

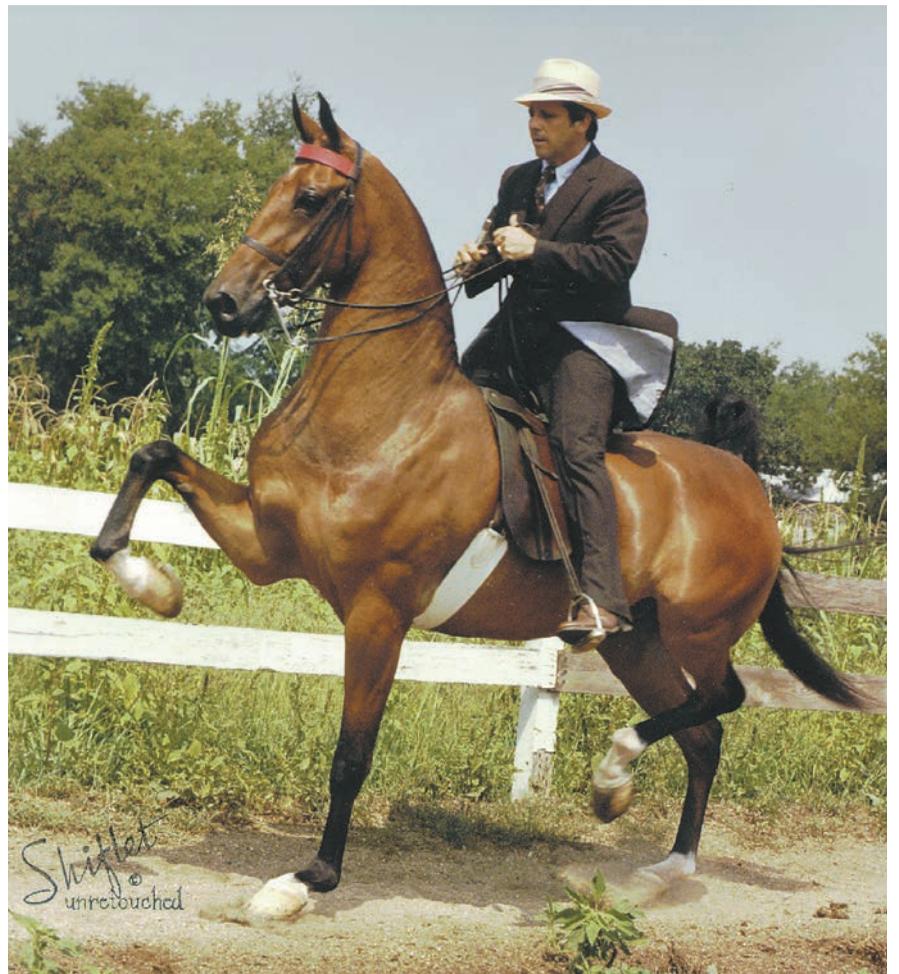
# A Horseman, A Gentleman, A Friend

## BILL BECKER

by Bob Funkhouser



Pictured with Nancy, Bill retired CH The Bodega Bay at Louisville. The personable gelding was one of his all-time favorites. photo by Howard Schatzberg



Shadow Run grew from a sick baby to a reserve world's champion three-year-old.



Queen Of The South, a half Saddlebred half Arabian cross, was the first horse that Bill gaited.

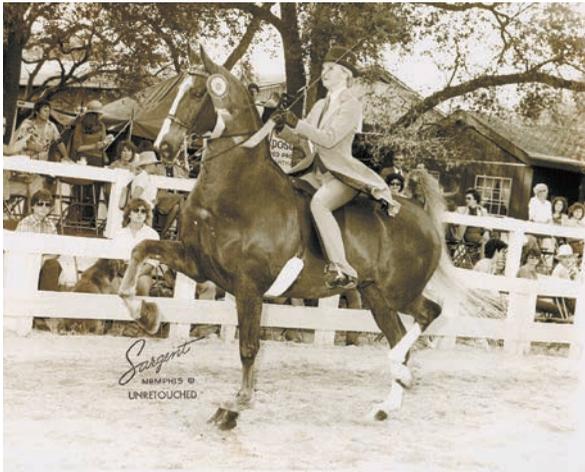
Becker. It's a name that has meant much to the American Saddlebred world. The brothers (Bill, Dave, Joe, Bobby) behind the name have contributed, each in their own way.

