

Arabian affection



Staff photo by Kathy Aney

An Arabian mare stands in a pasture at the Widman Hill Arabians farm in Echo.

Hard work, passion define Echo horse ranch

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The sun highlights Mary Widman's thick white hair and tan skin as she looks at faded photos of the place she calls home.

"These were innocently taken at the beginning, but they show what water and a lot of work can do," she said, a hint of pride in her voice.

It's hard to believe the faded photos of the run-down house and dry fields are of the very place she stands now: a white house with green shutters, raised beds on the patio and lush surrounding pastures where horses graze.

But it's the same property, and for the last 38 years it's been home to the Widman Hill Arabians farm.

The farm is just under 10 acres, but along with the 16 horses that live there, it keeps the couple busy every day.

"It's just enough to make it a lot of work," Mary said with a laugh. "If you're going to have 10, you might as well have a hundred."

Though Fred has had horses all his life, the couple started raising Arabians in earnest in the 1970s. Fred bought Mary a horse at Christmas in 1972. The couple had also acquired some rescue horses and decided they wanted to start raising horses but weren't sure which breed to focus on.

When Fred was working in Port Angeles, Washington, something happened that made the decision a little easier. He wanted to rent a corral, and the owner of the corral had two Arabian horses he was trying to sell. He insisted Fred take a look.

"I couldn't afford them. They were very expensive," Fred said. "But the more we talked, the more my interest showed."

Arabians tend to be on the smaller side, and are known for their versatility.

"They can do anything you ask them to do," Mary said. "They're beautiful to look at, and also beautiful to ride."

Eventually, Fred asked how much the man wanted for the horses.

"He said, 'I'd take \$3,000 for both horses, the trailer and the tack,'" Fred said.

Fred told the man he couldn't afford that price, so the man agreed to accept a down payment of \$1,500, with the rest paid out over the next few years. Mary came up to look at the horses, and agreed they should buy them. So they sold a milk cow and the quarter horse Fred had bought her, and came up with \$1,000.

The man said he couldn't let the tack go, but gave them both horses and the trailer.

"So that's how we got them," Fred said. "We started out with very simple means and built this herd over 40 years."

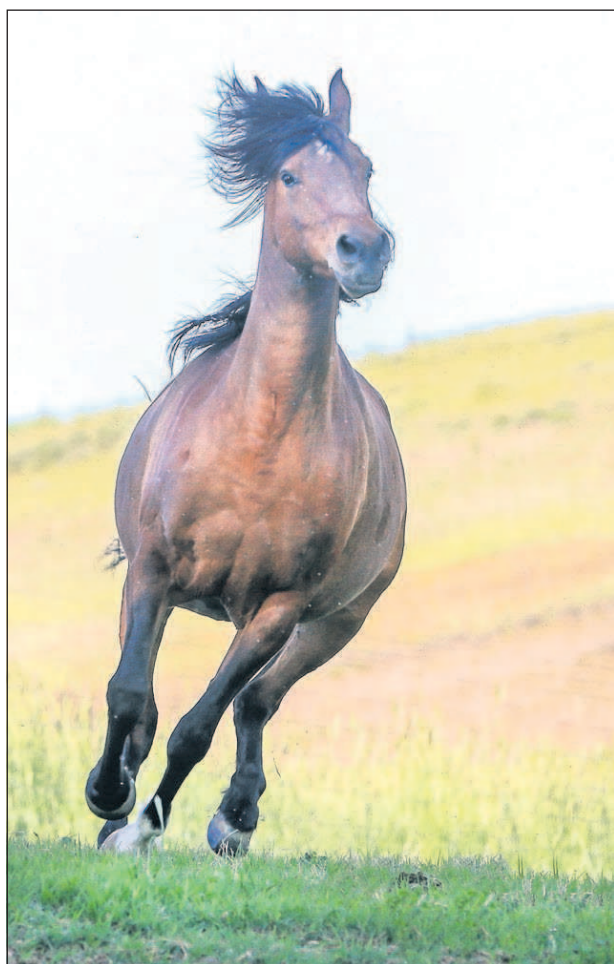
In 1979, they moved into the place in Echo — then an abandoned farmhouse with only two trees on the property. Through years of work they, transformed it, removing the weeds and star thistle and turning it into a livable property. The couple, now in their 70s, still manages the entire property by themselves.

