

Crossing the Country In Search of Cross-Country

By Ingrid Edisen

Brenda McCall believes in traveling to further her education. That's why the El Paso native crisscrossed the USA. She moved to the East Coast for several years and then back again to Texas. Today the USDF "L" graduate is settled in Leander, Texas, with her horseback riding husband, Michael. Being an "L" graduate means she is licensed to officiate at any event or dressage schooling shows.

She began her horse career innocently enough, being the typical kid who petitioned her parents repeatedly for a horse. Her grandfather had been in the Calvary and coached her how to properly mount and dismount off her rocking horse. She began riding real horses at age three, moving into hunter-jumpers as a young girl. Then, during her senior year of high school she had the opportunity to travel to Vermont to serve as a working student for Henri van Shaik (now deceased). He'd won a silver in the 1936 Berlin Games for his native country of Netherlands in show jumping but always stressed dressage and had also received training at the Spanish Riding School

"It didn't matter how advanced you were," Brenda recalled, "he started everybody out on the lunge line."

Back in El Paso she linked up with Ken Moreland who was the local president of the Arabian Horse Club. She started riding Arabs for him and did mostly Western type classes, some reining and horsemanship as well as jumping. The Arabians imported into the U.S. and bred back then were very classical and tended to be small in stature. Brenda persevered despite the fact that she was somewhat tall.

Along the way, her parents had relented and admitted that if she saved enough money, she could buy a horse. The first horse she bought in her very early teens was a retired Saddlebred show horse mare that had been neglected. Brenda, with the help of others, pulled her through and ended up keeping her eventually for kids lessons. At the barn she boarded at, was a fellow named Hugh White who rode a Lippizaner.

"I was only thirteen and thought it looked so cool to see him on this prancing horse," she explained. Of course, back then she really didn't understand that what she was watching was the rider putting the Lippizaner through basic dressage work. Hugh White mentioned his father, a retired Colonel at Ft. Bliss, hosted some intense dressage clinics and Brenda started attending these. Internationally known Franz Rockawansky was the clinician.

Now an older teen, she found herself drawn to eventing and eventually folks at the barn began loaning her their horses for her to work. She was new and willing and grateful for all of this although some more seasoned riders cautioned her not to be so eager to ride some of these "free" mounts. But all of it served to teach her more. She trundled off to

UT-El Paso and entered the pre-vet program and started giving lessons at the barn. One thing led to another, she said. Folks kept asking her to help them with their horses. Back then the minimum wage for most other jobs she could get (outside of the barn) was \$2.80/hour and she was making more with her horse-related endeavors. She was paying for school. There simply weren't enough hours in the day. In the early '80's she made the jump and contracted to lease a little barn in the upper valley of El Paso. She had too much horse business and now only went to school for two days a week. Her mother even manned the office at the barn. She still kept her hand in with the Arabians and even traveled some to give clinics herself. She also taught a lot of kids.

Back then some of her students won national titles such as top ten in the U.S. in hunter/jumper at Scottsdale, also reserve champion. The following year, another student was the champion at Scottsdale in hunter/jumper equitation, and huntseat equitation.

A client asked her to help train a fearless Thoroughbred that she ended up "inheriting" and used him a lot in lower level eventing. Marilyn Issacks in Las Cruces, New Mexico, wanted her to accompany her up to Jackson Hole, WY, but by then Brenda had met her husband, Michael, who had moved his two horses to her barn to board. The couple decided to move from El Paso in the early '90's to West Virginia. The economy in El Paso was tottering at the time. They took over a large 48-stall barn with an 80 x 200 foot indoor arena 60 miles from Washington D.C., it was over the river from Virginia and Maryland. Since they had boundless energy, they also undertook restoring the pre-Civil War house that came with the place. She was undecided which focus she'd pursue: riding, education or judging. Now ensconced in the heart of eventing, she was able to ride with "S" judges and clinics with folks like renowned Linda Zang and Jimmy Wofford were easy. She was able to also work with European FEI judge Nicko van Stigt who she found to have a very good eye and a soothing, calm demeanor. Her husband worked with David O'Conner, even assisting O'Conner in building courses for the Virginia Horse Center in Lexington, VA. By now she owned a nice Hanoverian mare who took various honors such as High Sport Horse of the Virginia Dressage Association.

She'd already worked through Grand Prix with van Shaik and got her notably athletic Spanish Arabian stallion MQF Maximillian up to third level as a six year old before she prematurely lost him. Max had been a reserve champion at the national Scottsdale Arabian show in hunters and come in second in the jumpers.

She kept up her educational focus and pursued the USDF (United States Dressage Federation) "L" (Learner) Judge program during this period of her life. She attributes Marilyn Heath to encouraging her to do the "L" program. All the while, Brenda was actively riding, schooling and competing.

While at an event show in Lexington, Virginia, her main event horse bowed a tendon in an accident. She began to take stock of where she stood at this time in her life. Jimmy Wofford had always maintained any event rider had to give at least 100 percent and she believed that the accident had occurred because that was one time she had failed to do so. Her mother passed away back in El Paso. And she and Michael considered returning to Texas and downsizing.

Now based in Leander, just north of Austin, she still rides and teaches. On their property they keep all eight of her horses. She keeps an Arabian stallion, two Hanoverian mares and a gelding. She has begun adding NARHA (North American Riding for the Handicapped Association) certification to her handle and on her way to finishing her

official USDF title as a USDF Certified Instructor to teach through Second Level. She teaches beginner adults and children (including special needs children) on horseback. A certain level of balance has been added back into her life.

“I love my horses and love being outside,” she stated. “Sometimes I have adults that come to me and say they can’t ride a horse at a trot and then when I show them that they can, they smile and it makes me so happy.”

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