The eldest son of Ed and Rose Becker had an unmistakable voice. He had an unmistakable gleam in his eye that made everyone feel like they were special to him, especially young people. He also had an unmistakable love of a nice horse and there were many in a good portion of Bill Becker's 78 years of life. It was a life Bill lived to the fullest with horses, family and friends right up until September 7 when he peacefully passed away at he and his wife Nancy's Shadow Run Farm, Nicholasville, KY.

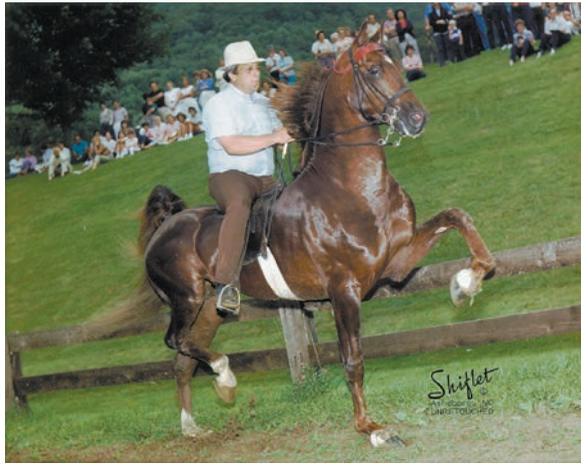
Bill's father was a Colorado cowboy turned trainer who settled in the Carolinas. He traded his Western ways for a cutback saddle when he saw his first American Saddlebreds at a local show. The first son emulated his father from the time he could remember. Horses would be a way of life as the family was noted for having one of the Southeast's first Saddlebred riding academies.

Bill gaited his first horse, a half American Saddlebred half Arabian cross, at the age of nine and won his first world's championship in 1956 aboard a gaited pony named Midnight Parader.

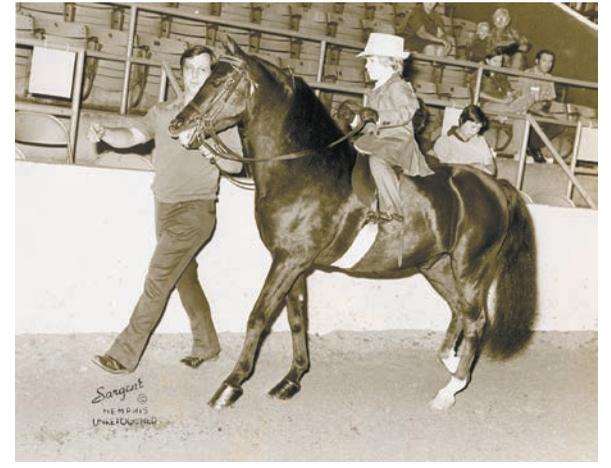
Inheriting the soft hands and ability to relate to horses as individuals from his father, Bill proved to be a formidable trainer early into his career. Not long after winning with his gaited pony he brought out a walk-trot mare registered as Contract's Lady Anacacho but she was shown under the name of Imperial Lady. She ended up being very successful for Don Harris and was eventually purchased for Kathie Gallagher by Helen Crabtree and they changed the



Beth Woods and Vanity's Sparkling Coin were one of Bill's champion teams in the Carolinas when he went out on his own.



Bill had many top horses for the Tierney family's Leatherwood Farm, including the gaited stallion CH Starlike Sultan.



Always a teacher, Bill is pictured here introducing son Billy to the show ring.

mare's name to The Sorceress. Following her show days she became the dam of the world's champion producing Status Symbol, the sire of among others, World's Grand Champion Fine Harness CH Night Prowler. CH Contract's Lady Anacacho also became the dam of the great CH Glenview's Warlock. The Becker mare had indeed written her own chapter in American Saddlebred history.

As many successful second-generation trainers have done, Bill spent time apprenticing under other trainers to hone his skills. Jimmy Thompson was the first outside teacher and then Bill went to finishing school with the master Garland Bradshaw. Armed with a solid foundation and a lot of drive he returned to the Carolinas to take a job at the Perry family's Spring Valley Farm. Bill and Jane Becker married during that time and they had three children: Billy, Jason and Jane Hart. A 10-year stint at Spring Valley for the young trainer also produced the likes of CH Surefire, CH Finisterre's Gift Of Love, Terra Cotta, The Benefactor, Belle Destiny and Havana Hijack, among others.

The Perrys had purchased several broodmares from Bill's dad and during his tenure there they raised several nice horses. Little did Bill know that at the end of his career, producing top horses would come full circle and he and Nancy would have a magical time with a broodmare that had an incredible string of champions.