From the groomed horses and grounds to the neatly planted raised beds on the patio filled with vegetables and flowers, everything about



Staff photo by Kathy Aney

Fred Widman gives two of his Arabian mares treats Tuesday evening at the Widman Hill Arabians farm.



Staff photo by Kathy Aney

An Arabian mare named Cherokee Juell runs around her pasture at the Widman Hill Arabians farm.



Staff photo by Kathy Aney

An Arabian stallion named Caesar plays with a huge ball Monday at the Widman Hill Arabians farm in Echo.



Staff photo by Kathy Aney

Mary Widman works with a horse Monday at the Widman Hill Arabians farm in Echo.

Widman Hill is impeccably cared for. "I don't see it," Fred said. "All I see when I go out there is more things that need to be done."

WH Juiluisz Caesar is the farm's only stallion and, at three years old, is a bundle of energy. As Fred leads him out of his stall and into the arena, Caesar runs around the space a few times before turning his attention to a giant pink soccer ball. He pushes, nips and tosses it around, kicking up powdery dirt as he does.

Through the clouds of dust, Caesar's steel gray coat glints in the sunlight.

"Gray horses are not born gray,"

Mary said. "They're born either black, chestnut or dark bay. But you can tell a baby is going to be gray very early on, because they have thin little white hairs around their eyes within a few days."

Caesar pauses momentarily from tearing around and trots over to Mary to say hello, poking his nose over the fence at her.

"Stallions have great personalities," Mary said. "We have happy horses."

Caesar goes back into his stall — after some initial resistance — and Fred leads three more horses into the arena. WH Harlem, Sterling V and

I'm Your Huckleberry WH graze and meander around the arena.

While these three horses are geldings, or males that have been castrated, one of them can still be bred.

"Sheridan is a gelding, but we have frozen semen for him," Fred said. "He's very well-bred. He was a good stallion and a good performance horse."

Many horses are now bred through artificial insemination, making it easier for the owners.

"Before, we had to haul the horses," he said. "You had to take the mare to the stallion, leave her there,

make sure she was safe."

Now, he said, it's just a matter of taking a mare to the veterinarian and making sure she's ready to breed. An owner can then order semen and the vet can inseminate the mare when she's ready.

The three mares in the lower field come to the fence as Mary passes by, interested in the newcomers. WH Cinema, a bay mare, leans her head over the fence, while Cherokee Juell V, another bay, and Huck's Halo V, a gray mare, watch from a distance.

All the horses are fairly social and curious about people.

"They had to be," Mary said. "When they lived in the desert, they would live in the tents with the Bedouin people."

Bloodlines run deep for many of the horses. The names of the horses reflect who they are, and who they come from.

"For the most part, names start with the first letter of the mother's name," Mary said. For example, several horses, including Caesar, are named to reflect their mother, Chili Pepper V.

"I'm Your Huckleberry" is the son of "Huck's Halo V," a 24 year old gray mare that lives at Widman Hill. Both are descendants of Huckleberry Bey, a famous stallion that died in 1992.

An exception is Caesar's brother, El Jahezz, who was bought by a breeder in Brazil.

"He's registered as 'WH Cavallo,'" Mary said. "I'm Italian, and Cavallo is my maiden name."

She laughed ruefully. "I waited to have a stallion to name Cavallo. Then when we sold him, she changed it to El Jahezz."

Fred trains most of the horses by riding them, or trotting them. If they're going to be shown, however, he will send them to professional trainers around the country.

The Widmans have several horses for sale, but acknowledge it's not for everyone.

"I think people are discouraged by what they expect to be high prices," Mary said. "In reality, you can find a good Arabian horse to fit any pocketbook."

Fred added that they hope the horses will go to people who genuinely want them.

"We've had horses leave this place for as little as a dollar, and as much as \$200,000," he said. "It varies — who comes through, who wants them. We pray they'll go to the right kind of people."

Because in the end, it's really all about the horses.

"Early on, we had a horse in the stable, and there was a woman who worked there," Fred recalls. "She had a horse she truly loved, and there were a bunch of boys who bullied her. She told me, 'You know, a horse is big and strong. It can hurt you, but it'll never hurt your feelings.'"

Both acknowledge how much effort it's taken to run the farm, and how much they've put into it.

"We've had some really good horses," Mary said. "Lots of success, and some really devastating failures."

She laughs, recalling the way things started out — with a horse Fred got her for Christmas.

"We've never done anything in a small way," she said.