

# Chapter 2 Lightning in a Bottle:

# The Story of Chinook Pass

by John Loftus

*As I continue to move this story forward, it occurs to me that perhaps I should've named the series The Life and Times of Chinook Pass instead of just The Story of Chinook Pass. As is so often true when writing about horseracing, the path that leads us to the epic tale we came to tell – in this case the Eclipse Award season of the great Chinook Pass – is paved with fascinating details.*

*The current chapter continues to lay groundwork, describing the times and people of a bygone era that is still well remembered by veteran horsemen but may be new to many of the younger folk. As this episode concludes, the stage is nearly set for the entry of the living comet we know as Chinook Pass. We'll get this horse to the racetrack in the next installment – I promise!*

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Thursday, April 9, 1959, was pretty much a day like any other in Seattle. The front page of the *Seattle Times* reported that the first seven astronauts had been selected for the US space program. The death of legendary architect Frank Lloyd Wright was also noted. A few pages in, there was an article about bids being let for the construction of the 45th and 50th Street on-ramps to I-5, which was still very much a work in progress.

It was on the front page of the second section that the previous night's fire at the WHBA's Horseshoe Club was reported. A photo taken from inside the smoldering ruin showed silhouetted firemen picking through the charred remnants of its posh furnishings as onlookers stared in from the street through a gaping broken window.

The Horseshoe Club, which featured fine dining, a bar, a cocktail lounge with classy entertainment, gambling, and – last but not least – the offices of the Washington Horse Breeders Association and its magazine, *The Washington Horse*, was no more.

Since its inception in the 1940's, the Horseshoe Club had been an incredible cash cow for the horsemen. Like many private clubs in the Seattle area, it was founded at a time when selling liquor by the drink was still illegal in Washington. Private clubs, ostensibly set up as not-for-profit organizations, were allowed to sell set-up beverages to patrons who brought their own bottles. Years later, these restrictions were eased to allow for full-service cocktail lounges, which made such clubs even more profitable.

Only the most limited forms of gambling

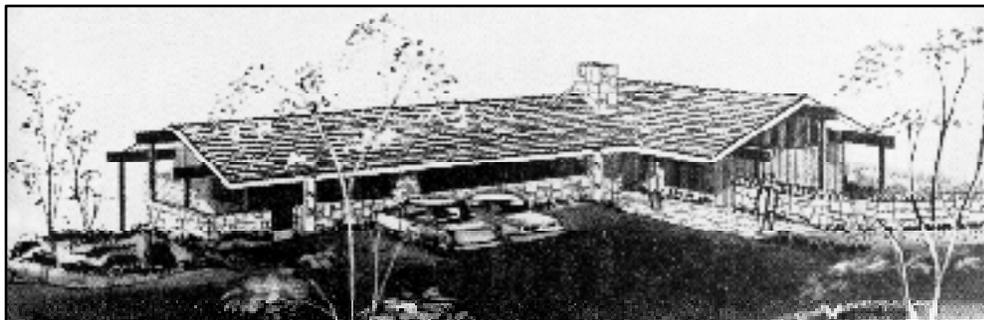
were legal in the state, but under so-called "tolerance" policies many local governments looked the other way as gaming pursuits, including slot machines, were featured in club shoving their right connections. Needless to say, this could be very lucrative. Although public corruption was rampant by today's standards, such activities were so commonplace that they were an accepted part of the fabric of life in mid-20th Century Seattle. No one thought much about it.

It was probably no accident that the club, located at the corner of 15th Ave. NW and N. 85th Street in Crown Hill, was literally across the street from the Seattle city limits in what was then unincorporated King County. This area was later annexed into the

fine dining establishment and cocktail lounge, the club had also housed the WHBA offices. It took about an hour to drive the 20+ miles to Longacres in those pre-freeway days, and many on the board favored relocating the headquarters much closer to the racetrack. This sentiment carried the day and soon an architect was designing a functional new headquarters in the modernistic Northwest style that was so popular in the 1950's and '60's.

"For the first time since the organization of the association, we will be housed in efficient quarters designed especially for its needs," Ed Heinemann wrote.