"I first met Billy when he bought Charlotte Stonewall from me. She was the first one to beat Lemon Drop Kid," remembered Bill Wise who ended up with a few of Becker's former Spring Valley horses like Surefire, Gift Of Love and The Benefactor. "He called me and said he was having a little problem with her. I sent the man down who had taken care of the mare for so long and he helped Billy get through the first show with her. The mare won and it was all good from there. That's when Billy and I became friends.

"Everybody liked Billy. My wife Chris said he was one of the sweetest persons she ever knew. We had a lot of mutual respect for each other. He was a great family man. He was a really good horseman who had the respect of all the horsemen and that's not always easy to do. I'll always remember we were inducted into the World's Championship Horse Show Hall of Fame on the same night.

Bill's time with Spring Valley Farm was a great boost to his career advancing all aspects of his craft, however, the Charlotte, NC area would be his next stop and this time it was his own stable. Starting out with five training horses and not even a pitchfork or a broom, Bill began his venture with Ronald Lee as his assistant trainer. Not long after, a horse crazy young lady named Nancy Whipple had heard that a Saddlebred trainer moved to the area so she went out and begged for a job. Bill objected that they didn't need a groom but Lee came to her rescue and convinced Bill to hire her. She started at \$35 a week and half the board for her Night Of Folly mare.

She worked from groom to assistant trainer and then found she had a knack for teaching. After teaching with Bill for a couple years he realized she was better at it than he was. The business grew and so did their relationship and they were married in 1994.

Some of their early customers from that period were the Woods family. At one time, Todd, Barbara, Beth and Linda were all showing.

"We've known them [Bill and Nancy] for more than 40 years," recalled Barbara Woods. "The girls were 12 and 14 when we started with Bill. They became wonderful friends and made us feel a part of their family. We've been there for every major event in their lives: the wedding, the Hall of Fame induction, moving to the west coast and moving to Kentucky.

"Bill taught the girls so much, not only about riding and driving but also about taking care of their horses. They didn't just ride and go home. He wanted them to know what it took to take care of and train horses for the show ring.

"He was a special man and a wonderful friend. He treated people honestly and he always told you what he thought. You might not have always agreed with Bill or wanted to hear what he had to say, but he told you the truth.

"We were very happy to attend his Celebration of Life. It was just what he would have wanted. He loved his children and grandchildren and it was great to have all them together."

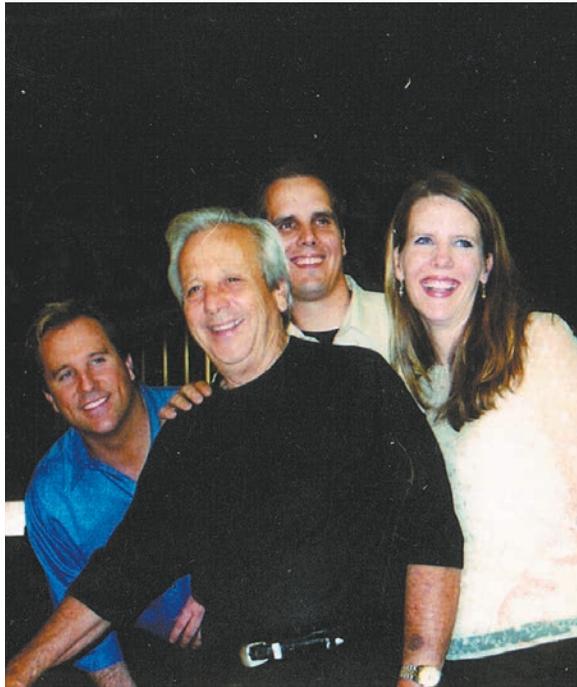
It was the Woods relationship that gave Bill another world's titleholder and the eventual name of his farm. The Woods had purchased a broodmare named Erin Belle from Bill. She was in foal to Spring Valley's Deliverance. The mare died when the resulting foal was just days old. The foal developed pneumonia and a 103 fever but as Bill was quoted saying, "He was a survivor. He was one of those phenomenal babies and even when he was sick he would flag himself



Heart to Heart won six world's championships for Bill and owner Jill Bachman.



