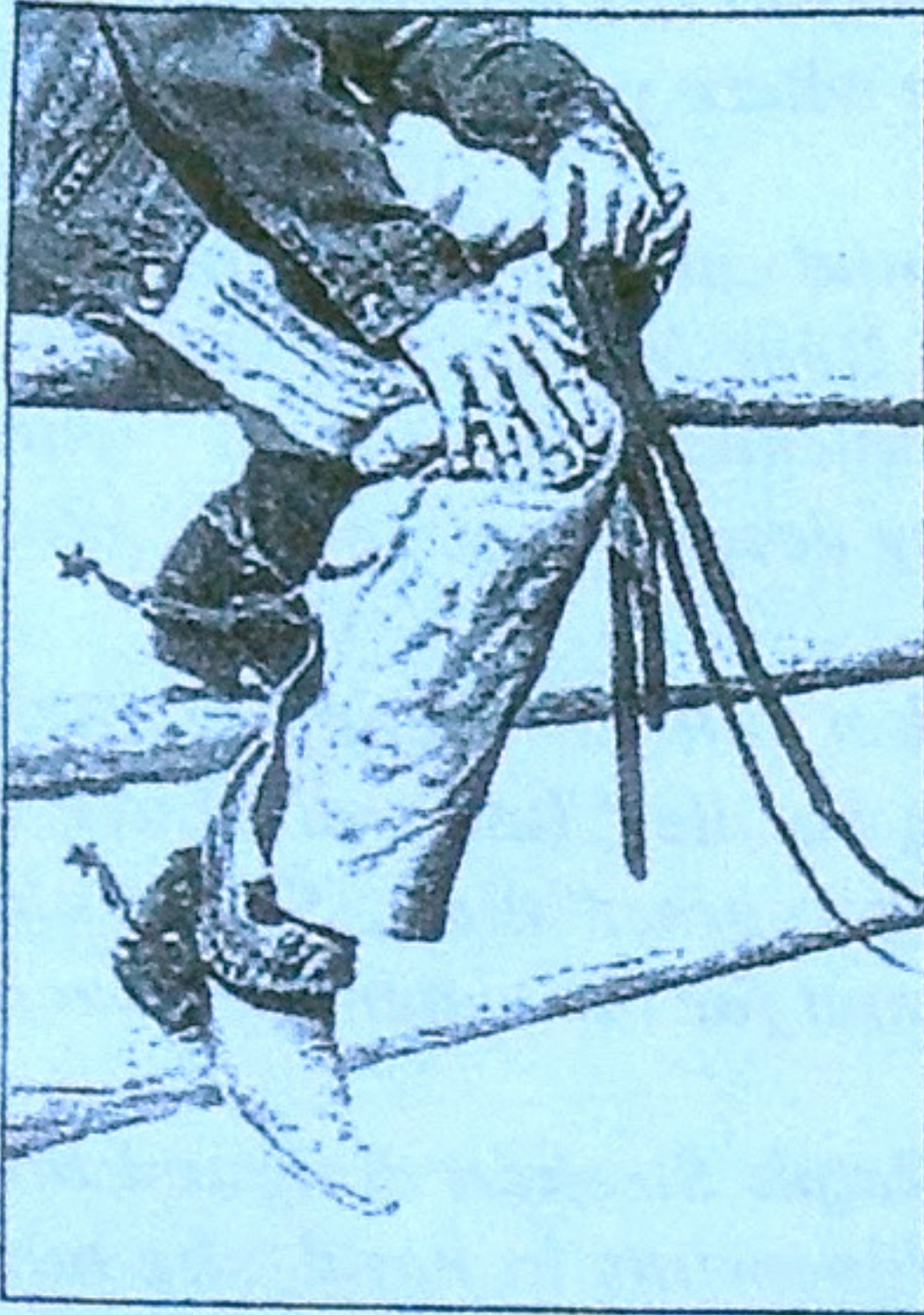


A History of Sunnyside Saddle Club



The following is an account of Sunnyside Saddle Club's origins and early years. It seems to have been written in the early to mid-70's. The author is unknown at this time, but if any of you readers know or if you have more stories and information, contact Cynthia Tait.

Sunnyside Saddle Club, a family horsemen's club, was founded in the spring of 1963 by Noel Confer and his sister, Shirley, when they realized there was a definite need for organized horse activities in Sweetwater Valley and the surrounding areas. Noel leased a thirty acre patch of towering tumbleweeds on Sweetwater Road in Bonita's river bottom, had one gigantic bonfire, and the Sunnyside Saddle Club was born.

When borrowed tractors could not finish the job of making a riding ring area, the Confer family and friends scratched out our first SSC ring by hand. Riders then came out of the hills for the first club "play day", charter members were enrolled and the first SSC officers, all juniors, were elected in October of 1963. The wind was not always at SSC's back and the trail was not always downhill as the club grew, but from a small group of barrel racers in a cloud of sand, a great deal of progress has been made. Today, SSC club horse shows are held in three divisions, western, English and gymkhana, and the once-a-month "play days" have expanded to make twenty-one club shows per year.

