

= Sheila Varian =

Sheila Varian (August 8 , 1937 ? March 6 , 2016) was a breeder of Arabian horses who lived and worked at the Varian Arabians Ranch near Arroyo Grande , California . She grew up with a strong interest in horses , and was mentored in horsemanship by Mary " Sid " Spencer , a local rancher and Morgan horse breeder who also introduced Varian to the vaquero or " Californio " tradition of western riding . She started her horse ranch , Varian Arabians , in 1954 with the assistance of her parents . Raising and training horses was her full @-@ time occupation beginning in 1963 . She used vaquero @-@ influenced methods of training horses , although she adapted her technique over the years to fit the character of the Arabian horse , which she viewed as a horse breed requiring a smart yet gentle approach .

Varian produced a number of influential Arabian horses whose bloodlines are found in a significant number of winning Arabian show horses in the United States . She began her breeding program with a small number of mares whom she bred to her national champion stallion , Bay Abi . She then acquired three mares from Arabian farms in Poland at a time when that nation was still behind the Iron Curtain and importation of horses to the United States was very difficult . These mares and Bay Abi formed her foundation bloodstock . As of 2016 , the Varian horses at stud represent the sixth generation of her stallion breeding line , and her foundation mare lines have produced nine generations of offspring . For her accomplishments , Varian received recognition from the United States Equestrian Federation , as well as several awards from various organizations within the Arabian horse industry . For her contributions as breeder and as a horse trainer in the vaquero tradition , she was inducted into the National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame in 2003 .

After she was diagnosed with ovarian cancer in 2013 , she sought to place the 230 @-@ acre Varian Ranch into a conservation easement to protect the land from development , and in 2015 announced that the California Rangeland Trust would partner with her to purchase the development rights and to allow her long @-@ time ranch manager , Angela Alvarez , to operate the horse breeding program after Varian . After Alvarez , the property would be gifted to the Trust to be sold , the conservation easement running with the land , and the Trust would try to find a buyer that would maintain the Arabian horse breeding program as well . Varian died on March 6 , 2016 at age 78 .

= = Early years = =

Varian grew up in Halcyon , California with a strong interest in horses , combined with a fondness for horse books such as the works of Marguerite Henry and The Black Stallion series written by Walter Farley . She credited Farley 's books as the origin of her interest in Arabian horses . She was given her first horse , a Morgan @-@ Percheron crossbred , at the age of eight , and rode bareback until she obtained her first saddle at age 12 . Although her parents , Eric and Wenonah Varian , did not have an equestrian background , they always supported her interest in horses , allowing both her and her older sister the freedom to ride horses as much as they wanted . Varian matured to be 6 feet (1 @.@ 8 m) tall , and has stated that while she " struggled " with her height as a young person , she found comfort in riding horses : " all my troubles went away . "

Varian and her parents began using the farm name " Varian Arabians " in 1954 . She credited her parents for helping her believe that she could do whatever she wanted to do and for trusting her own judgement , which gave her confidence in her own ability to work with horses . They worked as a team to build a horse business ; Eric , an electrical contractor , built fences and managed the land , Wenonah studied pedigrees , and Sheila handled the horses . In time , their ranch expanded from 21 to 150 acres . As a young adult , Varian completed college at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo and taught high school physical education for three years , until 1963 , when running the Varian Arabian ranch became her full @-@ time job . The ranch was self @-@ supporting from 1963 on , with the short @-@ term assistance of loans from Sheila 's aunt , Dorothy Varian , which were promptly repaid . Ultimately , the ranch grew to 230 acres .

= = The Varian horses = =

Varian preferred the Arabian breed because " their instinctual interest in and appreciation for people runs deep in their genes . The Arabian 's lightness and responsiveness are wonderful , as is their willingness to be your partner . And ... they are beautiful . Arabian horses have never let me down . " She valued horses with good dispositions and athletic ability as well as attractive appearance . She does not breed Arabians for a specific discipline , instead describes her breeding philosophy as ? consistently continuing to breed for more quality and never losing disposition or athletic ability . ? Following these principles , Varian has produced some of the most influential Arabian stallions in the breed .

