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Horse Culture in Lamorinda Changing Bit by Bit

By Cathy Dausman



Lafayette resident Karen Bottiani with her horse, Cupcake Photo Cathy Dausman

- and final - horse at what is now Twin Canyons Girl Scout Camp. She blames the scarcity of public riding stables in Lamorinda on liability insurance.

"I could make more money giving horseback riding lessons than travel writing if I didn't have to carry the insurance," she said.

Karen Bottiani gets her riding insurance through membership in the American Endurance Ride Conference. The MHA member said "we try to be good managers" on the land MHA has leased from East Bay Municipal Utility District. A 20-year member of the MHA, Bottiani keeps her horses at the pasture, and attends most meetings and events.

Recently, Bottiani was feeding her horses Blue and Cupcake before a trail ride with Gary Fend on Frosty and Laura Stetson on Pearl. Bottiani has been riding originally bareback since she was two; riding isn't a hobby for her as much as it is a passion. "I ride every day, unless I'm sick," she said.

Still, the Lafayette resident remembers a time when more local horses were kept in owners' back yards. She says nowadays riders belong to stables, board their horses and sign their children up for formal riding lessons. Bottiani used to ride along Pleasant Hill Road, but auto traffic today makes that too dangerous.

Shivani Rajan of Canyon echoed that sentiment: "I don't feel safe riding on [Lamorinda] roads now," said Rajan, who began as a MHA junior rider and has ridden for 20 years. She moved her horse with her to college in Santa Cruz, and then returned to the area, which she said was interesting from a riding point of view. She thinks the extracurricular activities high school students pursue for their college resume "leave less time for horses."

Trainer Kim Laursen said Henson's Arabian Center is now known as Henson's Equestrian Center in Lafayette has been there for years. She estimates 30 people use the facilities, which include a riding arena. Twenty horses, many of them older, are boarded there full time.

Lynne Collins likes the center because of its nice covered arena and also because it is secluded, yet close to town. Collins hadn't planned to ride the day she spoke, but stopped in to visit her 13-year-old Morgan horses Katrina and Twist.

Keeping horses "is a lot harder than having a cat," laughed Collins.

That is especially true at the feeding trough. Monthly horse boarding runs \$500 to \$800 per month, said Mari Parino, executive director of Orinda's Xenophon Therapeutic Riding Center.

Parino said "the sky-rocketing costs of hay and bedding" is partly to blame. She said boarding options have changed from private, smaller places to larger boarding ranches and that "designer barns" built in Castro Valley and Livermore have lured local trainers away from Lamorinda.

Moraga, Lafayette and Briones trail access has become more difficult because of busy roads and closed access points, Parino added.

Still, Lamorinda horse lovers continue to saddle up and ride off into our local hills.

Colorful local street names like Cattle Chute Road and Dead Horse Canyon Road only hint at Lamorinda's involvement with horses. In fact, the semi-rural area has a long history with all things equine, dating back to Pony Express rides through Lafayette in the early 1860s.

More recently, rider Linda Ostman said Lamorinda was once an area of backyard horse owners and that Contra Costa County was known to have one of the largest horse populations in the state of California.

"We rode our horses all over the place," said Lafayette's Nancy Brown. Brown grew up in Moraga where over time she owned and rode three horses. "I kept my first horse in the Moraga Horseman's Association pasture behind Joaquin Moraga School," she said. "MHA was the equestrian club back in the day. "We used to ride our horses from Moraga to Lafayette because Taco Bell had a hitching post for us to tie up and eat lunch. The jogging trail was not paved and it was mainly used for horses and walkers," she said.

By her second horse, Brown boarded at the Moraga Barn where it was "much easier to find your horse," and she wrote her rent check to Mr. Bruzzone. She boarded her third



Photo Cathy Dausman

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