In 1968, the club ring was moved to a site on Conduit Road in Bonita and in early 1973 was again moved to its present location on Quarry Road in the Valley. Today, SSC has approximately 500 members, a ten thousand dollar annual budget, full horse activities, endless meetings and a multitude of other happenings, but it has tried to retain that "small club" feeling where every member counts and where horsemastership, sportsmanship and companionship are highly rated.

It would take volumes to tell the complete story of Sunnyside Saddle Club, but let us today go down in history by giving thanks that SSC was founded. And hopefully, we members, the members to come and all the friends of Sunnyside Saddle Club will keep it alive as long as it is needed. May that be forever!

To this charming history, Liane Howard added her recollections of the series of moves the club had to make after 1973. In 1978, the ring was moved to Harold Young's Bonita Vista Stables. In 1981 the club moved to Runyans' Ring on San Miguel Road, and then it moved back to Quarry Road in 1982. Finally, in 1984, our own ring was built on Sweetwater Road.

Although the former sentence, "...our own ring was built on Sweetwater Road," is short and simple, the actual creation of Sunnyside arena was anything but! It is a fascinating story that tells as much about people's dedication and perseverance as about sinking fence posts into the ground or a timeline of events. The following is a compilation of the recollections of Muriel Watson, Liane Howard and Laura Galecki, who were all active in the club during those years and who participated in securing and building a permanent home for it. This now is a continuation of our club's story.

By the early 80's, Bonita was changing from a small community populated by family-owned businesses, farms, large acreages and several stables to a more densely developed residential area (a trend which continues to this day). Because the ranches and stables which hosted the shows were gradually sold, Sunnyside Saddle Club always had to be looking for a place which was big enough and had adequate parking for the shows.

It was at this point, about 1983, that the SSC members dedicated themselves to the task of finding a permanent location. They wanted the equestrians in south county to have a place where young people could learn how to show, prepare to compete in larger shows, and to just have fun.

At this same time the Bonita Optimist Club, which leased a large area of land called the Bonnie Brae Farm from the county (land which included the community meeting house near Rohr Manor and the river bottom below it), wanted to support some type of youth activity. They had a "gentleman's agreement" with the county that in return for taking care of this property they could use it as they deemed appropriate. Was this kismet? It was perfect timing and a perfect fit!

Optimist president Al Monahan invited Muriel Watson to give a presentation at their meeting to pitch the idea of opening up the river bottom to build an arena so that the Sunnyside Saddle Club could have a permanent home. The Optimists liked what they heard from Muriel, and it was agreed that SSC would sublease on the Optimists' lease. The club would pay for the arena, the buildings and for the water used each month at the shows. SSC also agreed to maintain the arena and buildings.

Far from their problems being solved, the club's work had just begun! Ralph Strahan designed the arena, and Muriel called the American Fence Company. Believe it or not, with blueprints in hand, she met the fencing people at 5:00 a.m. in the river bottom to show them where the club wanted the arena to be built! This was in March, and the arena was ready for the first show of many shows to come. Muriel paid for the arena out of her own pocket, and the club then went to work.

Charley and Judy Palmer secured a side of beef (from someone), and club members proceeded to sell raffle tickets all around the community. Everyone worked extremely hard to sell tickets. Through the raffle, enough money was raised to repay Muriel, and someone walked away with a lot of good meat!

After raising money for the arena, the club worked for the next two years to raise funds for further projects by selling tee shirts and caps with the club logo, hosting pancake breakfast rides, and other activities. Everything was done by volunteers. Mark Voigtritter built the entry booth and café, with help from club members of course. Ralph Kitchell painted the booth and the café, and Colin Howard installed the watering system. As you can see, their efforts paid off because Sunnyside Saddle Club has been able to host shows for over 20 years in its own facility.

Since that time, the county transferred all the property to the City of Chula Vista. This brought about more challenges for the club such as having to beat back a move by the city to replace the arena with tennis courts! Hopefully, that is the only bad idea from city hall that will have to be resisted, but attention to its development plans is always a good idea!

It must be noted that the Sunnyside spirit is still alive and well. This past year of 2005 saw the aging buildings given a new lease on life through more volunteer efforts and the generous donations of time, talent, labor, materials and financial contributions from club and community members. It is gratifying that people are still willing to step up and help with such generosity.

In recounting the challenges and travails as well as triumphs of Sunnyside Saddle Club, it is awesome to think that it has been active for over 40 years run solely by volunteers whose common bond has been a passionate love of horses. We are grateful to all those people who put so much time and effort into the club and have kept it going for over four decades even though the trail has been narrow, steep and rocky at times. We are part of something unique, and to paraphrase our unknown historian, "May it live forever!"