The new facility was located at 13470 Empire Way – which was also called the



*Artist's rendering for the new WHBA facility on Empire Way, which also heralded in a new direction for the association.*

city, which also followed a tolerance policy, but was more susceptible to waves of reform. Gordon Clinton, a reformer who pledged to eradicate gambling and vice, was mayor at the time of the fire and, as the city pointed itself toward a sparkling 21st Century symbolized by the Jetsonesque 1962 World's Fair, it became increasingly clear that Seattle's days as a wide-open town were in full retreat.

## A New Direction

During its 15 years or so of existence, the Horseshoe Club had become a staple of Seattle society, attracting not only horsemen, but also many others that were happy to pay the \$15 membership fee to enjoy its benefits, including many "who's-who" types. Some of these people actually got into racing through their associations with horsemen at the club, but many were just there for the social scene and nightlife.

Now that the club was gone, however, a debate that had been going on for some time came to a head. The question was: to rebuild, or not to rebuild? More than just a

Dunlap Canyon Road in those days. The new structure featured a full-length back deck that overlooked a pleasant little valley where horses and other livestock grazed, as well as a spacious board room with a large stone fireplace. Best of all, it was just minutes from the track.

(This structure is now the headquarters of Families First of Washington and, except for wear, looks much the same as it did when first constructed nearly a half century ago. The address is now 13470 Martin Luther King Way.)

The shift in direction away from entertainment and toward horsemanship left quite a number of members that were in the club for social reasons high and dry, so a committee of six was formed to help find alternative club "homes" for them. Total membership had been about 500-600, and many dropped out after the demise of the Horseshoe Club, but in the next few years the instincts of those that had advocated for the organization's new exclusively-equine focus were vindicated when membership nearly tripled.

## A New Generation

As noted in the previous chapter, a young fellow from Rainier Valley named Ralph Vacca signed on as the WHBA's new field man in the spring of '59, his hiring being noted in the same edition of *The Washington Horse* that reported the fire at the club.

Young Ralph, a city boy, had always dreamed of a career in horse racing. After graduating from high school he enrolled in the pre-veterinary program at Washington State College (now WSU). Wanting to be closer to the action, he wrote many letters seeking any kind of job in Kentucky. He got just one reply, but it was very good one. It was from Charlie Kenney, manager of Stoner Creek Stud near Paris, Kentucky, who told him that if he "wasn't afraid of hard work, long hours and no pay," he'd give him a chance.

For the next three years, Vacca worked side-by-side with the veteran farm manager, with stints each fall in the training barn of fabled Claiborne Farm, located just across the creek. Coming back home to Seattle in 1959 as its new field director, Vacca worked out of the WHBA's headquarters upstairs at the old Horseshoe Club for just a short time before it burned down. Then, along with fellow staffers Ed Heinemann, Clio Hogan and Lola Tyson, he relocated to the new temporary headquarters at 14643 Pacific Highway, near SeaTac Airport.

The WHBA had built up a sizeable nest egg during its night club days; plus, there was insurance money, so it had no trouble financing the construction of a new headquarters and, in fact, didn't need to worry too much about money for years to come.

Vacca gained valuable experience working side-by-side with the veterans on the WHBA staff, as well as magazine contributors like Pete Pedersen, who was then publicity director for Longacres. He parleyed that experience into job offers back in racing's heartland, returning to Kentucky to work first for the *Thoroughbred Record* and then the *Daily Racing Form*.

During this time Vacca was able to help out a young veterinarian named Bud Hallowell, who he'd known slightly while going to school at Pullman. Bud was uprooting his young family to take advantage of a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to assist in the practice of renowned equine vet Bill McGee of the firm of Hagyard, Davidson and McGee. They needed a place to stay while in Lexington and Ralph was able to set them up in a trailer park near the legendary Red Mile racetrack.

"It was all Standardbred people there, and they treated us real nice," Bud's wife, Pat, remembers.

By 1964 – the year Northern Dancer won the Kentucky Derby according to Vacca's way of reckoning time – both he and the Hallowells were back in Seattle. Ralph came back as advertising manager for *The*



*Washington Horse*. Within a few years he would become its editor, and then the WHBA's general manager. Hallowell would successfully pursue his goal of building an exclusively equine veterinary practice.

