



A horseshoer's mouth is a perfect nail holder, as Steve Summer demonstrates.

Horseshoeing : alive and well

When you hear that horseshoeing is a dying art, you probably think of the village blacksmith at his anvil and forge; of the advent of the horseless carriage; of today's auto factories in Detroit. You probably assume that horseshoeing is another skill made obsolete by technology.

But two farriers (which they say is "a fancy word for 'horseshoer'") who practice the art in the Sandy area have different ideas.

They are Steve and John Summer, brothers who grew up around horses in Oregon and who traveled to Oklahoma to learn their trade at a farrier's college. They say that the demand for their skill is still high — and if the art is dying, it's simply because there aren't enough practitioners of it.

"I got interested in shoeing horses when I was a little kid, watching them shoe my horse," Steve says. "I looked at what was going on and I told myself, 'Why, shucks, there's nothing to that. I could do that!'"

His brother interrupts him with a chuckle. "Little did he know then," John says. "But he since found out just how wrong he was."

The men each attended Oklahoma Farrier's College in Sperry, Okla., Steve in 1975 and John the following year. They soon learned what is involved in shoeing horses and they discuss it now with humor.

"The main things are to know what you're doing and to have the physical conditioning to take it," John explains. When asked why conditioning is so important, he retorts indignantly, "How would you like to have 1200 pounds leaning on your back for an hour?"

FARRIERS ARE TRAINED

Even though he jokingly said that a farrier is simply "a fancy word for horseshoer," John is emphatic in explaining the differences between the two. A horseshoer can be anyone who has watched the process and figured out how to duplicate it. Such a person "may or may not know what he's doing," the brothers explain.

The term farrier signifies a person who has taken training in correcting irregularities and who has studied anatomy so that the attention he gives the animal's foot is suited to each case. The men chose the school in Oklahoma over a similar course that is offered at Oregon State University because they wanted the opportunity to work exclusively with live animals.

"At OSU they don't have enough live horses to meet their needs so they often train their students using slaughterhouse feet," John explains. And he drawls, "That makes a whole lot of difference."

At the Oklahoma school, ranchers from the surrounding area brought their horses into the school three days a week. As many as 140 horses a day were shod. The other two days the students

were taken to outlying ranches where they shod the horses on-site. The course involved two months of daylight-to-dark work for the students.

"Basically, being a farrier involves shoeing horses and having corrective skills and the ability to use the gorge to make shoes," Steve explains. But those corrective skills are important. "Often a farrier spends a lot of time correcting what a horseshoer has done."

His brother agrees. "To do it right is a science. You can screw up a horse in a matter of minutes, and it can take months to correct it. It's a really an art, between the trimming and putting the shoe on."

The brothers say that many of their first time customers call because they want to learn the skill. They hope to watch the farriers and then save money in the future by doing the work themselves.

But John says, "They usually end up being our best customers. What takes us 15 or 20 minutes to do, takes them two or three hours." And Steve recalls his first shoeing job in Oklahoma, which took him four hours to complete. "Now I can shoe a horse in 45 minutes, or an hour at most."

HORSES NO PROBLEM

As Steve lifts a horse's foreleg and rests the hoof on iron stand, he talks about the frustrations of his trade. "It's like any other job," he comments. "The hardest part, the most irritations, can come from the public contact. The horses don't give us any problem."

"Our horses don't move a muscle when we're shoeing them," his brother explains. "If they do, they get an instant thump that quiets them. It'd be nice if everybody had horses trained that way, but some people expect us to train 'em as well as shoe 'em."

In spite of the headaches, the men plan to stay with their trade. Both recently started selling real estate "as a sideline" to enable them to purchase property on which to keep their horses. They say there is plenty of work for them here — "Clackamas County has more horses per capita than any other county in the state."

Both men are fathers, and they talk about their children in terms of their love for horses. "I'm raising a pair of team ropers and a barrel racer," John says, referring to his son and two daughters.

"And I've got two — both future barrel racers and rodeo queens," Steve counters. His daughters, ages three and six, are "doing real well on horseback," he says. "And that's full-sized horses — none of that Shetland pony garbage."

But even skilled horse handlers can have their problems. As the men led their animals away from the barn to turn them out to pasture, John yelped and began to limp. "Blasted horse," he muttered. "Stepped on my foot. Like to broke my toe."

Story and photos
by Kaye Barton



Steve Summer leads his horse Leo out of the barn to be shod.



Farrier John Summer at his anvil