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EVERY FALL, THE FOOTHILLS OF THE ADIRONDACK MOUNTAINS of upstate New York attract scores of "leaf peepers" to see the kaleidoscope of vibrant red, yellow and orange leaves on the region's trees. And while most of these visitors are familiar with Saratoga's historic Thoroughbred racetrack and horse breeding farms, few know its best-kept secret—its thriving rodeo scene.

Case in point: The tourist town of Lake Luzerne, where the blacktop ends at Howe Road and the West begins at the sign for the Painted Pony Championship Rodeo.

Owned by Shawn and Shana Graham, the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association-sanctioned rodeo runs every weekend from July through Labor Day. What's more, as stock contractors, the Painted Pony provides the roughstock and roping cattle for all of the region's PRCA rodeos.

In 2016, there were 12 PRCA rodeos in New York, including the Adirondack Stampede Rodeo in November, which paid out nearly $21,000; and the Gerry Volunteer Fireman's Rodeo in August, which annually awards nearly $65,000 and attracts more than 200 contestants. In addition, on any given Saturday night during the summer there are seven different rodeos held within a 300-mile radius, either open rodeos or those run by the International Professional Rodeo Association (IPRA) or the American Professional Rodeo Association (APRA). The Grahams also supply stock for those events.

"It's pretty neat to be the only PRCA stock contractor in the state," Shawn says.

The popularity of rodeo in New York is not a newfound fascination. It is a decades-old tradition that revolves around family and relies on folks like the Grahams, who are committed to keeping rodeo alive in the Empire State.

ROMANCE AT THE RANCH

The Painted Pony didn't start as a rodeo; it began as a vacation destination. During the 1940s, entrepreneur and real estate agent Earl Woodward played an integral role in promoting the town of Lake Luzerne as a vacation destination. Tourists could spend a weekend at one of 37 dude ranches and experience a taste of what life was like out West.

KIM STONE

Pavement Ends

In an area known for Thoroughbred racing and fall foliage, the Painted Pony Championship Rodeo does more than survive. It thrives.

By KATIE NAVARRA

"Offering the promise of finding 'romance at the ranch,' the area was marketed to single women as an opportunity to meet a real-life cowboy and find love," says Pam Morin, the historian for the Town of Lake Luzerne.

Morin collects and preserves oral histories from cowboys, cowgirls, wranglers and others who were involved in establishing and working the ranches. She also is Shana's mother and calls herself the "Painted Pony Grandma."

When the dude ranch business was booming, Jack McCue, a tie-down roping champion and former owner of Painted Pony, recalls the streets overflowing with out-of-town guests.

"You could drive down Route 9N in Lake Luzerne and see people sleeping in their cars because all of the resort rooms were full," he recalls. "There were 10 girls to every guy and cowboys from out West came here to work, compete and find a date."

Of the original 37 dude ranches that opened between 1940 and 1960, only five remain in operation today. One of those is the Painted

CASEY MARTIN

ABOVE: The 2016 First Frontier Circuit Saddle Bronc of the Year was Painted Pony Championship Rodeo's 70 Shasta. Matt Bartsch drew the bronc at the circuit finals in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

TOP: Taking care of the Painted Pony Championship Rodeo's livestock is a family affair. From left, Gabrielle, Alexis and Shana Graham bring in the herd of broncs.

ABOVE: It took nearly four years for Walt and Betty Isaacson to build their Painted Pony dude ranch; the first guests arrived in the spring of 1947.

Horses from Montana arrived by train to the town of Hadley in the spring of 1951 to be used in the Painted Pony dude ranch's new rodeo competition. People watched from their windows as the horses went by, led by Don Baxter.

Originally a dude ranch, the Painted Pony added a rodeo competition and grounds in 1951, and is still in operation today.

Pony, though it is no longer a dude ranch. It preserves the Western lifestyle through its championship rodeo.

Billed as the place "where the pavement ends and the West begins," the Painted Pony was conceived in 1943 when Walt Isaacson from New York City scouted for property in the Adirondacks to build a dude ranch. He connected with Woodward, and by Columbus Day that year Isaacson was in business. It took nearly four years to build and prepare the facility for the first guests, who were welcomed on April 19, 1947.

"The first paying guests were a young couple on their honeymoon," Morin says. "By Memorial Day that year they had 24 guests, and the rates were $40 a week per person."

Rates included lodging, three meals a day and horseback riding. Most other ranches didn't welcome children, so Isaacson and his wife, Betty, catered to families.

"Walt often said, 'if they don't want the kids, we'll take them,' " Morin says.

In 1950, the Isaacsons' daughter, Janie, married Don "Wild" Baxter, and he suggested adding a regular rodeo competition. The newlyweds traveled to Montana to buy horses and shipped them east by rail. In the spring of 1951, the horses arrived in the town of Hadley; it was the first time horses were shipped into town by train. People lined the road to watch the horses unloaded and driven to the ranch, and schoolchildren were allowed to watch from the windows as the horses went by.

