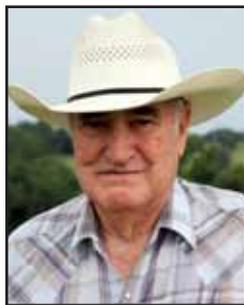


The Boss Men: A tribute to Bill Sanders

by Freda Cruse Phillips



Bill Sanders

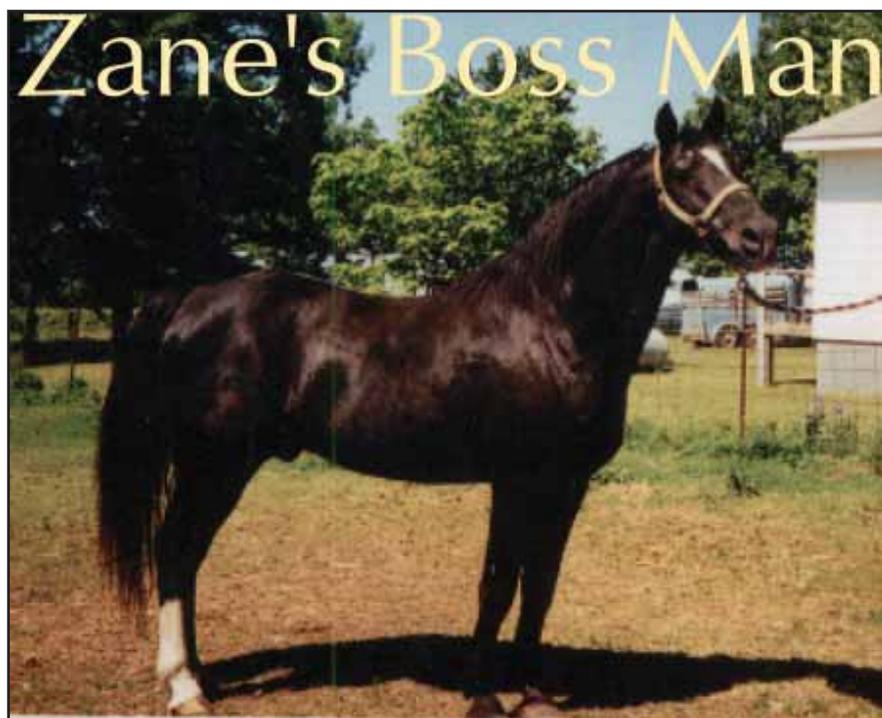
It was a beautiful fall afternoon and the drive a much welcomed reprieve from the hustle and bustle of the MFTHBA Fall Show. I had mentioned to a couple of the locals that I was going down to talk with Bill Sanders, and a gentle and knowing smile

time, then “people pushed on into the hills building houses, and then the county took over taking care of the road. This ole earth ain’t good for raising much ’cept kids and hogs,” Bill said. “Not horses?” I asked. “Oh, they need a place to run free, to be who they really are. This is their kind of place, and mine.”

“I worked for a dollar a day taking care of hogs to buy my first horse,” Bill said. “Saved up \$20 to buy her, then it was another \$10 to register

her. My dad wouldn’t let me spend money on something so useless, so I never got her registered. I was 14 and that was 1948, the year the Missouri Fox Trotters Horse Breed Association got its start.”

After spending a spell up north driving a truck, making a living and raising a family, Bill and his late wife, Maxine, found their way back home to the Ozarks where \$600 bought the first 40 acres of land. Bill managed to buy another 40



acres to add to his farm, which remains an 80-acre farm to this day. Bill tells me about the fox trotters and how it was their versatility that set them apart; that incredible ability to place their back feet exactly where their front ones had just been gave them the surefooted dexterity in maneuvering and traversing the rugged Ozark Mountains. He explains that they are named after the fox, who does exactly the same thing with his feet.

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would come over their faces. Finally asking about it, I was told, “Bill’s a true horseman, rough and strong, perhaps harsh when he needs to be, kind and gentle when it’s called for. He’s a horseman, someone who can really communicate with them.” It sounded a lot like the hands of a loving guiding parent. I found myself humming the words, “Daddy’s hands weren’t always gentle but I’ve come to understand, there was always love in Daddy’s hands.”

The sun was beginning to sink in the sky over the mountains of the Missouri Ozarks as I arrived at Bill’s house outside of Gainesville. Bill and his wife were waiting on my arrival like you’d wait on a good friend whom you’ve not seen in a long time, friendly hello’s, pats on the shoulders, hugs, food and drink.

Bill told me the dirt road that ended in his front yard was the way it had been for a long

Patterson remembers Sanders and Boss Man

I can’t think of the late Zane’s Boss Man without thinking of the Missouri Fox Trotters Hall of Famer Bill Sanders. An acquaintance back then, now a dear friend, Don Morgan, from Wichita Falls, Texas, took me with him on a trip to southern Missouri which he often took in the spring and fall of the year. Driving up the gravel road to Bill’s home situated on 80 acres of beautiful Ozark Mountain land just outside of Gainesville, I vividly remember the first time I saw Zane’s Boss Man. He greeted us running along the fence line in his hopes that this arriving trailer might be holding his next breed mate. The excitement and anticipation that he embodied couldn’t help but spill over to everything and everyone around him.

