The Sunshine Man

BY SCOTT DAVIS

It was a tiny ad, no bigger than about three by five inches, with words to the effect of "Experienced Farm Manager Seeking Work." And all it did was permanently alter the hierarchy of American Thoroughbred breeding by transforming Florida into a breeding powerhouse.

The ad, placed by Maryland horseman Elmer Heubeck, appeared in the classified section of The Blood-Horse in August 1945. Heubeck, a 1939 graduate of the University of Maryland with a degree in animal husbandry, had served five years as the farm manager for C.E. Tuttle at Caves Valley Farm, located in the heart of breeding country in the Old Line State. When Tuttle decided to move his operation to Oregon, Heubeck—with year-old son (Kerry) and wife Harriet—chose not to move. Instead he paid a price he recalls was "just pennies" to place the ad that caught the attention of Carl Rose, and the duo quickly proceeded to place the Florida breeding industry on the map.

But it was not without some reservations that Heubeck left his home

Elmer Heubeck, one of Florida's Thoroughbred pioneers, still casts a long shadow

Maryland with a degree in animal husbandry, had served five years as the farm manager for C.E. Tuttle at Caves Valley Farm, located in the heart of breeding country in the Old Line State. When Tuttle decided to move his operation to Oregon, Heubeck—with year-old son (Kerry) and wife Harriet—chose not to move. Instead he paid a price he recalls was "just pennies" to place the ad that caught the attention of Carl Rose, and the duo quickly proceeded to place the Florida breeding industry on the map.

But it was not without some reservations that Heubeck left his home

(continued on page 7080)
for Ocala, Fla., the county seat of Marion County. To that point, the few breeding farms that existed in the state were on the peninsula’s southern tip, near the race-tracks. Rose had established the Ocala area’s first Thoroughbred farm, Rosemere, in 1936, but it seemed very little like what Heubeck envisioned a breeding farm to be.

“It scared me,” he recalled with a grin. “It was mostly barbed wire fencing and Mr. Rose let all of the animals run around together; horses, pigs, chicken, sheep, cattle, and hound dogs all together like Noah’s Ark. It was really sandy and they had those weird bugs and the palm trees—it sure didn’t look like horse country the way we knew it.”

Still, Heubeck noticed the “land rolled properly,” reminding him somewhat of Eastern Maryland, and he quickly built Rosemere into a high-power breeding operation. In addition to the physical improvements on the property—wooden fencing and horse barns primary among them—Heubeck set out to improve the quality of the horses which, up to that point, were considered so inferior that Florida-breds competing against open company would receive a five-pound weight allowance.

“The horses didn’t have proper nutrition and Mr. Rose didn’t want to spend a lot of money buying horses,” said Heubeck, who estimated the most money Rose ever spent for a horse was $250. “He would wait until the end of the meet in Tampa (then called Sunshine Park) and buy mares that either were taken by the feed man as payment for bad bills, or ones that weren’t going to be shipped north.”

Rosemere stood stallions as well, but initially all were remount stallions, confiscated as bounty from the Germans during World War II and granted to U.S. farms for use. Though Heubeck recalled that Samurai, the farm’s top stallion, was a top stakes winner in Germany, he did not compare to those offered by Central Kentucky breeding operations. But with Rose’s stature as a major player in land construction in the state and a member of Florida’s Racing Commission, Rosemere’s future as a commercial breeder was secure.

Initially, all the farm’s offspring were sold to Charles O’Neil, a liquor salesman from Canada who partnered with Rose in Rosemere. But within four years of his arrival, Heubeck had established a pattern that would become the foundation for today’s 2-year-olds in training sales.

With Rose’s clout—“He was the only one who could get the stalls he needed at Hialeah,” Heubeck said—Rosemere would send its entire output of yearlings by van to Hialeah. Numbering about 30 by the mid-1950s, they would be accompanied by Heubeck and depart Ocala in mid-November. Having been broken and trained on the farm, the babies would invariably work a fast three furlongs within days of their ar-

(continued from page 7076)
rival, immediately catching the eye of other horsemen and attracting offers. By the end of the meet the following March, all had found new homes.

"We didn't have any trouble selling them at all," Heubeck said. "Rose's idea from the start was commercial, which was quite unusual at the time. He never had a real racing stable, and he recognized that the best place to sell them was at the track after they showed what they could do in a workout or a race."

As a result, the Florida-breds, not long before considered too puny and poorly bred to compete, began to win races outside of the state. The first Rosemere crop to sell at Hialeah attracted owners from Pennsylvania, Chicago, Massachusetts, and even Venezuela. Among that group was a colt named Werwolf, produced by Heubeck's mare Leonardtown, whose $12,500 sale to New York owner Mrs. J.G. Smyth rained attention on the operation. Heubeck's mare, named after a town in Maryland, produced three stakes winners for the breeder, including Wolf Gal in 1951 and Merriwolf in 1952. Heubeck said that Werwolf's success on the track was so unexpected that he decided to name all the resultant foals out of Leonardtown with similar names.

"I bought her on the cuff," Heubeck laughed, "and paid off the $500 when she won her first start for me. She continued to repay me with her offspring."

Rosemere in specific and Ocala in general were on the map; the Feb. 13, 1949, edition of the Miami Herald noted, "Don't be surprised if Ocala becomes the Lexington of Florida." Even The Blood-Horse took note: "We hit it off right away," Dreyfus said. "He is creative and contentious, which is a combination you can't find very often."

More than 40 years later, Dreyfus still considers Heubeck among his closest friends and calls him remarkable. "He is brilliant in all of the details," Dreyfus said. "He built and ran the entire thing," said Dreyfus. "And it was an absolutely beautiful farm. Everything was first-class and everything was done from the horse's point of view."