"On the last Friday in June of 1953, Don led the grand entry with Janie following carrying the American flag,

LEFT PHOTOS: COURTESY OF PAINTED PONY CHAMPIONSHIP RODEO; LOWER RIGHT PHOTO: KATIE NAVARRA

The Painted Pony Championship Rodeo roughstock live and perform on rodeo grounds in upstate New York.

KIM STONE

and a guest from the ranch carrying the flag of Painted Pony," Morin says.

The Isaacson and Baxter families continued operating the ranch until 1970, when it was sold to a guest's family. Isaacson briefly recounts the ranch's sale in his self-published book, *The Painted Pony*.

"A young woman that was a guest at the ranch stayed an extra week and told me her father would be up to talk with me," he wrote. "When her father arrived, he asked to buy the ranch … without looking at the property or the financials. He served as the Postmaster General for the United Nations and was ready to retire. On November 6, 1970, the transaction was complete. We shook hands and with mixed emotions Betty and I returned to Florida."

REVIVING THE LEGACY

By the 1980s, the Painted Pony fell into bankruptcy and was abandoned. A shift in tourists' interests and the expansion of nearby amusement parks brought the same fate to nearly 90 percent of the resorts like it. Harsh upstate New York winters took their toll on the facilities and many of the buildings fell into disrepair. Fortunately for the historic ranch, that was not its ultimate fate.

In 1991, Jack McCue and three partners bought the business through a tax sale. Not long after the group purchased the property, the dude ranch portion of the business was sold and the focus became rodeos. In the decade that followed, McCue and his wife, Kathy, became the sole owners, and his four daughters grew up barrel racing in the weekly rodeos.

Under the McCues' ownership, the Painted Pony expanded its offerings to include country music concerts. Tracy Byrd, Waylon Jennings and Patty Loveless were advertised as headliners, and fans packed the stands to capacity.

As the McCues' children grew up, none were interested in becoming owners, so Jack offered the business to Shawn in 2001. Jack had been friends with Shawn's father, Skip Graham, a steer wrestler and the rodeo's original bull fighter. Jack considered Shawn a son and knew he would continue the ranch's legacy.

Shawn spent much of his childhood at Painted Pony even though he didn't compete. Instead of riding horses he became involved in racing motocross, but as his 20th birthday approached, his interests shifted and bull riding caught his attention.

"I got a little old to race motocross," he says.

Competing in roughstock events, he earned the 2000 IPRA All-Around Champion title at the Northeast Regional Finals. That same year, he qualified for the American Finals Rodeo in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, in saddle bronc riding. During the first go, the horse threw Shawn into the dirt. As his forehead hit the ground, he heard his neck click like a stack of dominoes tipping over.

"I knew something was wrong, but I got up and tried to walk straight. All I could do was circle," he says.

He had fractured his C3 and C4 vertebrae and required surgery. Knowing his career as a rodeo contestant was over, he believed the opportunity to buy the Painted Pony was his only shot at staying involved in the sport.

Ironically, the facility that was once marketed as "romance at the ranch," connected Shawn and Shana, and started their life together as a couple.

Shana grew up coming to the Painted Pony with her parents, first sitting in the stands as a spectator, then later participating as a barrel racer. Most of her horse experience came from a local Thoroughbred farm her father managed. The farm's band of 40 broodmares produced offspring that ran at the Finger Lakes Race Track, Belmont Park and Aqueduct Racetrack, all in New York, and she helped her father during foaling season.

"Back then there weren't any alarms or cameras; you had to stay out in the barn on foal watch in the cold February and March nights," Shana says. "It was exciting because I got to stay up with my dad."

After high school, she studied business and marketing in college. She simultaneously bartended at the Painted Pony Saloon and managed the Ruby Tuesday restaurant in Albany. Shana and Shawn married in 2004, with Jack standing up as the best man.

The Painted Pony Championship Rodeo's 844 George's Bad Cat was the only horse selected for the 2016 Wrangler National Finals Rodeo that hailed from east of the Mississippi River.

Painted Pony Championship Rodeo's K-52 Jack Daniels Sour Mash was 2016 First Frontier Circuit Bull of the Year, seen here ridden by Mike Adams at the Adirondack Stampede Rodeo in Glens Falls, New York.

When Shana joined the business, she wanted to add her own touch to the popular barbecue dinner that is available on rodeo nights.

"Jack started the barbecue under his ownership, but I was eager to add my own spice to it," she says. "I truly enjoy this side of the business. There are a lot of laughs and good people I have had the chance to meet."

NATIONAL RECOGNITION

The Grahams have worked tirelessly to restore, maintain and build the Painted Pony. Their dedication to rodeo has not gone unnoticed, though their enthusiasm for the sport in New York is surprising to cowboys, cowgirls and rodeo contestants born and raised in the West.

"We didn't realize how popular rodeo is there," says Stacie Tarr, whose husband, Matt, is a PRCA bullfighter. "The amount of fans is incredible."

Matt was first invited to New York in 2013 just after receiving his PRCA permit. After accepting the booking, the couple began to wonder what they had agreed to. The couple's early trips to New York were so successful that in 2016 they booked July and August performances exclusively in the northeast.

