



THE BLACK STALLION LEGACY—PART TWO:

# Entertainment & Literacy

By Evie Tubbs

## Beyond the Limits of Imagination



ALL PHOTOS COURTESY BLACK STALLION LITERACY PROJECT AND ARABIAN NIGHTS.

As Walter Farley once said, "I love to watch people watch horses." Particularly, Arabian horses. Like mothers who stare and smile at infants and toddlers, it is hard for people to tear their eyes away from Arabian horses.

In the 1980s, swollen from an inundation of Hollywood actors and influential billionaires who came to play in the Arabian horse community, the industry found itself overwhelmed. In addition, modern greats like \*Padron, Fame VF+, Ruminaja Ali, \*Bey Shah+, \*Muscat and Arn-Ett Perlane+ were just beginning to emerge, setting the stage for what would be an unprecedented decade of cause and effect in the Arabian horse industry.

But this was nothing new for one farm, Al-Marah Arabians, owned by the legendary Crabbet breeder Bazy Tankersley, who was a long-time friend of Walter Farley. The farm not only survived significant changes during the past half century, but Tankersley remained true to her vision that the Arabian horse would play a significant role in producing athleticism in modern day horses. Her son, Mark Miller, followed in Tankersley's footsteps and developed his own active breeding farm, Al-Marah Micanopy, located near Gainesville, Fla.

Industry economics were inflating so fast that commerce could barely keep up. Like the stock market crash, most knew it couldn't keep up forever. They were right. By the early 1990s, Congress had passed new tax law changes affecting American horse owners, which drastically altered the landscape of horse ventures. This was devastating for the Arabian horse industry.

"I knew we needed to figure out a different way to make a living apart from the breeding farm," Miller said.

True to destiny's sensible irony, Miller's half-brother visited the Miller family at their Florida home and repaid a wedding gift of two Arabian horses with an all-expense-paid trip to popular Orlando theme parks. The obvious first stop was the colossal Walt Disney World, followed by a then-new Sea World. As they left the popular "Shamu Show," featuring an audience-interacting, trick-jumping, friendly family of Orca whales, park personnel mentioned that Sea World attracted more than four million people a year through its gates.

"I was aghast," Miller said. "Four million people come to watch Shamu jump? I thought, 'Somebody ought to do this with Arabian horses. They're a lot more interesting.'"

## The Birth of 'Arabian Nights Dinner Attraction'

At the time, there were four major Orlando theme parks—Walt Disney World, Epcot Center, Sea World and Circus World—and room for a fifth. Miller and his partners envisioned an entire theme park named "Horse World" dedicated to the magic of horses, largely Arabian horses. Unfortunately that dream never came to fruition because Disney announced their next expanded venture—Disney MGM Studios. Miller knew there was not enough funding in the world to compete, so he reined the concept back to a dinner theatre.

The magic carpet ride began even before it opened. Glen Randall, son of Corky Randall, who was the head horse trainer for "The Black Stallion" and "The Black Stallion Returns" films, joined the team along with three other trainers to train 65 horses for a show that opened eight months later. The groundbreaking for the 130,000-square-foot building didn't begin until seven months prior to opening night.

Finally, on Feb. 29, 1988, Arabian Nights Dinner Attraction opened, fulfilling a dream for the Millers. The show used primarily Arabian horses from Al-Marah Micanopy. Walter Farley also loved the concept, Miller said. And, Farley loved the idea of a permanent home for the Black Stallion, which became the pinnacle act of the show and remains so to this day.

In the short months that followed opening night, audience reaction to *Walter Farley's Black Stallion* never faltered. Miller shared this positive feedback with Farley, who had suffered from a stroke months earlier and was confined to a wheelchair. Miller sent a private ambulance



Millions of people young and old hold memories of equine fairy tales from Arabian Nights Dinner Attraction.





to bring Farley from California to the show in Florida.

"I'll never forget it," Miller said. "I don't think Walter had given an autograph in a year or so, but every member of the entertainment team was a devout Walter Farley fan and asked him for his autograph. It was a special night."

Since inception, Arabian Nights has become the most honored show of its kind in the world and still remains a family business. Its primary objective is to bring the magic of a dramatic equine experience to people who otherwise don't know horses.

For most, the experience is an unforgettable one. Set within majestic Middle Eastern-type concrete walls, the Palace of Horses displays the beauty of horses integrated with the latest technology in sound and lighting effects. As the world's largest indoor equestrian facility for a permanent show, Miller said, the Palace of Horses is one of a kind and the central stage for the show's dramatic and touching story of love.