When she was young , Varian developed an interest in finding the " perfect " horse . She soon realized that the way to achieve her goal was to begin breeding horses . Her first Arabian was the mare Farlotta (Lotnik x Farza) , obtained in 1952 . Farlotta became a finished spade bit horse who won both stock horse (reining) and western pleasure championships . Although loved and cared for by Varian , the mare had been neglected in her first two years prior to being purchased by Varian , and as a result of underlying health damage died at the age of seven .

In 1959 , Varian and her mother Wenonah purchased a two @-@ year @-@ old bay stallion named Bay @-@ Abi (Errabi x Angyl) . Trained and shown by Varian , he was the judges ' unanimous choice for U.S. National Champion Arabian Stallion in 1962 , later won U.S. National Top Ten awards in both Arabian English pleasure and Western pleasure , and thereafter was awarded the Legion of Merit . Even though he was not bred to any mares until after he was fully trained , and thus his first foals did not appear in the show ring until he was 7 , he sired 275 registered Arabians , including 65 champions and 24 national winners .

By 1961 , Varian Arabians had a small number of mares . The most notable of her early champions was Ronteza , a daughter of the stallion Witez II out of the mare Ronna . Ronteza was the second Arabian Varian purchased , and she trained the mare herself . The pair , undefeated in competition against other Arabian horses , went on to beat 50 horses of all breeds to win the 1961 Reined Cow Horse championship at the Cow Palace in San Francisco , California . Varian was aware that both Farlotta and Ronteza were sired by stallions imported from Poland , out of American @-@ bred mares , and believed this bloodline cross was a major source for the good qualities of these mares . Thus , Varian looked for Polish @-@ bred Arabian mares to breed to her American @-@ bred Bay @-@ Abi . However , Poland was at that time an Iron Curtain nation , and importing horses from there directly to America was quite complicated .

To accomplish her goal , Varian sought the assistance of British horse breeder Patricia Lindsay , who traveled to Poland and purchased three mares on Varian 's behalf . The mares arrived in California in December 1961 . They were Bachantka (sired by Wielki Szlem out of Balalajka , who was by Amurath Sahib) , purchased from the Albigowa stud ; Ostroga (Duch x Orda by Omar 11) , from the Nowy Dwór stud ; and Naganka (Bad Afas x Najada by Fetysz) , from the Michalow stud . Bachantka and Naganka had been trained and raced in Poland . Bachantka had a record of 2 / 15 (0 @-@ 1 @-@ 3) , and Naganka a record of 2 / 12 (3 @-@ 4 @-@ 1) . After her arrival in the USA , Bachantka also had a brief but successful horse show career .

Crossing Bay @-@ Abi on these imported Polish mares proved particularly successful for Varian . As of 2016 , the Varian ranch bred nine generations of horses descended from these foundation mares , and stood six successive generations of stallions descended from Bay Abi . The cross produced , among other champions , Varian 's successor to Bay @-@ Abi , the 1969 colt Bay el Bey (Bay Abi x Naganka) , who was U.S. Reserve National Champion stallion twice , 1977 Canadian National Champion stallion , and a regional champion in English pleasure . At the time , the Arabian industry had little interest in western disciplines , so Varian competed with her horses in English riding classes . Of Bay el Bey , she commented , " He could easily have been an open reining horse , but I made him into an English pleasure horse because he could do it , he was so athletic . " Her English champions also included Bay el Bey 's full brother , Mikado , a gray stallion who was a champion park horse .

Bay el Bey was best known for his offspring , who collectively earned him the nickname , " The Kingmaker . " He sired 441 foals including three sons considered his finest : his own successor at

Varian Arabians , Huckleberry Bey (whose dam was Taffona , a daughter of Raffon) ; U.S. Reserve National Champion Bey Shah (out of Star of Ofir , who was by Bask) ; and Barbary (out of Balalinka (Bask x Bachantka)) , who won a total of seven national titles in halter and park horse competition . Barbary was purchased from Varian as a yearling by film producer and Arabian owner Mike Nichols . These three sons of Bay el Bey alone sired a combined total of 650 champions .

