

## The Ole Saddletramp's Great Ride!

Bob Schweiger grew up on an Illinois farm. He and his brother spent every moment they could on horseback—in fact, their best childhood friends were steeds. It was a natural transition for Bob to continue working with horses in his adult life. As a professional dog trainer, Bob had the best of both worlds—he worked with great dogs and used horses to do it! Bob was well known



in the Field Trial community and certainly to the National Red Setter Field Trial Club. Several prominent club members hired Bob to train and campaign their dogs.

It was a good life and Bob was happy. Bob was forty six years old and about to become a grandfather for the first time. Still, he had a vague idea gnawing away at the back of his mind. Simply put, he wanted to “make his mark” in the world and it almost seemed like time was passing him by. He didn’t just want to do something significant— Bob wanted it to be really special. And most of all, he wanted to do it on horseback.

I’ve always believed that timing is everything. Well, when the Nation’s Bicentennial rolled around, many groups began putting on demonstrations to commemorate the contribution horses made to our nation’s development. Wagon trains, the pony express, farming, and even horse races are just a few examples of ways that horses either helped or entertained America. Bob began to think about all that and he suddenly realized what he wanted to do. Because Bob worked with and trained great dogs, he wanted to help establish a Field Trial Hall of Fame where such champions could be celebrated! There had been lots of rumors and discussions about such a place, but the dream just didn’t seem to come to fruition. William F. Brown had some “Hall of Fame” dog paintings in his office and they looked great! But Bob felt it wasn’t the caliber of what those champions REALLY deserved.

So Bob decided to ride across the country on horseback to drum up enthusiasm and funds for the construction of a “real” Hall of Fame. There had already been discussion of placing the building right next door to the Cowboy Hall of Fame in Oklahoma City. But that idea was not without controversy. Many people felt that funding would be come easier with the museum placed somewhere in the south.

Bob went to lunch with William F. Brown and pitched the horseback ride idea to him. Brown loved the plan and encouraged Bob to go for it! Several months were spent planning the event, charting a course and obtaining all the necessary permits. They needed Health certificates, Permissions to enter states, approval to ride on city streets and a ton of good

luck! Bob wanted to begin the trip at the American Field Office in Chicago. They would travel south through Kentucky and into Tennessee. They'd visit Grand Junction and Memphis. After a few days rest they would travel west and go through Arkansas and the Ozark mountains. Finally, they would come into Oklahoma, travel through Tulsa and finish at the proposed museum site in Oklahoma City. Total distance 1200 miles!

Bob Kerans, the Editor of The Flushing Whip back then, became Schweiger's one man publicity team. He obtained prizes and donations from all over the United States. The two Bobs worked out a deal with The American Field to publish a "coupon." Thirty thousand people subscribed to The Field back in 1976. Readers who mailed in a coupon and a dollar donation would be eligible for weekly drawings and great prizes. They might win training collars, horse tack, pet supplies, dog crates, shotguns and much more. Bob Schweiger even advertised the grand prize-- a new born colt from champion bloodlines. Kerans and Schweiger hoped the coupon donations would cover the food, feed and other expenses of the trip and still raise a significant amount of money for the Hall of Fame. The American Field initially planned to run the coupon in the next issue after Bob and his team left Chicago.

Bob needed a support team— he couldn't accomplish such a trip on his own! His son Jeffrey was just 17 years old but he agreed to come along and take the job. Jeff drove Bob's truck which also pulled a 17 foot Avalon hard top camper. Bob devised a "leapfrog method" to assure that the horses got enough rest. The plan was for Jeff to drive ahead several miles and get ready to exchange the horses. This was no small task. Jeff had to unhitch the trailer, move the truck forward enough to be able to lower a ramp, take a horse out, saddle it up and be ready. When they made the exchange the first time, it took over 45 minutes. By the last day they could accomplish the change in 11 minutes or less. In between everything else, Jeff cooked meals and replenished the supplies. At seventeen years old he accomplished his work like an old hand.