## Black Stallion Literacy Project

*We read to be entertained, educated or inspired, or just to rejoice in the use of language. Perhaps most of all we read because it transports us to worlds beyond the limits of our imaginations.*

— Web site of the Black Stallion Literacy Project, [BSLP.org](http://BSLP.org)

After Walter Farley passed away in 1989, his son Tim Farley took over management of the Black Stallion related business. Through this connection, Miller and Tim Farley began a close friendship.

"We feel the same way about many things," Miller said.

It was just another day in 1999. After dropping Tim's kids off at the airport in Orlando, Miller and Tim began talking over pizza about education and literacy. The concept of a horse-inspired literacy program began to surface.

"I have no idea where it came from," Miller said, "and Tim doesn't either. It just seemed like a good idea, so we decided to give it a rip."

Only a short time later, the pizza lunch developed into what became known as the Black Stallion Literacy Project (BSLP), an inspirational non-profit corporation that encourages children to learn to read through the classic literature and equine magic of *Walter Farley's Black Stallion*. A first-grade program, which utilized *Little Black, a Pony* and *Little Black Goes to the Circus* as reading primers, was soon followed by a school request from Fort Worth, Texas, asking for a fourth-grade pro-

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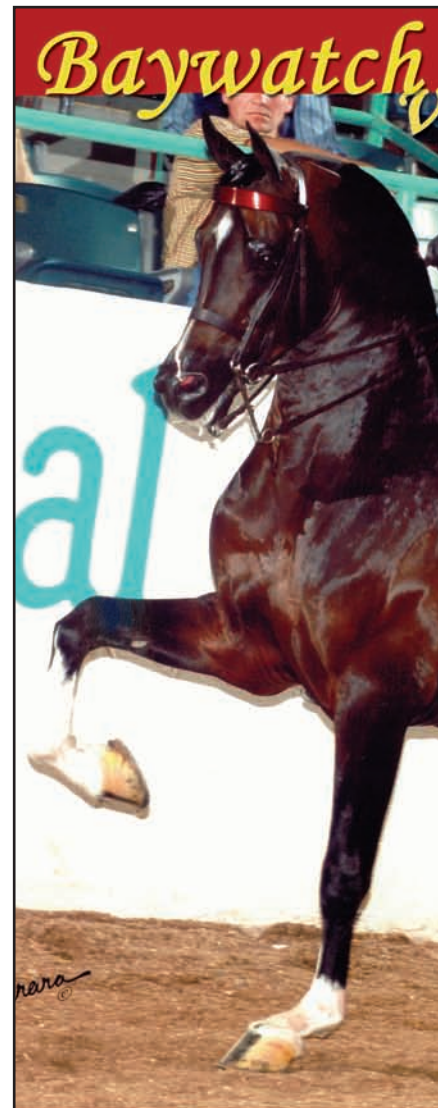
— Mark Miller

gram—developed 48 hours later. Technically, a fifth-grade level book, *The Black Stallion* grounded the fourth-grade program with a challenge to rise toward.

“We learned after we had already started the program that first and fourth grades are the critical years for reading development,” Miller said. “If you don't learn reading basics in first grade, you are going to fall behind. If you get through fourth grade able to learn a chapter book, it's a watershed—your chances of graduating high school and leading a happy life are pretty good.

“America produces a lot of testing,” Miller said, “but not much emphasis is placed on motivating children to learn to read and enjoy reading.”

The first-grade program introduces children to reading with their own copy of a *Black Stallion* book. The learning process begins with an organized class field trip to meet and touch a real horse like the one the children will read about, followed by a second “horse touch” experience at the program's conclusion, where children



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The Black Stallion Literacy Project inspires children to learn to read through experiencing the magic of horses.

“This little grey Arabian horse had his head hung over the railing, cocked, looking at this little girl like it was the most interesting thing he’d ever heard. And the girl was reading away as if he needed to know every word of the plot line.”

—Larry Bramblett, president of BSLP

### Popular *Black Stallion* web sites:

[www.TheBlackStallion.com](http://www.TheBlackStallion.com)  
Official *Black Stallion* web site and Fan Club. Best value for purchasing books, movies and memorabilia.

[www.Arabian-Nights.com](http://www.Arabian-Nights.com)  
Arabian Nights Dinner Theatre, home of *Walter Farley's Black Stallion*

[www.BSLP.org](http://www.BSLP.org)  
Home of the *Black Stallion Literacy Project*

actually sit in front of a horse and read to it.

On a cold, rainy day in Tucson, Ariz., a first-grade class was visiting Al-Marah Arabians for its program culmination: reading to a horse. A little girl in a tattered pattern dress shivered in the cold as she passionately read aloud to one particular horse as if no one else was around for a hundred miles.

“I’ll just never forget it,” said Larry Bramblett, president of BSLP. “This little grey Arabian horse had his head hung over the railing, cocked, looking at this little girl like it was the most interesting thing he’d ever heard. And the girl was reading away as if he needed to know every word of the plot line. I thought ‘Oh my goodness, the whole program was worth it for this child.’”