*The highlight of Jill Bachman's show ring career was driving Heart To Heart to the World's Champion Roadster To Bike Mare title.*



*There was no end to the laughs when Bill was with his children: Billy, Jason and Jane Hart.*



*Bill and Nancy found great joy in all aspects of life, especially the horse business.*

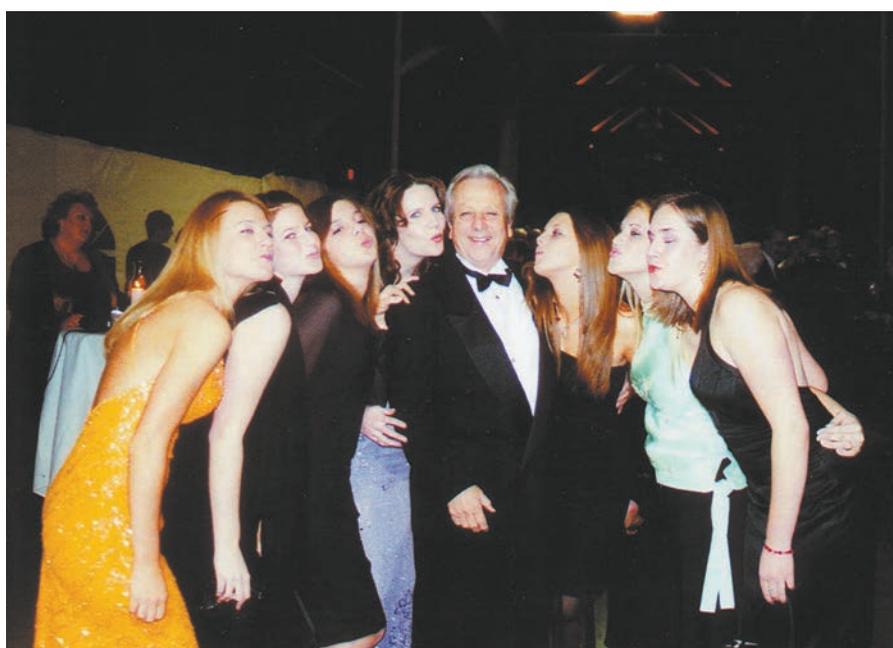
and trot above level." That baby was Shadow Run an eventual Three-Year-Old Three-Gaited Reserve World's Champion with Bill from a class of 21 entries.

As great as the Carolinas were to Bill and Nancy, they made a move to California where they created a wonderful operation for Jill and Richard Bachman. El Milagro was created in honor of Richard who was diagnosed with cancer 10 days after Bill and Nancy accepted the offer to move to Salinas, CA. He had said it would be a miracle if they got this done and thus El Milagro.

Much like one of his favorite colts, Shadow Run, Bill was a survivor as well. In 1996 he was critically injured to the point that there were worries that he wouldn't live and if he did would he walk again?

Jill Bachman's road mare Heart To Heart was the inspiration that got him back to the show ring. He encouraged Bachman and gave her the confidence to show the mare in the Roadster To Bike Mare Stake at Louisville with him on the rail.

She was quoted in an earlier Saddle Horse Report interview as saying, "The day I won that class was a highlight of my career. As for Bill, when he



*So many young people were shaped into great young adults by Bill and they always returned his love. Showing their love were Anna Hormann, Amber Lowery, Maggie Camp, Jane Hart Becker, Jessica Keys, Tasha Sandler Dunlop and Kristen Koenig.*

came home he was a different person." That same year she and Nancy [Becker] escorted Bill into Freedom Hall to accept the American Road Horse and Pony Hall of Fame.

Life changing events for Bachman led to the closing of El Milagro and Bill and Nancy were faced with another decision. "It had always been Bill's dream to move to Kentucky and start a barn," said Nancy Becker in that same Saddle Horse Report interview. So that's what they did in Nicholasville. Shadow Run was born and with some of their California clientele following them to the Bluegrass, the couple built yet another business in yet another area, this one filled with horse trainers.

Their talent and personalities made them successful amidst a sea of successful trainers. Shadow Run was producing top young horses, performance champions, and winning equitation riders. Eventually it was time for Bill to slow down a little so a young lady with a Morgan and Saddlebred background was in town working with Thoroughbreds at the Keeneland sales when some friends told her the Beckers were looking for an assistant.

"Anna Johnson told me the job was available," said Stephanie (Sedlacko) Brannan. "I met with Bill and Nancy and at the end of the interview they told me the job was mine. I asked, 'when do I start?' and they said 'right way.'"

"I went home and loaded up my truck, trailer, Morgan, Hackney, a dog and a bird and moved to Kentucky, moving in with Anna and Susan Johnson. I started working for Bill that Wednesday of Fall Classic and their assistant at the time was working her last few days. On Monday, I was on my own.