Bob selected three horses for the trip. They were all Tennessee Walkers and were using horses. Stormy, Bob's mare was his first choice. She was a level headed animal—rock solid and easy to work with. He knew she'd accept the sights and sounds of city travel. She even seemed to know to stop for red traffic lights! Bob selected Frosty, his snow white gelding as the second choice horse. Frosty was actually for sale at the time. Frosty had an exceptionally smooth gait and was a great ride. Finally, Bob selected a stallion—named Little John who was young, strong and sensible beyond his years. Bob wanted him for special situations.

They decided to start the trip on Flag Day in honor of Americana and the Bicentennial. A crowd gathered at the doorstep of the American Field, 222 West Adams Street in downtown Chicago. William F. Brown Sr. and the entire American Field staff came out on the sidewalk. There were representatives from the local newspapers and sports magazines. Nick Bridges came representing the Illinois Department of Conservation. Don Thompson of the Lane Trophy Company was on hand to present a beautiful wooden plaque with a map of the USA and the proposed plan for the trip. With very little ceremony or pretense, the men took their positions. Bob climbed up on Stormy and Jeff jumped into the cab. Bulbs flashed as they turned and began their journey through Chicago. It wasn't without challenge! Four hours in bumper to bumper rush hour traffic with Bob and Stormy right in the middle!

Stormy tolerated it pretty well until they reached the canal. But when they began to cross the bridge, Stormy balked. She could see through the grated surface all the way down to the water and there was no way she intended to walk there. Bob sensed her concern and quickly moved her over to the sidewalk area where she crossed smoothly without incident. They finally made it out of the city unscathed and unharmed. But those initial hours provided a reality check leaving the team both daunted and uncertain of what lay ahead.

The group headed south toward Newton Illinois where Bob Kerans lived. When they finally arrived Kerans came outside with disappointing news; The Field had decided not to publish the coupon or participate in the drawings that Kerans had organized. The whole idea had been scraped. Apparently there were some liability issues. This changed everything! The whole point had been to raise money for the Museum and Hall of Fame. In addition, there would be no funding to offset the cost of the trip! The men talked earnestly about calling everything off but Bob felt more determined than ever! He decided that if they couldn't raise money for the museum construction, at least they could raise awareness. So, in spite of the uncertainty, Bob climbed back on the horse and headed for Kentucky. He carried a 25 year silver anniversary copy of The Flushing Whip which Kerans autographed during the visit. They hoped to someday place it in the Field Trial Hall of Fame.

In the next days Bob rode down through Illinois and across a piece of Kentucky and on to Grand Junction, Tennessee. Barry Saunders met them and introduced Bob all over town. Barry took them sight seeing. They visited with Mrs. Raines at the renown Raines Hotel where the famous handlers bedded down. (There's still a model of the building at the Bird Dog Museum today. The real hotel was destroyed by fire in 1986) Later in the day Bob, Stormy and Jimmy Bryan had their picture taken right on the steps where the National Champion is crowned. The team stayed on at Grand Junction a few days and thoroughly enjoyed the visit.

By July 3rd they were riding toward Memphis. But as Bob rode along, he suddenly realized they were approaching an underground tunnel. This is located somewhere near the Memphis airport. He and Stormy found themselves "boxed in;" they had no where to go but dead ahead—and that was Bob's greatest fear! Traffic on the two narrow lanes sped through the darkness at an amazing rate. Bob found a pedestrian walkway and he guided Stormy up onto that area. They worked their way through in what was a terrifying ride. Trucks blasted past. The wind and subsequent vacuum pulled at the pair. Sometimes the drivers blared their horns. The noise and resounding echo startled Stormy but she struggled and maintained her composure. They somehow they made it through safely— but it was a very dangerous point in the trip. What a contrast to the events of the next day (July 4<sup>th</sup>) when Bob rode through Memphis and shouted out *Happy Birthday America* for everyone to hear!

Although the daily routine never varied, the landscape changed all the time. Jeff and Bob became a well honed team and seemed to develop a sixth sense for reading one another. One of the biggest issues for Jeff was coping with boredom. He would drive ahead five miles and usually have to wait an hour for his dad to ride up. Back in 1976 Jeff didn't have a *Gameboy*, an *I-Pod* or an *mp3 player* to wile away the hours. Their life consisted of "Hurry up and wait.. hurry up and wait." They put in twelve hour days and that meant, hurry up and wait—twelve times a day. That factors out as twelve hours of waiting for a 17 year old boy! Pretty tedious when your only entertainment is a tattered deck of cards.