“Then the teacher came back, fit to be tied, looking for her after everyone else had boarded the buses. I was ready to run interference when the teacher saw her and began to cry. She explained that they were ready to hold this child back because they didn’t think she could read. The child wouldn’t take tests, participate in class or talk to anyone, and so they were ready to put her in Special Education. But to the horse, she read beautifully.”

The fourth-grade program challenges children to read at an older level with the original classic “The Black Stallion.” As a special treat at the program’s conclusion, the Arabian Nights show is brought to the school’s town and preformed for as many as eight thousand children who are still reveling in the magic and adventure of book’s story.

“Before the Black Stallion comes out,” Larry said, “the entire coliseum filled with thousands of children’s voices begins chanting, ‘The Black... the Black... the Black!’ There’s nothing like it.”

Cathy Christiansen, member of the Arkansas Arabian Horse Club and active volunteer for BSLP since 2004, is a lifelong believer in the magic of the Black Stallion.

“My husband, Craig Christiansen, is the an announcer for the U.S. National Arabian Horse Show, and even yet I have been to no Arabian horse show that could possibly match the sheer screams coming from five thousand fourth-graders calling for one horse, the Black, the horse they knew and loved. It gives me goose bumps and brings tears to my eyes.”

To date, BSLP has inspired more than 250,000 children to learn to read.

In 2001, BSLP received the prestigious Points of Light Award, which is given by Points of Light, a bipartisan organization that brings people and resources together to confront human issues—literacy, in this case. Miller and Tim Farley traveled to Washington, D.C., where the Pentagon was still smoldering from the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. Leaders told them that because of recent events, not many would show up for the ceremony. They were wrong.

That day, 700 school buses and 6,000 inner-city children rolled in to shocked group leaders and unprepared parking patrol in downtown Washington, D.C.

At the post-ceremony banquet held at the Kennedy Center, Tim Farley spoke with many teachers who expressed how amazed they were at how these kids related to the Black Stallion books.

The teachers said the black horse tale of triumphing over evil and breaking free from captivity to become one of the best was inspirational to the kids.

That was a striking moment for Tim Farley. “All this time I’d always thought of myself as Alec Ramsey,” he said. “But these kids think of themselves as the Black.”



A first-grade boy reads to an attentive Arabian horse.



## 2006 U.S. NATIONALS WELCOMES THE BLACK STALLION

Fittingly the sentiment of the last U.S. Nationals held in Louisville proudly welcomes *Walter Farley's Black Stallion* to Freedom Hall.

Arabian Nights Dinner Attraction (Kissimmee, FL), courtesy of the Black Stallion Literacy Project, brings a fairy tale to life on horseback in an evening performance culminating with *Walter Farley's Black Stallion*.

Friday, October 20 • 7:00 p.m.  
Kentucky Fair & Expo Center (Louisville, KY)

In conjunction with the 2006 U.S. National Arabian & Half-Arabian Championship Horse Show.

For more information, visit:  
[www.ArabianHorses.org/USNationals](http://www.ArabianHorses.org/USNationals)

Tickets are available through  
[www.Ticketmaster.com](http://www.Ticketmaster.com) June 1st.

\$10 for adults, \$7.50 for Seniors  
& Children (17 & under)  
Children 5 & under are FREE.

U.S. NATIONALS



2006 ARABIAN & HALF-ARABIAN  
CHAMPIONSHIP HORSE SHOW

“My favorite thing is being at the BSLP shows, having all those kids chanting ‘the Black’..., it brings a lump to my throat. My dad would have loved it because the Black made a difference in their lives. It’s a legacy. That’s all I know.”

– Tim Farley

Inspiration contained within the covers of these books continues to speak to children of all backgrounds and walks of life.

In 2005, the Arabian Horse Association became an official sponsor of the Black Stallion Literacy Project. Many clubs throughout the United States are active supporters bringing BSLP to schools in their area. Arabian horses are featured in every book that the BSLP children use with an enclosed Arabian Breed Flyer and the Arabian Horse Association logo is emblazoned on the books’ back covers.

“My favorite thing is being at the BSLP shows,” Tim Farley said. “Having all those kids chanting ‘the Black’..., it brings a lump to my throat. My dad would have loved it because the Black made a difference in their lives. It’s a legacy. That’s all I know.” 🐾



Fourth-graders clamor to the front of the coliseum with Arabian breed flyers from the Arabian Horse Association after enjoying the Arabian Nights BSLP Road Show, the culmination event for their BSLP reading program.

*Evie Tubbs is AHA Marketing Manager and a frequent contributor to AHM.*