Frank Whitham after her racing career.



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Multiple stakes winner Flameway contested the 2018 Kentucky Derby while Lookin At Lee ran second in the 2017 edition. Both were raised at Pennland Farm.



Frank and John spent their youths driving tractors, tending cattle, and assisting farm laborers.

The families immediately installed a pink neon sign that became a landmark on South Broadway: “Penn Brothers World’s Largest WHSE.” As Frank recalls, 31 tobacco warehouses operated in Lexington, their annual auctions bringing numerous visitors to the city every fall. Frank Sr. and his brothers also owned Penn Storage Co. behind the warehouse. The family augmented its interests to include a tobacco warehouse, Penn Brothers, in Vidalia, Georgia, later trading the warehouse for 350 acres of horse farm land in Ocala, Florida. The latter eventually became Harry T. Mangurian Jr.’s Mockingbird Farm.

A Lexington Herald-Leader story told how the Penn Brothers

Warehouse moved almost 9 million pounds of tobacco across its floor in the 1950s when burley was at its peak. Buyers represented some of the world’s major tobacco companies. The warehouse was seven acres, all wood, and consequently “the largest termite factory in the world,” Frank joked. The Herald-Leader told how the boys’ uncles, Oscar and Pete, originally got around the warehouse by riding bicycles and, “When they passed each other, if they needed to speak, they would pedal in little circles, never stopping.” Golf carts eventually replaced the bicycles.

Diversifying with horses

The combined Penn families found themselves in the horse



John Penn donated his farm to the Bluegrass Land Conservancy, meaning it will never be developed.

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business in 1945 upon adding Kingston Farm on Russell Cave Road to their growing conglomerate. A number of broodmares came with the farm. Since the families were always open to trying new income streams, the broodmare angle looked like something they should investigate for its profit potential. The senior Penns were quick studies. Frank has farm records showing Penn Brothers selling 73 yearlings in a single session at the 1966 Keeneland September yearling sale. "Every third horse that went in the ring was ours," Frank said.

John and Frank grew up helping farm laborers care for about 200 Thoroughbred mares. "Teasing" the mares to determine if they were ready for mating during the winter months took all day, three days a week.

Frank recalls the old ways, as well. In his memory the mares were delivered to their appointments with stallions in a manner to suit more leisurely times. Mares now are in and out of stallion farms as quickly as they're bred. When Frank was young, the mares sometimes spent hours or perhaps the entire day visiting the stallion farm.

"We had a six-horse van," Frank said, "and we drove it like a school bus, dropping them off at stud farms and picking them up later." Think of this old-time practice as something like doggie day care, with the difference that you eventually got a Thoroughbred foal.

"We would foal out 50 to 60 mares," Frank said, "and then we'd buy 20 to 30 weanlings a year at Keeneland."

The Penns offered high-volume yearling consignments at Keeneland until 1969 when they ended their partnership of families for estate-planning reasons. The farms and horses were divided among the family, and these families continued to sell as separate entities. Until the 1960s and dissolution of the partnership, the family also stood stallions at Kingston Farm: Signator, Graphic, Sweeping Light, The Sultan, War Dog, and Rablero.

In 1981 John took his operation to his

present farm, which has been expanded to 800 acres on Harrods Creek Road north-east of Paris. That same year Frank built a house on his Pennbrook Farm, where he and his wife continue to live. Bayakoa retired to this latter property in 1991 and lived there until her death in 1996. Frank has great memories of his years with the Whithams and other clients.

"We were very fortunate to board horses for people who would let us raise them to be athletes," Frank said. "They were raised outside. The secret to both our operations is pasture. That means having enough pasture for [the number of] horses. It means turning them out every day; you look at them in the morning and turn them right back out. You don't overfeed them. They don't need the finest hay if you do a good job with your pasture."

Both brothers can extol for hours about their love of land. But in addition to the talk, they've walked the long miles of their mission. John donated his farm to the Bluegrass Land Conservancy, and Frank sold easements on his land to Fayette County's Purchase of Development Rights, a land conservancy program he pushed to

create in 2000. The result is these farms never will be developed for subdivisions. Frank also serves on the Lexington-Fayette County Planning Commission, attending meetings every Thursday.

Alex, at least the fourth generation of Penns to farm, is another to endorse the family's love of the land.

"The biggest lesson my father has ever taught me is why we do this, and it is for the love of the land," he wrote in a text. "If you take care of the land, it will take care of you no matter what agricultural crop you're growing, whether it be horses, cattle, tobacco, beans, or hay."

Love of the land surely must be ingrained in Penn family genetics. Nothing else could explain the intensity with which the Penns have worked to raise their crops and cattle and horses through several generations. The Penns have diversified with the changing times since those days when tobacco shared the Bluegrass landscape with horses. What has not changed is the lasting connection the Penns have made to the soil and a culture of hard work that formed the foundations for all in horse country. **KM**



"If you take care of the land, it will take care of you no matter what agricultural crop you're growing," says Alex Penn, second from left. He is at least the fourth generation of Penns to farm.