Subsequent generations of Varian stallions continued the pattern of winning in the show ring and then producing champion show horses across multiple disciplines . Huckleberry Bey was 1979 U.S. National Reserve Champion Futurity Stallion , 1981 U.S. National Top Ten Stallion , and 1984 U.S. National Reserve Champion English Pleasure . He then became the leading sire of US National Champions for five years , and in 1999 his likeness was reproduced as a Breyer horse model . In turn , his son , Desperado V (x Daraska by Dar) became a leading sire of champions . In 2004 and 2005 , Desperado V was ranked the leading Arabian sire by the United States Equestrian Federation (USEF) , and was second in 2008 and 2009 . By 2009 , Desperado V had sired 75 national winners . In addition , another Huckleberry Bey son , Bravado Bey V (x Bachista V) was USEF 's 10th @-@ ranked leading Arabian sire in 2008 .

In 2010 , of the top 25 leading sires of winning Arabian dressage horses since 1960 , Desperado V was ranked number 2 (following Khemosabi) , Bey Shah was number 4 , Huckleberry Bey was tied for fifth , and Barbary was also on the list , in addition to five other grandsons of Bay El Bey .

Over the years , she made use of outside bloodlines . She leased the young , then unproven stallion Khemosabi for his first breeding season in 1969 . She also made use of horses owned by other ranches , such as the Polish import Bask , whom she linebred to his 3 / 4 sister , Varian 's Polish import Bachantka , producing another significant foundation mare , Balalinka , dam of Barbary . In 2002 , requiring an outcross stallion not closely related to her own horses , she purchased the Brazilian @-@ foaled Jollyen El Jamaal , who has bloodlines not previously incorporated into the Varian program , as well as a line tracing back to Bay el Bey via Bey Shah . Varian continued to seek performance ability in her mares ; in the Varian program , every mare is trained under saddle and must prove suitable as a riding animal .

Varian did not originally work her ranch name into the names of her horses , but today all Varian @-@ bred horses have a registered name suffixed with the capital letter " V " . The Varian ranch also acknowledges the importance of the mares by using the first letter of each mare 's name to start the name of their foals . Varian @-@ bred horses are freeze branded with the Varian " V " logo .

= = Training philosophy and vaquero tradition = =

Vaqueros were the horsemen and cattle herders of Spanish Mexico , who first came to California with the Jesuit priest Eusebio Kino in 1687 , with two expeditions in 1769 , and the Juan de Anza expedition in 1774 . They were the first cowboys in the region . She learned horse training methods that derived from this tradition . In her teens , she was mentored in horsemanship by Morgan horse breeder and cattle rancher Mary " Sid " Spencer . The Spencer property , called Forsyth Ranch , was near Arroyo Grande on land that is now under Lopez Lake . Spencer helped Varian learn the underlying principles of training and riding horses , how to work cattle in the mountains , and introduced her to vaquero training methods . Spencer also did all of her own ranch work including shoeing , gelding , horse training , baling hay , and truck repairs . She learned how to handle well @-@ trained horses by riding one of the Spencer family 's finished Morgans , a gelding named Little Horse . With Spencer 's help , she also learned to recognize correct conformation and balance in horses .

After learning traditional vaquero methods of training from Spencer and others , Varian modified her training methods in her twenties , after meeting Tom Dorrance . He introduced her to his ' soft approach ' of working with horses , and his methods were an additional influence on Varian 's training philosophy . Varian utilized vaquero @-@ influenced methods in training her horses , but believed that modern well @-@ bred horses need a gentler approach , stating , ' All good horses , like smart children , need good instruction , but they don 't need harsh instruction . '

Varian was one of a very few experts in the 21st century who was still teaching about vaquero equipment , methods , and history . She had a strong interest in the history of the spade bit horse in California . The spade is an elaborate , complex bit that can only be properly used on a highly trained horse handled by a skilled rider . In the vaquero tradition , its use represents the highest level of trust and communication between horse and rider . The process of training the spade bit horse takes five to seven years to complete . Its emphasis has always been on producing a finely tuned working horse and partner , emphasizing quality rather than on how quickly the goal is reached . The conformation of the horse is also a factor ; to become a spade bit horse , the animal must be bred to have a higher neck set and well @-@ carried head . Varian compared the ride and handling of a horse trained in this manner to that of a Jaguar automobile .