That's not to imply there was no excitement. They had a couple mishaps, and really, they

sort of served to break the monotony. On one occasion Jeff fell asleep while he waited for his dad. He awoke to a crash and discovered the trailer had rolled all the way down a hill into a gully. What a time they had getting that pulled out! Later, towards the end of the trip, the truck and trailer jackknifed and caused everyone quite a fright. Thankfully, no one was seriously injured. But with such potential for disaster, it's truly amazing how well those two "Saddle tramps" really did.

With the tenacity of pit bulls they pushed forward—day after day and night after night. Each day brought another grueling 12 hour haul. At night, they'd pull over to the roadside, do their chores and eat whatever they could find for dinner. Before Bob went to bed he would perch himself on a bale of hay and balance a Remington portable typewriter on his lap. As Bob sat in the moonlight swatting mosquitoes, he pounded out updates for the American Field. Their subscribers followed the team's progress enthusiastically. When folks saw them pass through town, they often called the Field Office to report the sighting. You couldn't miss them. It's hard not to notice a man riding a horse down the middle of the Main Street highway—especially the way they were decked out! Bob's horses each had personalized red white or blue stable sheets. Besides having their name embroidered, they also said: "Read about us in the American Field!"

There were good days and there were bad. On one occasion they arrived at a town that was totally on fire. Bob rode Little John and could hardly see for all the smoke. Fire trucks zoomed in every direction. Bob and Little John blindly picked their way through and managed to cross town without flaming out. No one had time to celebrate America with our crew. They were too busy struggling with the massive blaze.

Meanwhile, Bob and Jeff were struggling with a burn out of their own. Their money was short and their meals were lean. Since they'd lost their financial backing, the men struggled to mete out an existence on their own. Most days they collected glass pop bottles along the road—cashing them in at local stores to get change that they used for their lunch. On one occasion Bob noticed a huge tractor trailer tire that had broken loose from its holding and rolled off the road when the truck made a sharp turn. He had Jeff go pick it up—they sold it and felt like millionaires! Bob's diary read: "Real food today. The Lord provides!"

A few days later they crossed the river and arrived in Arkansas. The team actually passed through the town of Dogpatch—but didn't encounter any Yokums. Things went smoothly until July 8<sup>th</sup>. They'd gotten lost coming through Hindsville, Arkansas and needed to make up time. The local townspeople suggested that Bob leave the road and go up over a nearby mountain. They promised that he could catch the same road at the top—but by going that way he'd save 10 or 15 miles. Jeff took the road and Bob took the mountain. A local man sketched out how to get up the mountain and find a gate when he finally reached the peak. Bob mounted his horse and began the ascent. As it got higher and steeper, Bob noticed large clusters of rocks. These outcroppings made a stepping stone type environment—with each one making a platform about 4 foot high. They were in a precarious position. Bob got off the horse and climbed on the first "step". He coaxed Stormy up and then climbed further. They moved slowly like that—Bob sweating and scrambling higher and higher. With each step he pulled his horse further up the mountain. When the pair finally got up to the top, Bob sat down to catch his breathe and collect himself. He was soaked, exhausted and panting like a dog. As his breathing became more regular, the world came into a closer focus.

Bob suddenly noticed that his horse's saddle was gone! He couldn't believe it. Leaving the horse ground tied, Bob slowly retraced his steps, several thousand feet back down till he found the saddle. There it was—still cinched up. Bob and his horses had lost so much weight that Stormy had literally walked right out of her saddle while they climbed. Bob carried the saddle up to the top and made his way through the gate. Sure enough Jeff was perched there at the top of the hill, waiting for his dad to show. In spite of what a fiasco it was, Bob felt the treacherous climb to the top was worth it in miles saved! What do you suppose he'd say today?

The group arrived in Inola, Oklahoma the famous site where the American Field Futurity is run. The men were absolutely exhausted. Bob had severe sunburn to his mouth—he hadn't thought to wear sun block on his lips. Dr. Hawthorne, a local dentist and well known field trialer and judge, took them in and treated Bob's sores. They rested at Dr. Hawthorne's place and allowed themselves a few days recovery time. They moved on refreshed—with the end in sight.

