



Green Valley Pecan ▲

Dick & Nan Walden:

FROM PECANS TO PUREBREDS

BY ELLEN MEDLEY WRIGHT • PHOTOS BY ASHLEY GALLÙN

On November 11, the bright Southwestern sun shone on the orchards of the Green Valley Pecan Company as the harvest machinery buzzed to life to accomplish the work of shaking the trees and sweeping the harvest. The 7,000 acres bustled with activity, not only in preparation for the harvest, but as nearly 25,000 guests gathered on the property through the course of the day for the ninth annual Sahuarita Pecan Festival.

The largest grower of pecans in the world, Green Valley Pecan was founded by Keith Walden in 1948 in Arizona. Today, owners/managers Dick and Nan Walden, along with Dick's children Deborah and Rich, and their employees host the event to support local community organizations like food banks, animal shelters, ROTC, 4-H, environmental groups and others. They also introduce their large audience to their other

passion: the Arabian horse. "It's an opportunity for us and our employees and families to have a fun outdoor day and to host the community," says Dick. Attendance is free, and 100 percent of the parking fees this year were donated to the Community Food Bank. Charities are rotated each year in order to help more organizations.

The day opened with a flyover by the 162nd Wing from the Air National Guard. Later, there were horse-drawn wagon rides into the orchard to watch the pecan harvest demonstration. Other activities included a pecan cracking contest, a tractor pull, face painting, jumping castles, climbing walls, a petting zoo and veteran recognition events. Local artists and food vendors set up shop, and guests perused their wares. Such a large event requires a full-time employee, Paula Beemer, whose primary job is to plan and execute the festival.

Bales of hay allocated space for the Waldens' Arabian and Half-Arabian horses to give demonstrations during the day and educate festival goers about the breed. Dick and Nan have a genuine

passion for sharing the Arabian horse and finding ways to enhance exposure at a grassroots level. As time-consuming as hosting the festival is, it was clear how important this effort is to the couple. They took time not only to present their own horses during the parade, but to talk about them and answer questions.

As horses in every discipline imaginable—from sidesaddle, to hunter, to trail, to endurance—performed for the impressive crowd, spectators learned about Arabian traits, colors and divisions. Nan gave a speech about affordable ways to make riding horses possible, discussing options like leasing and group lessons, and she reminded her listeners that it is never too late to get started, as she didn't buy her first horse until she was around 50 years old. She also presented her Half-Arabian pinto gelding Stars And Stripes SF++/, who is a multi-National Champion in Trail, as an English trail horse.



▲ Nan Walden and Stars And Stripes SF give a demonstration



▲ Agracie Girl V+++// greets the crowd at the Pecan Festival with trainer Amanda Bordin

The Southern Arizona Arabian Horse Association (SAAHA) helped present the Arabian parade during the festival and had a booth set up with literature about the Arabian horse. A dozen volunteers, organized by president Marilou Balloun, handed out ribbons to the kids. The Waldens were extremely appreciative of SAAHA's support, which has been at the festival for seven years.

Both horses and farming run through Dick's veins. Farmers Investment Co., the parent of Green Valley Pecan, has been family-owned and operated since 1937. Dick's father, Keith Walden, planted the pecan trees with his brother-in-law in the mid-60s, the first farm to grow commercial pecans in Arizona. Dick and his brother grew up performing every job on the farm. Soon after they married, Nan joined the business as in-house counsel, and both Dick's children work full-time in the business. Their 13-year-old grandson, Will, worked this past summer on the farm, so that makes four generations. They have many second- and third-generation employees as well.

Dick has been riding since he was 4, getting his start with Quarter Horses. His passion for the Working Western, Trail and Sport Horse divisions stems from his lifelong appreciation of working horses.

Dick and Nan did not get involved in the Arabian breed until later in life. Nan had always wanted a horse, but had never had the property or been in the right place. After she married Dick,



▲ A new Arabian horse lover

she also rode a Quarter Horse, and when that horse passed away, she told Dick she wanted an Arabian. Nan discovered Sheila Varian, and when Dick heard Sheila talk about training technique, he was captivated; she was speaking his language, and the rest was history.

Kaypasa V was the first Arabian the Waldens bought, and they have successfully bred the beautiful Desperado V daughter numerous times at their Rancho Soñado, 20 minutes from Green Valley Pecan. "She was so incredibly beautiful to me," Nan recalls. "She had this long mane and tail. She looked like a carousel horse and was a bright blood bay. We bought her the first day, and Sheila, being the good marketer that she was, would bring out the sold horses and show them, and she said, 'This mare has been sold to that weeping woman in the corner.' And I was! I just couldn't believe that we had a horse that beautiful. And now we have a barn full of them, and Dick is the biggest advocate for Arabians and Half-Arabians."

Dick and Nan became regulars at the Varian sales. That is where they found Agracie Girl V+++//, who is now a multi-National Champion. Nan was captivated by her from the moment she saw her. "She was black with a perfect cross diamond on her forehead, and she was so affectionate and so trusting and so people-oriented," Nan remembers. "She would stick her head out of the 'V' and want to be pet and nuzzle in your arms. She just was an incredibly social horse. Then, when I saw her move, she was so beautiful. She had elasticity in her trot, and the way that her shoulder was set in and her neck tied into her shoulder, she just had this beautiful, oily movement that was athletic and feminine at the same time. I just had a feeling about her."

Nan attributes her special mare's temperament to "generations of good breeding." She knows that the temperament of Agracie Girl's wonderful sire and dam, Sundance Kid V and Amazing Grace V, are the reasons her mare can perform at the highest level and also be perfectly gentle as she greets the young children who crowd around to touch her at the Pecan Festival. After navigating some trail obstacles, Agracie Girl demonstrated the Arabian's wonderful temperament as she stood quietly with ears perked as throngs of children and adults gathered around her to pet her face and sides.

Inspired by horses like Agracie Girl and programs like Sheila Varian's, Dick and Nan are committed to breeding quality Arabian horses that are suitable for competition and companionship. The horses bred by Rancho Soñado are of the highest quality; in addition to being beautiful, they are athletic and functional, and they represent the best bloodlines of the breed. Furthermore, the Waldens continue to be committed to sharing the Arabian horse with all they meet. They do so in a way that is accessible and fun, making them an invaluable asset to the Arabian industry. By using one passion as a platform for another, they expose new people to the Arabian horse on a scale no other individuals can claim. **NH**

2017 SAHUARITA PECAN FESTIVAL