"Our family and friends couldn't believe there were enough rodeos to support us in the northeast, but there are" Stacie says.

Nearly 10 years ago, the Grahams expanded the Painted Pony Championship Rodeo, adding enough stock to support 40 road shows a year in addition to the 30 shows at the home ranch.

"We knew we couldn't survive on a 10-week rodeo season; the business isn't lucrative enough," Shawn says. "We made the decision to go year-round so we could stay in the business full time. In July of 2016, we put on rodeos in three different states within three days."

They now travel from local fairgrounds to convention centers, and to regional and national championships. Hauling up and down the East Coast has allowed their stock to earn multiple awards. In 2008, the couple's saddle bronc 70 Shasta was the first New York horse hauled to Las Vegas for the Wrangler National Finals Rodeo.

That was the first of many national honors bestowed on the ranch's stock. In 2013, Shane Proctor rode the Graham's bull Blue Canyon to a third-place finish in the sixth round of the NFR. The ride helped Proctor win the world championship that year.

In 2014, bareback bronc Shana's Delight helped two riders win more than $27,000 at the NFR. And in 2015 the Grahams' roughstock brought home top awards at the First Frontier Finals Rodeo held in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Bareback bronc 844 George's Bad Cat was named Horse of the Year, and 70 Shasta won the title in the saddle bronc category. Their bull K-52 Jack Daniel's Sour-mash was named Bull of the Year, an honor befitting his performances in Harrisburg and previously at the NFR.

At the conclusion of the 2016 season, K-52 Jack Daniels Sour Mash was

LEFT: HUBBELL RODEO PHOTOS; RIGHT: CASEY MARTIN

named the First Frontier Circuit Bull of the Year, 70 Shasta earned Saddle Bronc of the Year, and 844 George's Bad Cat was bareback horse of the year.

The Graham's bucking stock has traveled to the Dodge Ram Circuit Finals Rodeo eight years in a row. The rodeo is the second-largest in the country, featuring more than $1 million in prize money. Prior to the event, the PRCA directors selected 50 bulls and 50 bareback broncs for the competition from hundreds of nominated animals from across the country. The Grahams had three horses and three bulls selected from nearly 790 nominations.

"Our animals mean everything to us," Shawn says. "Each bronc or bull only bucks seven or eight times a year. Each maximum ride is eight seconds, so that's a maximum of about one minute."

The 31-year-old bronc 855 Hatchet is a testament to the care the animals receive. At his advanced age, the gelding still bucks.

"They go above and beyond to ensure the quality of their animals and to help those animals gain national attention," says Wacey Cody, a bareback and saddle bronc rider from San Angelo, Texas, who regularly competes in the northeast.

LOCAL LOVE

The national recognition is a testament to their hard work, but for Shawn and Shana, the locals who support the Painted Pony year-round are essential to their success.

"It's all about family. I've been going to Painted Pony with my uncles before I was old enough to compete myself," says Carmine Nastry, a tie-down, team roping and all-around competitor with 24 titles.

Nastry, a regular at the rodeo, admits that it's more than good livestock that keeps him coming back. His son is a trick roping contract act there, and his wife and daughter run barrels.

While it's the local rodeo contestants who keep the crowds coming to the weekly rodeos, the Grahams realize that family—both biological and acquired through friendship—is equally critical to the Painted Pony's success.

The Graham family currently owns and operates Painted Pony Championship Rodeo: Shana and Shawn are shown with their children, from left, Trevor, Gabrielle and Alexis.

When Shawn and Shana are on the road for more than a few days at a time during the summer months, they are accompanied by their children, Gabrielle, 10, Alexis, 8, and Trevor, 7. Support from family, friends and employees enables them to maintain the hectic pace.

"We would not be able to go up and down the road without our support staff," Shana says. "The 35 to 40 employees we have keep us going."

Volunteers like Charlie and Barb Stone are equally important to keeping the facility running. Each weekend the couple drives 152 miles one way from their home in Plattsburg, New York. The Stones pay their own hotel room and travel expenses.

"We already have our rooms booked for 2017," Barb says. "Shawn and Shana have welcomed us like we're part of the family."

Perhaps most notable is the couple's commitment to the rodeo and ranching lifestyle.

"It's not a Wild West show simulating the Western life," Cody says. "The Painted Pony is a valid, competitive rodeo with good stock."

The Grahams are dedicated to the Painted Pony because they like the Western lifestyle and also hope this paves the way for their children to have a good future. Gabrielle was named 2017 Lil Miss Rodeo New York. Alexis is following in her boot steps. In January, she won the personality category in the first Miss First Frontier Circuit Rodeo Queen Pageant.

"We're preserving a family tradition and creating a life that our kids have an opportunity to enjoy today and in the future," Shawn says.

KATIE NAVARRA is a New York-based freelance writer. Send comments on this story to edit@westernhorseman.com. To learn more about the Painted Pony Championship Rodeo, visit paintedponyrodeo.com.

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