Our Saddle Tramps arrived in Oklahoma City at 7:05 pm on 7/14/76. A group of Oklahoma Field Trialers headed by Thurman Thompson were gathered to welcome the pioneers home. Delmar Smith rode out on a horse to meet Bob and led him right to the festivities in the city. Vernon Snell, an old reporter was on hand and he took Bob everywhere. They visited the Chamber of Commerce and were hosted to a party. Bob dropped his saddle off for display at Sheplers Western Store for everyone to see. They stayed in Oklahoma City as celebrities for four days before packing up and finally heading home to Paw Paw, Illinois. They'd made the trip in 30 days!

In summing up his experience when it was done, Bob wrote the following:

*"During the trip I didn't read a newspaper, listen to the radio or watch any television. It gave me a small insight into the feelings of those who have been isolated from the world—either by choice or fate. I truthfully lived in a world of my own. When Jeff told me how far I'd ridden on a given day, it seemed vague and unreal. The slow pace gave me the opportunity to drink in the scenery; I know that I'll always cherish and remember the things I saw and experienced on the journey.*

*Thirty days, eight hours and twenty minutes after leaving Chicago, we arrived at our destination in Oklahoma City. I had accomplished what I had set out to do. I had ridden every step of the way. No sham or shame, no flamboyance; just one hoof beat after another, every step of the way.*

*Financially, the trip netted nothing. Measured in dollars and cents it could be termed a failure. But a dreamer doesn't sum up success by the coins in his purse. And there's the fact that I shouted "Happy Birthday!" loud and clear to this great country. That alone gives me pride.*

*As the days rolled past, I saw a young colt become a horse and my young son become a man. In turn, I was allowed to become a boy and fulfill a dream of my youth. My long ride is over now and it's become just one of the many memories that are part of my life."*

This summer marks the thirty-year anniversary of Bob's cross county ride. What he did was not just unusual—it was absolutely remarkable. His trip caught the attention of thirty thousand readers and the Field Trial community. While he didn't get to raise the funds he'd planned, Bob DID raise awareness about constructing a Hall of Fame. As a member of the NRSFTC, he represented us well—he hung tough against all adversity and never

surrendered. To say "it's impressive" doesn't begin to do justice to the task. But in spite of all that, for many folks, Bob's great adventure is all but forgotten. In fact, for some of you, this might be the first you even heard that Bob Schweiger rode 1200 miles to help promote the Field Trial Hall of Fame. Well, the Museum complex WAS eventually constructed—not in Oklahoma City, but right there in Grand Junction near the Ames Plantation. If you haven't been to Grand Junction to see it—please go. What an amazing facility!

Now, here's the irony of it all. The memorabilia from R.J.'s famous ride isn't housed at the Hall of Fame at all. But, it **IS** in Grand Junction! If you want to see Bob's saddle and run your hands over the worn leather seat—or examine what's left of the metal horse shoes that pounded the pavement from Chicago to Oklahoma City... well, all that stuff is down the road in a special museum display at Wilson Dunn's Sporting Goods Store. I promise, if you stop by, Wilson will take you right back and show you everything from Bob's trip and more! And believe me, he'll make sure you understand that it really WAS an exceptional thing that Bob Schweiger did!

Before I finish, let me add a few lines about the players in this remarkable adventure. Here's where everyone ended up.

Frosty had been for sale (\$500) before Bob's great ride but Bob brought him home and kept him to the end. Frosty and Stormy each lived to be more than thirty years old. They both are buried right in Bob's front yard. After the trip, Little John was sold to a man in Arkansas who liked his bloodlines. From then on, Little John's only responsibility was to service the mares. I'm told he lived out his days with a perpetual smile on his face—and it wasn't from sniffing horseradish! Bob's son, Jeff, became a welder, is married, and still lives in Illinois. The trip was a difficult experience for the young teen and he has NO desire to ever repeat history! And finally, R.J. Schweiger lives in Hurtsboro, Alabama and serves as Constable for nearby Russell County. Bob still belongs to the NRSFTC and is just a boy at heart! And needless to say, that charming Saddle Tramp STILL loves to ride!

