

PARTING SHOTS

A weekly snapshot from The Daily Astorian and Chinook Observer photographers



JL Gillikin and Heather Hryciw perform a tango outside of The Festival of the Dark Arts at Fort George Brewery Feb. 14.

JOSHUA BESSEX — The Daily Astorian

The Barn: Nearly 90 percent of U.S. horse owners are female

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The demands

Keeping horses is messy, labor-intensive, expensive and emotionally demanding. Horses have immense physical strength and powerful wills, so the relationship between animal and owner is different than with other pets. A deep bond isn't incidental; it's fundamental.

That level of involvement might seem overwhelming, even to professed animal lovers. But for some people, the challenges of horse ownership provide a sense of purpose and a source of joy.

"I always knew it would be a lifestyle. I'm very passionate about it," owner Amy McHale said in mid-February. While growing up in the 1970s, two of McHale's three sisters were "very, very horse crazy." They convinced their parents to get one horse for the family, and then another.

"It progressed from there," McHale recalled. They became a family of die-hard equestrians.

In 1977, her father built the cavernous barn, which includes a huge sheltered arena, numerous stalls, and a loft where spectators can watch events.

"He wanted to build an indoor facility that his family could ride in year-round, because it rains a little bit around here," McHale said.

He planned to rent stalls to other area horse owners, but formed a backup plan in case the girls lost interest.

"With all of us girls, he would always say, 'If you all can't get along and this doesn't work out, it will be a truck garage.' That is why he built it tall with big doors — just in case."

But he never needed the backup plan. Until the mid-1980s, the family spent nearly every weekend riding and competing, and the customers



Submitted photo
National Barrel Horse Association awards series winners at Red Barn Arena included, front row from left, Cody Huff, Rachael Glasson, Abby Doan, Olivia McKinsstry-Kemmer, Sophia Bittner. Middle row: Dominique Bittner, Allison Bonney, Wylie McHale, Sarah Markham, Laura Byrne, Brooke Morgan, Erika Glenn, Rachael Bartlett, Arriana Wiegardt. Back row: Katie Glasson, Christy Carruthers, Cheri Bolden, Hannah Pilon, Reece Pierson, Tracy Yates, Mckenzie Dalton.

kept coming. Later Amy began competing in rodeos, and in 2009, took over the barn. She estimates that there have probably only been two years in her life when she didn't compete. Her 13-year-old daughter Wylie began riding when she was 2 and now does Junior Rodeo. Wylie's cousins also ride and compete.

Women prevail

The people who board horses at the barn are overwhelmingly women.

"That is fairly true across the country," said Ashley Furst, a spokesperson for the American Horse Council. One 2010 study found that nearly 90 percent of U.S. horse owners are female.



A horse waits to compete during a day of barrel-racing events at the Red Barn. McHale hosts semi-regular shows and competitions. Some are for serious competitors, others are just-for-fun social events.

More than half are working or middle class, and most live in small towns or rural areas. At The Red Barn, these

women (and a handful of men) fit in horse care around work and school. Starting around 6 in the morning, owners stop in to lead their horses out to pasture. They return in the evening to bring them in. For two or three hours, the barn functions like a happy hour for people who don't mind getting muddy. Owners muck out stalls, feed horses, drape them with blankets. Some saddle up and take a few turns around the arena. Others unwind by grooming their horses or visiting with each other.

"Everyone has busy lives, hectic lives, lots of responsibility," McHale said. "I say, 'When you come here, leave your problems at the door. This is

your time to enjoy — your time with your animal.'"

On a Tuesday night in mid-February, Wylie tied her horse Dude up just inside the barn doors. After spraying and brushing him, she braided his tail.

Caring for horses is such an integral part of Wylie's routine that she scarcely seems to notice the amount of work it involves.

"After school, I usually take about a 15-minute break," Wylie said. Then, she heads to the barn to help with chores and take care of her horses, wrapping up around dinnertime.

Some local horse owners are serious competitors, while others just keep them as pets. Some prefer Western-style trail riding, while others use the more genteel English-style. Outside of the barn they might have different backgrounds and world views, but they do tend to share some common values, McHale said.

Inside the barn, retired grandmas, working mothers, young single women and teenagers take a collaborative approach to raising the next generation of equestrians. As little ones in helmets and bright jackets learn to groom, ride and compete, there is always someone there to give a boost, hold a baby, calm a restless mount or offer a bit of wisdom. The youngest riders aren't coddled; they're coached, gently pushed toward greater independence, responsibility, confidence.

"In general, horse people are really good people. They are very family oriented," McHale reflected, thinking back on her own upbringing.

"On the weekend we hung out with people, and a lot of times we really didn't know what they did in their daily lives, in their jobs. But you had that horse bond. Here in our barn we have a great group of people."

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