

JEAN VANDERLYN UNVARNISHED

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My friend, Ken Ericksen, and I were talking about the race track that was on the flats west of New Paltz back in the 1920s. "You know," he said, "there used to be a little girl from New Paltz who was a great trick rider back in the thirties. She still lives in New Paltz." I filed it away, doing the mental arithmetic.

Several months later, on eBay, up came a set of newspaper photo negatives with the caption "Girl Rider Shows Experts, 10/17/35 New Paltz, NY. Eight-year-old Jean Vanderlyn handles her mount with adult precision, performing difficult circus ring stunts with the greatest (sic) of poise. The little girl coaxes her horse into obeying every order she gives."

The negatives arrived, six partial strips with three sequential shots, each following a particular trick. I looked up her name in the phone book. Sure enough, there she was, still in New Paltz. If I didn't know she was from here, I would have sworn from her "Come on over," she was from Oklahoma. Jean Vanderlyn had agreed to meet me for a chat.

I went to her home—manicured lawn, everything as neat as could be. She greeted me in blue jeans, plaid shirt, bare feet, and a warm handshake.

Within minutes the connections came fast and furious. On seeing the wonderful western motif furniture, all handmade

by her father, it occurred to me that it would have seemed perfect in the white adobe house on Old Route 299 just east of Ohioville. I said so.

Turns out she had lived there. Then she mentioned that her grandfather had owned Vanderlyn's store in Ohioville. I promised to bring her my postcard collection and show her the ones of Ohioville with the store, the gazebo, and the barns that had contributed to the Vanderlyn's livelihood in the early 1900s.

Yes, she knew my mother (Jean called her the "animal lady") and Mrs. Stokes ("the other animal lady"). Jean told the story of my mother (Dot) and Mrs. Stokes calling her one day. Seems Dot and Mrs. Stokes wanted to round up a stray dog that was very wary of people. Dot had called Jean to find out if she still knew how to rope. That said a lot about both women.

Jean knew almost everyone I mentioned,

family and friends. She had grown up in Ohioville, and I had grown up in Plutarch, just five or so miles from one another and just twelve years apart.

The first thing Jean asked as I set up the tape recorder at her kitchen table was that I not "flower" up my article about her. So, here, unvarnished, is what I learned.

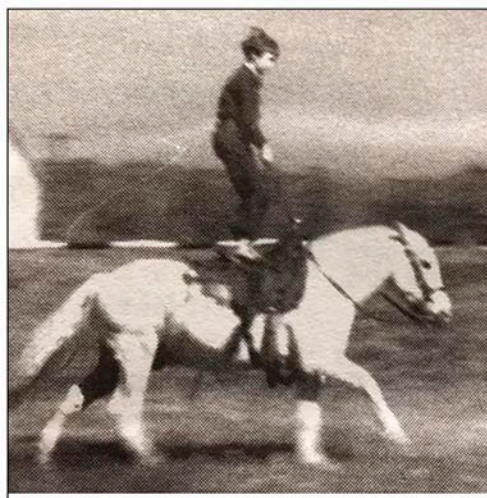
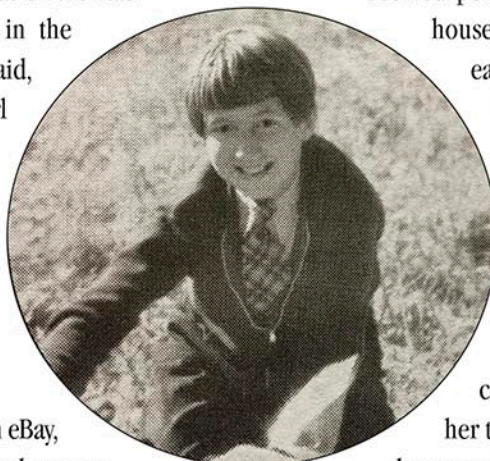
First, the newspaper article was wrong. Jean was older than eight in 1937, she was ten. Oh, well, then.

During the "off-season," the Vanderlyn family farm was rented to rodeo people from Ringling Brothers, Barnum and Bailey Circus. Jean watched their tenants, Peggy and Leonard Murray, practice tricks on horseback. When the Murrays left for the summer to go on tour, Jean taught her pony to follow commands and did the tricks she

had watched the Murrays practice. Jean said she "...followed Peggy around, picked up trick riding and didn't even know it." When the Murrays came back the following year, they were amazed to see this little girl doing many of their tricks.

Jean rode in local parades and continued to practice tricks with names such as Slick Saddle Stand, Fender Drag, Double Vault, and Hip-podrome Stand. Her fame spread.

Universal Newsreel (a black and white film news program shown in theaters prior to the movie feature) came to New Paltz to film her when



she was about ten. Jean saw it in the movie theater in downtown Highland. She was not in any other movies.

The young trick rider's first paid performance was at the Dutchess County Fair. She said her mouth was so dry, she "could have spit cotton." The butterflies and cotton subsided, and Jean Vanderlyn found her profession.

Eventually, Jean worked for rodeos, dude ranches, fairs, and circuses. She rode steers in rodeos and marched in the Grand Entry Parade that opened major events two or three nights a week. She showed me photos taken of herself and other trick riders such as Tad Lucas, World Champion-Trick, and Fancy Riding. Work took Jean to many places, including Long Island, Connecticut, Massachusetts, the Adirondacks, and of course, Madison Square Garden. She met other



Trick and Fancy Riders and famous western stars, including Gene Autry, Roy Rogers, and Dale Evans. Jean said she was particularly fond of Roy and Dale. "They were real people, would come down after the shows and sit around a talk with us."

Jean retired in her late 30's to take care of family matters back in New Paltz and has lived here since.

She gave me a tour of her house, which I thought looked like a movie set for a 1950's western. The family Bar V brand is on furniture and leather upholstery. She showed me a lamp made from wood taken from Perrine's bridge repair (the covered bridge on Route 213). Her father had worked for Cen-

tral Hudson but made many pieces of furniture—all with a western flair.

Jean summed it all up, saying that trick riding was mostly a matter of training your horse well. "That's the key—having a horse you can trust."

She doesn't ride anymore. A bad shoulder makes it impossible to mount a horse. Her interest nowadays is wood carving. I saw intricately carved and painted birds, ducks, donkeys, and oh, by the way, no horses.

I don't know when I have had a better time, leaned more (a watch-eyed horse?), or laughed more.

Thank you, Jean Vanderlyn (who, by the way, needs no varnish).