While the veteran horsemen were still its bedrock, the influence of this younger generation began to move the association in new and innovative directions. In addition to handling legislative matters, breeders' awards, farm visits and other traditional services, a vigorous array of new programs were also introduced, including horsemen's short courses, a youth project, grooming clinics and press tours of farms.

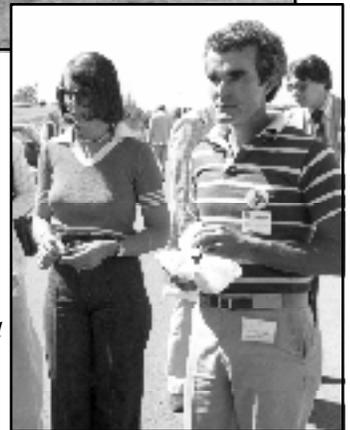
Taking a page from the Alhadeffs, the WHBA even started organizing art shows. During this time luminaries of the horse racing world such as Dr. Bill McGee, famed trainer LeRoy Jolley and Secretariat's owner, Penny Chenery, were brought to the Pacific Northwest to hobnob with local horsemen.

A.E. Penney, one of the WHBA's founders, passed on and grandson Jim took over the reins of the family's venerable Naches farm, expanding the operation and racking up training titles. Jim's younger brother Bob, sporting a brand-new DVM degree, appeared on the scene during this time and soon became a dynamic creative force in the industry.

Those who knew the late Dr. Bob Penney marvel at the energy he put into every project and say that "if Bob could imagine it, he could make it happen." Bob Penney added a new style and flair that seemed to fit the times. Persuading Mickey and Karen Taylor to bring Triple Crown winner Seattle Slew to Longacres in 1977 was pure Bob Penney, and it remains the hat trick for which he is perhaps best remembered. Bob pitched the idea to Longacres' Morrie Alhadeff and together they made it happen.

Many who read this will recall the pomp and ceremony of that July weekend, when a

*Seattle Slew thrilled local fans with his appearance at Longacres in 1977. His appearance was largely orchestrated by Dr. Bob Penney, shown at right with Karen Taylor, who, along with husband Mickey, owned and raced Seattle Slew.*



long line of perhaps 100 horses and riders in full parade regalia led the great champion around the Longacres oval, and how he marched, neck arched proudly, to the winner's circle with the Penneys' faithful stable pony, Copper, at his side.

Finally, after the pandemonium of fans and flashbulbs had sufficiently abated, Slew began his ceremonial victory lap. As he galloped around the far turn and came to the head of the stretch, the crowd rose to its feet. Seattle Slew heard the wild cheering and, in spite of the 140 pounds on his back, dug in, stretched out and finished with gusto as if running for the roses all over again.

Bob Penney had arranged for half of the proceeds of the event to go to equine research. His good friend and fellow vet, Dr. Barrie Grant, was a face in the crowd that day. In his wildest dreams, young Dr. Grant could never have imagined that 23 years later he and the entire staff of his California clinic would be flown to Kentucky by the Taylors to save the life of their legendary stallion using a technique – now known as the Seattle Slew surgery – that was developed in part through the funds raised at Longacres that day in 1977.

## The Blue-Blooded Colt

As the Washington breeding industry continued to improve and expand, the sons of many famed sires were brought to the state for stud duty. Dewaine Moore's Rainier Stables featured Prince o' Morn, son of Round Table; Vitality, son of Nashua; and The Patient, son of Bold Ruler. Ads in *The Washington Horse* noted that the book of Kudu, Hump Roberts' stallion by Swaps, was full. Penney Farms at Naches stood Cold Command, a son of War Admiral and former Kentucky Derby favorite that won over \$200,000 racing in the silks of Cornelius Vanderbilt Whitney, and Rameses, a son of Swaps and full brother to two national champions. Other major farms of the day had fine stallions as well.