"They were both just amazing to work for, wonderful people. He was there early every day and he was picky about everything. We got along real well that way. He also helped me with lessons. Bill loved kids and loved teaching them. I had worked a few other places and was always told or shown what to do but had never really been taught why I was doing it. Bill taught me his way. There are so many little things that I still do today that make me think of him: the way he would fix straps on a boot, the way he didn't use a top string on a brace unless the horse absolutely required it. There are many little things he did differently and always had a great reason for it. He didn't want to break the hair with that unnecessary string on the brace.

"Bill would let me try things, but I usually tried them while he was gone to see if they worked first. If they did, I would show him and if I had a good reason why I did what I did, he was good with it, especially if it worked. He wasn't afraid to try something different. We had some horses that would work in one bridle and show in a different bridle. I had never seen that done. He was always thinking outside the box and encouraged me to do the same.



One of many honors Bill (fourth from the right) received during his career, he was inducted into the Carolina Horsemen's Hall of Fame in 2004. Photo by Shiflet.

"Besides being a great horseman and teacher Bill was very people oriented. He got along with everybody and he had a special bond with his peers. I remember he would always take me to Rob Tanner's to watch him work horses on Sunday. He never stopped wanting to learn and he respected Rob a lot. He told me it was important to watch and learn from others.

"I will never forget when he was having health issues and couldn't always communicate liked he wanted to. However, when he saw a nice horse he would get so excited and was able to communicate. You knew you were doing good when he got excited."

Part of that excitement came from watching youngsters that he and Nancy raised out of the Broodmare Hall of Fame matron, She's In Style, a daughter of Desert's Supreme Memories and the Broodmare Hall of Fame producer Mountain Maria. Her offspring have included World's Champion of Champions CH He's In Style, World's Champion of Champions The Cat Walk, Reserve World's Champion Cat Can Do, Reserve World's Champion Katniss, and this year's Two-Year-Old Three-Gaited World's Champion He's A Cool Cat. There's nothing in this industry that Bill didn't do well.

There have been many great horsemen in the horse show world but few that have earned the respect and love of their peers, their employees, their customers and the children whose lives they mold, but Bill Becker accomplished all of that in his time with us. Just earlier this year all of the above gave he and Nancy a heartfelt standing ovation as they received the UPHA Lifetime Achievement Award for a job well done.

He will be remembered as a Hall of Fame trainer. In addition to the above mentioned stars some of his other notables included Wind Capers, Society Knight, Dancing Time, Capricious Capers, CH Starlike Sultan, CH Corinne Corrina, CH Chablis Premier, Artistic Impression, CH A Rich Girl, El Milagro's Sir Richard, CH Chat, Terry Jean's Starlight Cadet, CH Heir To A Star, CH Much More Radiant, CH She's My Desire and one of his all-time favorites, CH The Bodega Bay who passed away a few weeks after Bill. The Bodega Bay and Heart To Heart have been the best of friends for years in the pastures of Shadow Run. Some of the riders who garnered national acclaim included Beth and Linda Woods, Cassie McEuen, Tasha Rose Sandler, Jessica Keys, Amber Lynn Lowry, Shana Lee Fox, Jense Blake, Anna Hormann, and Ada Johnson.

A Celebration of Life was just held at Shadow Run with family and friends coming together to laugh and share stories, just as Bill had wanted. Many people will tell you how much Bill's family meant to him. You know he had a big smile looking down and knowing his three children, Billy, Jason and Jane Hart and their respective spouses, Mary Lou, Crissy and Kevin, were all there,

along with his grandchildren Zach and Bailey Sharpe and Caden and Christian Becker. Many stories were told and the laughs far outnumbered the tears.

Longtime friend Raymond Shively will be one of many to miss Bill, yet always smile when thinking of him.

"I met Bill in 1954, he was showing a gaited pony," said Shively. "He was a couple years younger than me. He'd always been able to ride a horse. He was very gifted with a horse.

"Another thing is Bill was always a gentleman. I never saw him out of place. Lillian and I drove down to his and Nancy's wedding. We went on vacation a lot together. We had a lot of fun together. He was a wonderful person and a great family man. Man, he loved those children and grandchildren.

"Bill was there for everybody. If you needed advice or anything he was there for you. He always wanted to help people. I don't know what to say, other than I'm really going to miss him."



At the 2016 Super Convention Gary Garone presented Bill and Nancy Becker with the UPHA Lifetime Achievement Award.