

Robert E. McCabe

CTBA Member Profile



by DEBRA GINSBURG

Growing up in Arcadia, Calif., would make any kid crazy about horse racing. The atmosphere around Santa Anita Park was a powerful influence for longtime CTBA member Robert (Bob) McCabe, who not only went on to breed Thoroughbreds but also wound up marrying one of the industry's strongest advocates.

"It was very rural back then," he recalled. "We lived across from an 80-acre alfalfa field right in the heart of Arcadia, near the farm where the great California-bred runner T. V. Lark grew up."

Bob's two brothers were ushers at Santa Anita in the horsemen's box seat section and his dad was a conductor on the Pacific Electric Railway that operated a line to the track. Every summer the family took the train down to Del Mar to attend the races there.

"My dad got to be a pretty good handicapper," McCabe added. "He bought a 2-year-old at the Santa Anita sale, but by the time the horse got ready to race the United States had entered the war and Santa Anita became an interment camp. He sold the horse to some people who ran it down at Agua Caliente in Tijuana and won some nice races with it. All of that had a profound impact on my life and I knew I wanted to someday own some racehorses."

During college, McCabe met a girl

whose life was also touched by horses. Earlene Knisley was born in Fresno, but grew up on the Lucky Baldwin property in Arcadia. Her father trained and took care of Anita Baldwin's horses while her uncle administered the Baldwin estate, eventually persuading his heirs to sell some of the land to Dr. Charles Strub for the con-



Robert (Bob) McCabe (left) and his late wife Earlene with Bill Shoemaker

struction of Santa Anita. Not only did Earlene help her dad with the Baldwin Thoroughbreds, but she would ride her own horse along hillside trails where the track's turf course is today.

Bob enlisted in the Navy upon graduation and saw action during the Korean War. There was action on the homefront as well, for he and Earlene married in 1953 and started raising a family. When his time in the Navy was over, he went to work for a company called Aerojet that was building a rock-

et facility near Sacramento. They bought some land near Wilton and, while Bob was busy sending rockets into space, Earlene was instilling in their four children a love for horses and animals. She was constantly shuttling them to horse shows and fairs, where they exhibited their prized livestock.

It was Earl Knisley, Earlene's father, who found the couple their first Thoroughbred mare and lured them into the breeding business. Bob remembers that Fast Chicle cost them \$300 and she gave birth to a Corporal II filly named Song Leader. "That filly was her first foal," he said, "and when she placed in the Solano County Juvenile Fillies Stakes we were hooked."

For 19 years, the McCabes operated their Wilton property as a small scale broodmare nursery, caring for pregnant mares and raising their foals. After Apollo 11 landed on the moon in 1969, Aerojet downsized to 2,500 employees and Bob took an early retirement. He was then hired by the real estate commissioner to head up a district office in Fresno for eight years.

During their time in Fresno, the McCabes boarded horses at Adrian and Charlene Voorneveld's Cypress West Farm, then switched to the Johnston family's Old English Rancho division in Sanger when the Voornevelds retired from the business. Bob still has horses at Old English and owns shares in some of its stallions currently in residence.

In 1987, Earlene got a phone call from the California Horse Racing Board (CHRB) offering her a job as assistant to Executive Director Len Foote. It couldn't have come at a better time, for Bob was being transferred back to Sacramento. For Earlene, it was her dream job. She eventually became the manager of rules and regulations for the CHRB, helping to successfully implement the Simulcast Regulation, Article 24. She also

worked closely with Dr. Dennis Meagher, Senator Ken Maddy and the equine veterinary department at U. C. Davis on several important issues. She was a major liaison for the implementation of the split sample drug testing program and an outspoken advocate for racetrack safety.

Unfortunately, Earlene was diagnosed with terminal breast cancer in 1991, but continued her work with the CHRB while valiantly fighting her disease for another four years. She passed away on July 2, 1995 and, a year later, U. C. Davis honored her posthumously for her many contributions to racing, especially her support of its post-mortem program which had achieved international acclaim for the study and research of fatal racetrack injuries in horses.

"She poured her whole heart into her work, that's for sure," Bob recalled. "She was a real go-getter and had wonderful people skills. Her enthusiasm for racing was contagious, as was her smile."

The management of the California State Fair in Sacramento also wanted to honor Earlene for her work by naming a race in her memory. The Earlene McCabe Derby for Cal-breds had its inaugural running in 1996. Two years later, Bob got the Sutter Cancer Center involved with the event and the 1998 renewal became a benefit for breast cancer research, complete with a buffet brunch in the Turf Club, a stallion raffle, prize giveaways, and live and silent auctions. Although the Cancer Center was a little hesitant at first about getting involved with a horse race, the event has become one of its major annual fundraisers and received a

major boost when Steve and Cyndi Weeks, the owners of 2001 victor Love That Lion, donated a portion of their winnings to the cause because Cyndi was a breast cancer survivor herself. This year's running will take place Sunday, Aug. 24.

While Bob and Earlene had bred and raised several winners during their time together, none of their horses were exactly world beaters or even major stakes winners. In fact, their best runner, Bank On the Irish, only managed

myself to sell him after she died. He really bonded with our granddaughter Katie, who inherited Earlene's horsemanship skills. She has won plenty of prizes showing Irish over fences."

The McCabes got out of the horse business when Earlene's cancer returned so that they could concentrate on her illness. After she died, the children urged Bob to get back into it. He bought some mares from Charlene Voorneveld and bred them to Paranoide (Arg), producing a pair of foals that he named Kissin It Away and Fourwayinheritance.

"I told my kids, 'Okay, you talked me into it. Now you're kissing away your inheritance,'" he quipped. "That's how we named those foals."

Kissin It Away and Fourwayinheritance both won for McCabe before getting claimed away, with Kissin It Away a winner in her first start. Her half-brother, Sunday Cash, also captured his first few races before he got claimed. Bob owns shares in Old English Rancho's freshman sire Perfect Mandate and has some nice babies by him. He also has a Bold Badgett gelding in training with Steve Specht in Northern California

who is showing a lot of promise.

"The thing that keeps me in the horse business is seeing the babies and watching them develop," he said. "I'm just a little breeder with big dreams. One of my dreams is coming up with the next John Henry or Funny Cide."

Four years after Earlene's death, Bob met a lady from his church and they got married. "Sue doesn't have a horse background," he said, "but she's learning it and loving it, especially when we visit the winner's circle."



California-bred Bank on the Irish shown in the winner's circle on Sept. 2, 1990 (top), as Earlene's riding horse (bottom left), and now in the hands of the McCabe's granddaughter Katie (bottom right).

to win three races from 25 starts for earnings of just \$21,846, but he remains a sentimental favorite for many reasons.

Sired by Irish River (Fr) out of Fast Chicle's last daughter, Bank On the Irish was foaled at Cypress West in 1987. He had a lot of natural speed, breaking his maiden going six furlongs in 1:08 1/5 and winning a six-furlong allowance race at Sacramento in 1:08 2/5. He then developed a breathing problem and was retired to become Earlene's riding horse.

"Irish helped Earlene deal with her cancer," Bob recalled, "so I couldn't bring