But in spite of all this high-class blood flowing into the Northwest, the arrival of Native-Born was still a pretty big deal. The cover of the May 1966 edition of *The Washington Horse* featured a four-panel photo montage of the handsome golden chestnut being lowered from the belly of a United Airlines plane upon his arrival from New York at SeaTac International Airport. Inside the magazine was a four-page story extolling his virtues as an individual and reciting the seemingly endless racing achievements of his parents and their forebears.

Born at Alfred G. Vanderbilt's Sagamore Farm in Maryland, Native-Born was a blue-blooded colt from a blue-blooded farm. He was the son of its star sire, Native Dancer, out of its star broodmare, two-time national champion Next Move, who was by Calumet Farm's legendary Bull Lea.

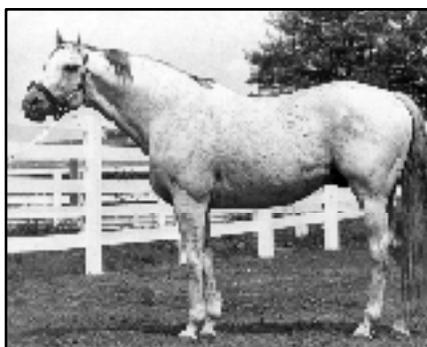
Vanderbilt himself was one of the most illustrious characters in the history of American racing, having come into possession of the Pimlico racetrack at a relatively young age and going on to become head of the New York Racing Association and The Jockey Club during the course of a career that spanned more than six decades. History will probably remember him best as the man who arranged the 1938 Pimlico Special – the match race between Seabiscuit and War Admiral.

Native Dancer, known as the Grey Ghost, was undoubtedly one of the finest racehorses of the 20th Century, and is ranked seventh on the list of Thoroughbred racing's top 100 prepared by *The Blood-Horse*. Undefeated in nine starts at two, he continued his winning ways at three before sustaining the only loss of his career in the 1953 Kentucky Derby. Fighting his way back from last place after being bumped and boxed, he finished second by a gallant neck, wanting a few more strides. Veteran trainer Barclay Tagg famously noted that jockey Eric Guerin had taken him "everywhere on the track except the ladies' room."

Native Dancer would never lose again. He went on to win the Preakness, Belmont and many other top stakes races before foot



*Well-bred Native-Born, sire of Chinook Pass, was brought to Washington in 1966. Native-Born was by one of the finest racehorses of the 20th Century, Native Dancer (lower left), out of "one of the best race mares ever to perform in America," Next Move (lower right).*



and leg injuries forced him into retirement a few races into his four-year-old season. He went to stud with a record of 22 wins and one second in 23 starts.

Although Native Dancer's quality as a sire was not immediately evident, his stature grew enormously with time as descendants such as Northern Dancer, Mr. Prospector and Storm Cat became the super-sires of their eras. Eventually, three in four Thoroughbreds could trace their lines to "The Grey Ghost" and, by 2008, 17 of the previous 20 Kentucky Derby winners would carry his blood in their veins.

*The Washington Horse* described Native-Born's dam, Next Move, as "one of the best race mares ever to perform in America." Blessed with both early speed and staying power, she ran with the finest fillies – and occasionally colts – of her generation, always the high-weight, and more often than not the winner. She retired at five as the third richest distaffer in history, having won the Prioress Stakes, Delaware Oaks, Gazelle Stakes, Beldame Stakes, Ladies Handicap and Vanity Handicap, among others.

And so it was only natural that Mr. Vanderbilt would be eager to breed Next Move with Native Dancer, who was three years her junior. One young prospect resulting from this mating was a colt named Restless Native, who showed promise on the track but was retired to stud duty at three when at endon began to bow.

A barn favorite, Restless Native's first foals were being eagerly awaited at the time Native-Born began his three-year-old campaign. The future sire of Chinook Pass was running in company with the very best sophomores – colts that were being pointed at the Triple Crown classics. If Native-Born was successful, his owner would have to decide which one of Next Move's Native Dancer colts – he or Restless Native – would carry on that particular blood cross in his stallion barn. If Native-Born became a champion, he would likely spend the rest of his life in the prestigious breeding shed of Sagamore Farm. If he wasn't a strong enough runner, he might be sold.

