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THE EQUESTRIAN LIFESTYLE MAGAZINE



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Sam Savitt SKETCHED His Dream Life

His son tells the story of a man who always knew he wanted to draw horses.

By **Roger Savitt**

If my father were still living, he would now be 101 years old. Though he never aspired to such an advanced age, he might have been OK with it on one condition—that he could still draw and paint horses.

If ever there was someone perfectly fitted to a career, it was my father, who knew from the age of 12 that one day he would like to be an equestrian artist. The man was so well matched to his work that a vocational testing service once asked him to take one of their exams, so they could refine their findings on how a future artist should respond to their questions.

Perhaps the right question for Sam Savitt as a child was not, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” but, “Why?” After all, he grew up in a poor family in the coal-mining town of Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, where his exposure to art and horses was peripheral at best.

Where drawing was concerned, he lacked formal training in childhood, but he showed a real flair for it early on, and he enjoyed it. Concerning horses, my dad insisted he didn’t know for sure where the fascination began, but he had some strong suspicions. No doubt, he said, adventure novels and movies about the Old West played a role. And I don’t need to tell readers of this magazine that horses are magnificent creatures many

artists might like to draw, if only they knew how. It was knowing how that gave my father the wherewithal to enter the art world. He said as much when he studied art at Brooklyn’s Pratt Institute.

As a teenager his abilities caught the eye of his high school art teacher, who encouraged him to apply to Pratt. However, once he arrived there he felt so humbled by the talents of other students that he wondered if his admission had been a clerical error. But soon he realized that when it came to drawing a horse, he could beat them all hands down.

Since he graduated from Pratt in 1941, my father didn’t have much chance to get his career off the ground before the start of World War II. Soon after hostilities began, he enlisted in the U.S. Army and made a hopeful bid to join the U.S. Cavalry, only to be thwarted by time and technology. The army officially ditched horses for mechanized vehicles in 1942—closing out an illustrious equine history with one last honest-to-God cavalry charge against Japanese soldiers in the Philippines. That was the same year my father went to the Asiatic-Pacific Theater as a first lieutenant in the Army Corp of Engineers. While he was in the service, he kept his artistic skills sharp by drawing what he saw—running the gamut from children in the villages of India to men with machine guns in the jungles of Burma (now Myanmar).



"Because you can see every stroke, the pencil drawings are great at showcasing my father's talent," writes Roger Savitt.

GETTING SETTLED

About the time he was formally discharged from the U.S. Army in 1946, my father married my mother, Bette Savitt (née Orkin), whom he had met at a dance only three months earlier. Initially, they lived in New York City, and during the next 10 years they moved twice before settling in rural North Salem, New York, about 60 miles north of the city.

This 10-acre farm had something my father wished for all his life—a barn for horses and places to ride them, not to mention an 1832 federal-style house with space for an art studio. For the remaining 44 years of his life it was a home he loved.

As publishers of the 1950s cranked out truckloads of comic books and dime store novels, talented illustrators were kept busy, but there were only so many to go around. Recalling a

client who didn't want his comic book to list only one artist, my father said he once had to use a pseudonym, Vic Dara, in addition to his own name. Did anyone notice similarities in style between Sam Savitt and Vic Dara? I'll never know.

As an artist, my father took inspiration from Paul Brown, a friend and self-taught equestrian painter, known for his careful yet seemingly casual style. He also admired the dynamic work of Canadian novelist and artist Will James. And there was Harold von Schmidt, whose sharp realism of the American West must have resonated with my father, who went there twice during the Great Depression, hitchhiking and hopping trains to get around.

My dad realized early on that if he was to master his craft, he could not simply attend studio classes or study the work of others. He needed to truly *understand* horses. While growing up, the sum of his equine experience went no further



than his familiarity with a horse that pulled the milkman's wagon in Wilkes-Barre. His equestrian education didn't begin in earnest until a fortuitous encounter with Gordon Wright.

Wright was a revered riding instructor who helped establish the U.S. Equestrian Team in 1950 and earned a historical footnote as the last cavalry officer to represent the country during international riding competitions. The instructor needed an illustrator for his eventual classic, "Learning To Ride, Hunt, And Show." He took a liking to the young horse artist with boundless enthusiasm for his subject.

A DISCIPLINED STUDENT

Under Wright's tutelage, illustrator Sam Savitt became an accomplished rider. His enormous self-discipline as a freelance artist translated well into high-quality

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horsemanship. Over the next 25 years or so, he won scores of ribbons at local horse shows and even became a judge. He may well have exchanged riding lessons for artwork. (Years later, he gave a painting to a surgeon in return for an operation on his hand. The surgery was a success.)

When the move to North Salem allowed him to keep his own horse, my father learned all aspects of horse care, even minor veterinary procedures. He also started training horses. These opportunities to observe the intricacies of how horses behave and move helped feed his nonstop quest for knowledge of all things equestrian. At one point, he even illustrated catalogs for the old Miller Harness Company because the painstaking drawings he did of saddles, bridles, stirrups and so forth gave him greater proficiency when reproducing these items in a finished painting.

Curiously, he believed that his growing expertise made his job harder, not easier. He said the more he knew, the more he realized there was still much to learn. No matter how masterful his work appeared to everyone else, he often asked himself if it could have been better. Nowhere was his anguish more evident than when he did portraits, often for fussy clients. Yet, to my knowledge, he never had an unhappy customer.

