

Rescued Horses

Story by Cammie Conlon

If horses could talk, the two Belgian mares pastured behind the Little River Post Office would probably say they are thankful to be where they are. Had things gone differently last year, they might have wound up at the slaughterhouse. Instead, they were rescued by Susan McKinney, of the Little River Inn family, and now call a grassy ocean bluff their home.

The mares are known as HRT horses. They were among the thousands of mares that are confined in pens and kept pregnant so that their urine can be used for Premarin, a popular medicine in hormone replacement therapy (HRT). When the horses' production has waned, they are sent to auction where they may be bought for recreational use, or, as often happens, purchased by "killer buyers" who sell them for horsemeat. The thousands upon thousands of their foals also are sent to auction.

Susan learned about HRT horses from Kathleen King, who began rescuing foals and yearlings four or five years ago through the United Pegasus Foundation. She and her husband David now have six of them at their ranch in Surprise Valley.

Susan was a pushover for the plight of these unfortunate horses. She has loved horses all her life. As a child, she rode her own horse, Dolly, over the grounds that became the Little River Inn Golf Course, and not long ago she bought a Pinto named Puzzle.

So off Susan and Kathleen went to Kiss Horses Center in Galt, California where fifty or so horses—mares and foals—were waiting to be rescued. After several hours looking at them all, Susan decided to adopt two yearlings.

Just as she was leaving, a horse trailer pulled in and as she describes it, "When the door was let down, two horses came thundering out. Thundering! These two big old girls demanded our attention! I fell in love with them."

Welcome, Lilly and Iris. Those are their names, but people feel free to call them what they like. Kathleen calls them Mama and Auntie. Susan's cousin Connie calls them the Big Boned Gals, with a nod to k.d. lang. And the locals call them the Little River horses.

On May 4 of this year, Lilly gave birth. That was a surprise. And so the baby was named Surprise. Susan McKinney thought she had adopted four horses. She got five. (The two yearlings are with a family in Fort Bragg.)

Because Ole's Whale Watch Bar provides the best view of the pasture, Bartender Sue Bondoux has become the Little River horse expert. She says just about everyone has an opinion about them. "A customer will ask me what kind of horses they are, and I'll tell them Belgian draft horses. Then he'll say 'No, they're Percherons,' or some other breed, and pretty soon all the customers are discussing the horses. Everyone's an expert" Frequent guests at the bar regularly proffer advice about everything from how the horses should be sheltered to how Surprise should be raised, Sue reports.

When it came time to wean Surprise, Susan brought Puzzle to baby-sit him, and keep him away from his mother. Surprise was not pleased. He has since gone to live at the McKinney's home where Puzzle still keeps his eye on him. And Surprise has started to be trained by Ron and Leilani Levy who are, what Susan calls, "horse whisperers."

Premarin connection

According to a Dateline NBC report (January 18, 2004), the demand for Premarin dropped dramatically after July, 2002 when a portion of the women's health initiative study found that women taking Premarin-type medication were at higher risk for heart attack, blood clots, breast cancer and dementia.

By the end of 2003, more than half of the Premarin farms (fifty at one time) in the United States were out of business, and the number of pregnant mares went from forty thousand to twenty thousand.

Wyeth, the international pharmaceutical company that produces Premarin, created a \$3.7 million trust fund to help transport the horses to recreational auctions and equine rescues. It is also compensating those farmers who either keep their horses, or find new homes for them rather than sell them for slaughter.

Some see this as a mere gesture when compared with the \$2 billion Premarin once made for Wyeth.

United Pegasus Foundation, based in Arcadia, California, has long been a critic of the treatment of pregnant thoroughbreds at Premarin farms, as well as an advocate of rescuing these horses.

If you happen by downtown Little River, you might take a look out at the pasture. You'll see two pretty happy horses.

"Lilly and Iris have become inseparable," Susan reports. "They even share their food."

That's something to be thankful for.

To learn more about the United Pegasus Foundation, go to www.unitedpegasus.com/premarin2

To see Kathleen and David King's rescued colts and yearlings at their Surprise Valley Carriage Co., go to www.svcarriage.com

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