Over the following years I was a frequent visitor at Bill Sanders’ home in the mountains, where Zane’s Boss Man always greeted us with the same enthusiasm as the very first time. He was a sight to behold and one that I must admit I looked forward to with excitement. What an addiction for Bill Sanders and that horse that I developed. Bill, Boss Man and I developed a special bond with each other, a cherished bond. We tried repeatedly to breed Boss Man to just that right mare, in hopes of one of them would produce a great Boss Man son. Bill had a horse on hand, Cookies and Creme, that finally got the job done, producing Boss’ Midnight Cash, who is proudly carrying on the Boss Man legacy.

My addiction became a passion to own Zane Gray’s great son, Boss Man. I inquired about him often. In order to be the proud owner

of this great line of horses, I told Bill to offer his owners X dollars. They took it, I’m sure thinking I was crazy, even an idiot perhaps. When I told my wife, she thought the same. This was an ownership I will never regret. It was an honor to own the great Boss Man.

Three years into my ownership he developed ring bone. We worked with multiple efforts and endeavors to rid his pain. At times we saw improvement, especially during breeding season; Boss Man just had a tendency to forget his pain during that time anyway. That excitement and anticipation, that eagerness, it never left him.

I remember the morning Bill called me to tell me Zane’s Boss Man was having trouble getting up due to his pain. He conveyed to me in tears that February day that “it’s time.” Bill loved Boss. I knew he knew what was best. I said yes, in tears. His grave was dug. Boss Man was led to his tomb and lay down beside his resting place. At the home of Bill Sanders the great Zane’s Boss Man lies today at a spot just beyond the trees, in the open field just in sight of the gravel road.

Today his son, Boss’ Midnight Cash, carries on his legacy. With three world championship model awards, it is a proud honor owning both of these amazing horses and having had the opportunity to become friends with Bill Sanders, the real “Boss Man.” He is a wonderful person, a dear friend and I’m indebted to Don Morgan for introducing us.

Harry Patterson
Wichita Falls, Texas

Sanders tribute

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People in all walks of life rode the fox trotter; this horse could be pretty on Sunday, pulling the buggy in to church, and then rugged and steady as it moved logs out of the hills, tilled the gardens and fields.

“People have logged these hills, mined some, tried raising cattle, even cotton and strawberries, row crops of all kinds, mostly to feed their families, a little to sell when they can.”

Bill speaks with the authority of a man who knows that working hard simply isn't always enough. Life deals us hard blows, knocks us off our feet. Faith in God and oneself is all that we have at night to give us reason to wake in the morning, to keep breathing, to keep living.

“God will know when he's through with us,” Bill offers. “I guess he ain't through with me yet.”

Bill then launches off into a story about how Boss Man was every bit the horse his daddy, Zane Grey, was. He laughed about how when Zane's Boss Man heard the trailers coming up the dirt road, he would get excited, running the fence line, watching, knowing he was about to “get 'im some.”

“He was trained. He was patient. He would not mount those mares until I said so, then he'd do his business and they could load up their mares and head home. Boss Man and me, we might take a ride out into the fields. It might have been him that got a little, but it's a sight to see if you ain't never been around horses when they mate up. Boss Man, he was a lady's man, he would nuzzle up to them and flirt, get 'em ready he would. They would be all but down waiting on him. If he didn't like the way they looked, you might as well not bother unloading. He had his type, just like his daddy did. It's true. Don't know that I ever really understood what that type was, but you knew it as soon as they unloaded. He'd just ignore 'em or he'd be right up in their business rubbing heads, smelling 'em out, getting 'em ready.”

Recovering from recent back surgery, getting around is difficult for Bill. As he talked about Boss Man it was clear he had lost a creature he loved dearly, a friend that he had shared 20 years with. They had an understanding, Bill said. “Kinda like a kid; they know when they've done bad when they see that look on your face, just like they know they done good. Boss Man, he had the looks, I knew when he was unhappy with me, as if it was my fault somehow that this mare wasn't his type. There wasn't nothin' you could do 'cept take 'em home.”

Trainer Steve Atkisson handles Boss' Midnight Cash, son of Zane's Boss Man. Cash is carrying on his sire's tradition, having won three world champion model titles.

Bill had to ride out to the field driven by his wife, Regina, to where Boss Man lies buried. First his wife bends and cleans the stone with a soft cloth. The black marble shines in the warm setting September sun. Bill looks fragile against the skyline, a big man with an even bigger heart. Tears fill his eyes as he tells me about the day they had to put Boss Man down.



Bill Sanders stands by the grave of Zane's Boss Man, the stallion he loved for 20 years.

“The man with the backhoe showed up before the vet. When the hole was dug, Boss Man made his way out to the hole, stood there a bit and then laid down right next to it, as if to say, ‘I'm ready,’” Bill said, wiping a tear from his eye. “The back hoe fella, he was a rather harsh man, but by the time the doc got here to put him down, he was feeling it, too. This was a magnificent creature and just like some people who are ready to meet their maker, well, Boss Man was in such pain around his ankles, he couldn't stand or walk much, but I know if we had brought him a mare to breed, he'd have done it. He was ready, pain was no problem, if she was his type.”

Bill's wife places red roses on either side of the black marble headstone. The grass is green. The sky is blue. It's a striking fall day. I think I hear the soft whinny of an anxious mare, the snort of a knowing Boss Man and the soft whisper of a man who has buried part of his heart here. Bill stands alone, not wiping away the tears, as I take his picture.