More than 40 years later, Dreyfus still considers Heubeck among his closest friends and calls him remarkable. "He is brilliant in all of the details," Dreyfus said. "He is creative and contentious, which is a combination you can't find very often."

Under Heubeck's direction, Hobeau quickly rose to become one of the top breeding and racing farms not only in Florida but in the nation, ranking among the country's top 10 in leading money-winning owners for 15 consecutive years beginning in 1962. During its heyday in the late 1960s and early '70s, Hobeau's earnings were routinely in the top five; in its best year, 1967, no other owner earned more than its $1,120,143.

"We had very good luck very early at Hobeau," Heubeck said. "Mr. Dreyfus was interested in a racing stable, and he bought some very good horses. He doesn't claim to be a horseman, but he knows numbers."

Hobeau's best horses were a combination of purchased horses and homebreds, with many of the latter tracing back to the first horse Dreyfus ever owned, Beau Gar. Dreyfus owned 25% of Beau Gar when he raced, and bought the remainder upon re-
tirement, sending the son of Count Fleet down to his new farm to serve as a stallion. His offspring included Beau Purple—"The best horse I ever owned," Dreyfus asserted—who defeated five-time Horse of the Year Kelso three times: in the 1962 Suburban Handicap and Man o' War Stakes and then in the 1963 Widener Handicap. "It was 110% luck but the rest was skill," Dreyfus remembered with a chuckle.

Still, it was a combination of the skills of Heubeck as farm manager and the man they hired in 1963 to be their trainer, Allen Jerkens, that led to Hobeau runners upending champions, as Beau Purple had done, commonplace.

Handsome Boy, a homebred son of Beau Gar, romped by eight lengths over Buck passner in the 1967 Brooklyn Handicap. Six years later, Onion, a gelding produced from a Beau Gar mare, shocked Secretariat in the Whitney Stakes (gr. I). As to it prove the feat simple, yet another Hobeau colorbearer, Prove Out, conquered the mighty Secretariat at the following month in the Woodward Stakes (gr. I). And then for good measure defeated Riva Ridge in the Jockey Club Gold Cup (gr. I). Two years later, Hobeau again captured that traditional race when Group Plan outlasted heavy favorite Wajima.

In between Handsome Boy and Onion there were such top quality runners as Taken Aback, Winnie, and Poker Night, and though Jerkens was receiving most of the credit, the Hall of Fame trainer points to Heubeck as an important part of the reason for Hobeau's success.

"He's a great horseman," Jerkens said. "He did a great job of preparation. Most of the horses were within just a couple weeks of being ready to race when they came from the farm."

Jerkens attributes Heubeck's veterinary training as an important factor, describing the farm manager's work with the sore footed Beau Purple.

"He would improvise—I remember he built a flowing stream at the farm that he used to dip the horse's feet into. Heck, we even had horses who bowed tendons and came back to win stakes," Jerkens said, mentioning Mac's Sparkler, who in 1967 alone captured the Columbiana and Black Helen Handicaps and Beldame Stakes.

Jerkens, like everyone who encounters Heubeck, was impressed by his dedication, a trait he passed on to Craig Wheeler. Wheeler became Hobeau's assistant manager under Heubeck in 1979 and assumed the role of farm manager upon Heubeck's retirement in 1987.

"He's the hardest working man in the business," Wheeler said of his former boss. "He wouldn't ask you to do anything he wouldn't do himself, and with his knowledge of horses and farms, he did virtually everything. He is happy only when he's working, and he works all of the time."

Such is Heubeck's influence that scattered throughout Thoroughbred racing remain men who learned under his tutelage. Manny Tortora, who earlier this year became the all-time winningest trainer in the history of Calder Race Course is one, having worked under Heubeck as an exercise rider at Rosemere in the mid-1950s. Another is trainer Jimmy Picou, who was the exercise rider for the Rosemere yearlings at Hialeah from 1950 through 1952.

"He could tell you how to ride a horse better than the rider," Picou said. Also mentioning Heubeck's background in veterinary medicine, Picou noted how Heubeck was able to get older runners that had broken down back to the track and into the winner's circle. "What he did at Rosemere was a work of art," he said. "He knows horses inside and out."

With such a background, of course, it is not surprising that a man like Elmer Heubeck was not content with a rocking chair and gold watch when he left Hobeau. He immediately went to work on Quail Roost, the farm he had owned for 27 years but, by his own admission, did very little with while at Hobeau. Once again the physical structure was primary, but Heubeck also brought along his broodmare band and developed the former wildlife habitat as a haven for other animals of varying sorts. "It's a menagerie," said Picou. "He's entirely devoted to animals." Agreed Tortora, "He's not only a great horseman, but also one of the best agricultural minds anywhere."

And an optimist, too. In 1999, the then 82-year-old Heubeck and his wife, Harriet, who recently celebrated their 62nd wedding anniversary, sold Quail Roost and purchased another parcel of land. Named Quail Roost II, Heubeck immediately went to work building new barns and two training tracks: a seven-eighths-mile grass course and one-mile dirt oval. Although slowed slightly by recent heart surgery, Heubeck still ponies his horses to the track every morning and keeps up with his duties. "I've always trained horses and I'll probably keep doing it until they put me in a box," he said.

When that day comes, Heubeau—for whom Calder Race Course recently inaugurated a race for Florida-breds—will be honored alongside Rose as men whose vision transformed the state's breeding industry from virtually nothing into a powerhouse, ranking second in virtually all major categories. "I always thought Florida could do it," he said. "The grass grows good, it's a nice climate, and the horses are outside all year long. I always said I thought that Florida will overtake Kentucky, and I think it's going to, too."