Traditionally , the vaquero method starts a young horse using a hackamore , which is headgear that uses a heavy rawhide noseband , called a bosal instead of a bit to control the horse . As the horse gains skill with a rider , it moves to lighter bosals , and next into a transitional period in its training ; carrying a bridle with a type of curb bit called a " half breed " which is a modified spade bit worn in conjunction with a light bosal . The rider carries two sets of reins , one set on the bosal and one on the curb , giving this gear its name , the " two @-@ rein . " After several years in a two @-@ rein , the horse graduates into the spade bit .

Varian departed slightly from tradition . She started young horses under saddle at the age of three , beginning with a bridle and a snaffle bit because it sends clearer signals to a young horse , particularly one of sensitive disposition . She then introduced the traditional hackamore , and , after a couple of months to transition between the hackamore and the snaffle , began teaching neck reining , which allows a horse to be ridden one @-@ handed . After a year or two , when the horse became light in the hackamore , she introduced the young horse to the two @-@ rein , using a light bosal with either a " half @-@ breed " or a low @-@ port curb bit . Once the horse understood the bit , the bosal was removed and the horse was ridden in just the curb bit for a while until ready to go into the full spade bit , at which point the horse went back into the two @-@ rein when the spade is first introduced . She introduced horses to the spade bit at the age of seven or eight , if they had suitable conformation and temperament to carry it . When she selected and fully trained a spade bit horse for her own personal use , that particular horse stayed with her for life and was never sold .

Varian considered Arabians the most " people @-@ oriented " of any horse breed . " No other horse will leave his food to come and see you . " Noting that they are a " hot @-@ blooded " breed , she viewed them as sensitive horses that will not tolerate harsh handling , but strongly disagreed with those who considered Arabians to be too high @-@ spirited to be good trail horses . She emphasized teaching horses to have good manners . She roped off of her horses and took them into the mountains .

She viewed Arabians as requiring a smart and gentle approach . She advocated for trainers who used the methods of master horsemen such as Ray Hunt and Tom Dorrance , with Dorrance 's philosophy being especially suitable for Arabians . She considered the breed to be inherently gentle , and pointed out that any horse can become " hot " if they are kept in a stall 24 hours a day , fed a lot of grain , and never ridden . Varian explained the nature of Arabian horses by analogy , comparing them to precocious children who show their ability with delight , but cannot be bullied or pushed around .

= = Legacy and awards = =

The Varian Arabian Ranch has been ranked multiple times as one of the leading Arabian breeders of winning horses by the United States Equestrian Federation (USEF) , which since 2004 has ranked breeders based on points earned by horses shown in sanctioned USEF competitions . The ranch was first in calendar year 2008 , and in the top ten from 2006 through 2010 . In 2013 , the Varian breeding program was ranked by Arabian Horse World magazine as the all time number one breeder of both English @-@ type and Western @-@ type Arabian horses . Sheila Varian as an individual was honored by the USEF with the 2001 Ellen Scripps Davis Memorial Breeders ? Cup , awarded to an individual who consistently breeds outstanding show horses . Within the Arabian

industry itself , Varian was honored in 2005 with the Arabian Breeders Association 's lifetime achievement award , and was the Arabian Professional & Amateur Horseman 's Association 2009 Breeder of the Year .

Varian was inducted into the Cowgirl Hall of Fame in 2003 . She was honored for both her contributions as a horse breeder and as a trainer , but the honor represented , in many ways , her roots in the vaquero tradition . Other inductees that year included western artist Glenna Goodacre ; musician , artist , cowboy poet and pickup rider Ann Secrest Hanson ; and classic cowgirl trick rider and barrel racer Velda Tindall Smith (1908 ? 1990) .

In November 2015 , Varian announced that she would be working with the California Rangeland Trust to place her ranch into a conservation easement to protect it from development . She had begun the project with the intent that her longtime ranch manager , Angela Alvarez , would operate the horse breeding program after Varian was no longer able to do so , and then once Alvarez was no longer able to run the ranch , the property would be gifted to the Trust to be sold , the conservation easement running with the land , and attempts made to find a buyer that would also be interested in maintaining the Arabian horse breeding program .

Varian was diagnosed with ovarian cancer in 2013 and died on March 6 , 2016 , at the age of 78 . At news of her death , the web site for the California Rangeland Trust crashed due to the high amount of web traffic , necessitating supporters of the trust to set up a backup crowdfunding site for donations to the conservation effort .