### Western-Bound

Joe Shabaz, a prominent member of the WHBA, came to Ralph Vacca's Empire Way office one spring day in 1966 to ask for his assistance in a confidential matter. Speaking on behalf of undisclosed partners, he inquired as to whether Vacca could use his Eastern connections to secure the purchase of a Native Dancer colt that they could take to the racetrack and later to the breeding shed.

Shabaz had come to the right person. Vacca picked up the phone and dialed up Sagamore Farm, where he was well-acquainted with manager Harold Ferguson. The timing was perfect. Young Native-Born was racing in top company, including the eventual winners of that year's Triple Crown

events; however, although he'd shown blazing speed, it was becoming increasingly clear that he might be lacking the two-turn talents of his famed parents. The speedy chestnut had notched just two wins in eight starts at Aqueduct, Hialeah and Saratoga. There would be no Kentucky Derby for him.

Yes, Native-Born was available, Ferguson told Vacca. Photographs were sent and at op vet checked the young colt out thoroughly for soundness and condition. Shabaz and his partners liked what they saw, and the vetting report showed him to be very sound and fit. Published reports at the time suggested that the undisclosed purchase price for Native-Born was \$35,000, but a \$25,000 figure is the number Vacca recalls today, more than 40 years later. In either case, the son of Native Dancer was soon flying across the continent to his new home.

There are conflicting reports as to who the original partners were as well. Contemporary accounts list Shabaz, Maurice McGrath and Hump Roberts. Later, Joseph E. "Ed" Purvis would say that he, too, was part of the original investor group. We'll take him at his word.

The arrival of Native-Born at Longacres that late April day in 1966 created quite a stir. The new colt went directly to Hump Roberts' barn. He was already in training and his new owners were eager for a race. The Longacres meet began on Memorial Day weekend in those days, so they decided to

point him at the Yakima Valley Derby at Yakima Meadows, scheduled for May 15. Hopefully it would be an easy spot for a horse of his quality.

Three-year-old Native Born was a beautiful animal, *The Washington Horse* reported, describing him as follows: "Physically, Native-Born stands 16.1 and is a very well balanced animal with powerful shoulders, a deep girth and excellent quarters. (He) projects an overall appearance of strength and substance. Alert eyes, masculine and clean head with graceful and powerful neck together with strong and sturdy legs give Native-Born a picture book look."

His owners quickly found out that their new colt could run, but were concerned over reports that he tended to sulk once he got to the front and also could act a bit studdish. But he clearly had the talent, and if trainer Roberts could keep him sound and get him to concentrate on racing they felt they might just have a runner. After all, Mr. Vanderbilt thought enough of the youngster to retain two lifetime breedings, they noted.

Their hopes must've soared on the first Saturday in May of 1966 when a fellow son of Native Dancer named Kauai King won the Kentucky Derby. He and Native-Born were from the same crop of well-bred Eastern colts and had faced one another quite regularly. Kauai King had been unplaced in his two previous starts, so perhaps their new colt might begin to fire as well.

Two weeks later their hopes turned to disappointment when their colt took on a good local field in the Yakima Valley Derby. The 5 1/2 furlong distance should've been ideal, but it wasn't Native-Born's day. *The Washington Horse* reported that he was "off a bit slowly but moved up to Silver Duke at the top of the lane, only to tire slightly." Silver Duke bested him by five lengths in 1:04, a very good time for that track.

In the meantime, Kauai King went on to win the Preakness by nine lengths and then finished third in the Belmont Stakes behind Amberoid, a horse that Native-Born had run well against on several occasions. Hump Roberts began to condition their new hopeful for the Longacres meet and no doubt the owners decided to simply draw a line through the Yakima Derby. Native-Born was something special— he just had to be. 4

*John Loftus is media services director for the Muckleshoot Indian Tribe and has been contributing stories and photos to Washington Thoroughbred since 2005. John has setup an informal "Friends of Chinook Pass" e-mail group for those who have memories to share about the great Eclipse Award-winning champion and his human connections. E-mails received will be shared with all that have joined the group, and also with Chinook and Jill. (Yes Chinook Pass has e-mail!) So let's hear from you! Join the Friends of Chinook Pass e-mail group by writing to: chinook.pass@earthlink.net.*