I recall a painting of his that hung in our house. One day, he said he was bothered by how a leg looked on one of the horses, and he seemed unfazed by the fact that the art in question had already hung there for 15 years. So down it came, he reworked the leg and returned the piece some weeks later. I can't say that I saw any difference, but my father saw it, and that's what mattered.

As the accuracy of his art improved, so did his ability to bring two-dimensional images to life, often giving them uncanny energy. His explosive rodeo pieces are probably the best example, but there were many others as well. Kentucky's American Academy of Equine Art annually presents the Sam Savitt Award to the artist whose work is judged the "best depiction of a horse in motion."

When it came to horse art, my father had no preference for one setting over another. Horses standing quietly in a field or tearing down the home stretch of the Grand National were equally suitable. In addition to rodeo, he showcased racing, hunting, steeplechasing, polo, dressage—basically any venue imaginable. His tools of the trade were also diverse. He relied on oils, acrylics, gouache, casein, pencil and watercolors. I even saw him work magic with a ballpoint pen.

Although he never used an agent, word of my father's artistic prowess spread quickly, and I can't recall a time when



Artist Sam Savitt's equine information charts, sold by Black Horse Press, were enormously popular.

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he didn't have assignments waiting. He illustrated at least 130 books, countless advertisements, brochures and magazines—including 31 covers of *The Chronicle of the Horse*—and just about anything where you could put a horse's picture, including postcards, calendars, lamp shades, serving trays, clocks, playing cards, coffee cups, placemats and key chains.

In the early 1960s, my mother sought to capitalize on some of this largess with a mail order business called Black Horse Press. Its sole mission was to sell reproductions of my father's work. Always supportive of my father, she possessed the business acumen that eluded him. Although it sold everything from greeting cards to limited edition prints, the mainstay of Black Horse Press was a series of authoritative horse



With a base in equestrian-friendly North Salem, New York, Sam Savitt could observe nearby show jumping competitions and foxhunts, using these experiences for future pieces.

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information charts that focused on such topics as draft horses, polo horses, rodeo horses and horses in history. The first chart to be created, The Sam Savitt Guide To Horses, became so popular it was added to the Smithsonian Institution's collection.

THE ARTIST AS AUTHOR

While art was always my father's greatest strength, he also became an author, almost by accident. In the late 1950s, he compiled a series of drawings showing the stages of a horse's growth from birth



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to adulthood. With just enough text to stitch them together, he created his first book, "Step-a-Bit." The book's warm reception encouraged him to keep writing.

He went on to publish another 14 books and co-author two more. They included short stories and books on rodeo, wild horses, horse care, the U.S. Equestrian Team and fiction targeted at young people. His widely studied "Draw Horses With Sam Savitt," published in 1981, was praised for its clarity and completeness. I wonder if he might have written more had he ever learned to type: His manuscripts were all in longhand.



Sam Savitt's artwork graced the cover of The Chronicle of the Horse 31 times, including with a piece created specifically for the magazine's Dec. 24, 1999, Turn Of The Century Issue—an amalgamation of many of Savitt's drawings put together by Lost Mountain Graphics.



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"He said the more he knew, the more he realized there was still much to learn. No matter how masterful his work appeared to everyone else, he often asked himself if it could have been better," writes Roger Savitt about his artist father, Sam Savitt.





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As a writer, he was conversational and real and, in a sense, the style was a logical extension of the person. He was down-to-earth and approachable. He accepted you for who you were. He was charming, a natural storyteller and, despite his many successes, utterly free of ego. As befits an artist, he was emotional, sensitive and passionate about his work and other things in his life. While comfortable in the company of others, his leisure time usually favored solitary activities such as brisk walks with his dog or hours on the back of his horse.

A typical day in the life of Sam Savitt started early—with chores in the barn, a lengthy swim at the local gym (three times a week) and breakfast, ending with a trip to his studio by 8 a.m. By late morning, he'd likely break for tea, with lunch sometime thereafter. Then back to the studio until about 4:30 in the afternoon, when he'd walk his dog. Riding, if he did it, would happen earlier in the day. He almost never worked in the evening. While not a grueling schedule, he was a diligent worker who rarely took a day off.

With an active foxhunt since 1924, Golden's Bridge Hounds, and a gradual evolution from cattle farms to horse farms, North Salem wasn't short on equine enthusiasts. My dad seemed to be friends with most of them. Horses were the common denominator in both his career and his social life. So it shouldn't surprise anyone that at mealtime he and my mother talked about horses—indeed, at every single meal I can remember.

And before the meal began, there was a pretty good chance he'd be sketching something horse related on the back of an old envelope or scrap paper. He might be exploring an idea for a painting or working through an issue involving whatever was sitting on his easel. I suppose there were also moments when he was simply doodling, perhaps relishing his unlikely journey: the man from Wilkes-Barre who grew up with few advantages but his own native talent and a relentless goal to follow his heart's desire.

That he would excel and be honored for his achievements was gratifying to him, but it was clearly secondary to the joy of living a life from which he never wanted to retire and being in a town that he never wished to leave.

We should all be so lucky. 🍷



Roger Savitt works in corporate communications at a Fortune 100 company and, with his sister, Vicki, runs a website that sells their father's original art and provides information about him: www.SamSavittArt.com.