

# Honor, Glory and the Pursuit...

by Cynthia McFarland

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Motorists driving through Marion County are sure to spy the prominently displayed, scenic billboards which boast that Florida's horses provide 72,000 jobs. The photo in the ads portrays a peaceful group of mares and foals grazing atop a hillside drenched in thousands of wildflowers, the delicate phlox that bring gentle explosions of color to pastures and roadsides in early spring. The scene is an eye-catcher and anyone paying attention who has driven on State Road 200, west of I-75, will recognize where it was photographed. There is poetic justice in the fact that Bonnie Heath Farm, one of the state's oldest and most historic Thoroughbred operations, provided the stunning scenery for this particular billboard campaign.

A weathered sign along that same stretch of State Road 200 proclaims Bonnie Heath Farm as the home of champion Needles. In 2000, forty five years after he won a slew of stakes races - including the Kentucky Derby and Belmont Stakes - and was voted champion for two consecutive years, Needles was at last inducted into the Hall of Fame and enshrined as a member of the National Museum of Racing.

When this long-awaited honor was finally bestowed, it brought smiles to the second generation of Dudleys, Scott and Diane, and to two generations of Heaths: Bonnie Heath, who campaigned Needles in the 1950s with partner Jackson Dudley, and Kim and Bonnie Heath III, who had operated Bonnie Heath Farm since 1991.

Needle's induction into the Hall of Fame unleashed a torrent of happy past memories for the older Heath. For the younger Heaths, it reaffirmed what has kept them in the business through good times and bad: an enduring love of horses.



## Good Memories

Now 84 years old and married to wife Opal for 66 years, the elder Bonnie Heath looks back fondly on memories of the farm and Needles. "The memories and the good times came so fast," he remembers.

It was trainer Hugh Fontaine who bears responsibility for Heath's and Dudley's interest in Thoroughbreds. A former World War I ace pilot, Fontaine had a reputation as a colorful character who lived life to its fullest. Heath and Dudley met Fontaine through yacht broker, Bill Gould, in Ft. Lauderdale in the early 1950s.

The first horse owned by the partnership of Heath and Dudley, who raced as D & H Stables, was a \$10,000 claimer named Foster Son. "We did pretty well, but we had nothing of quality until Needles," remembers Heath. "We didn't have a notion of how to go about having a stakes horse, but Fontaine was a natural - he knew where to run them. All we wanted was a win, it didn't matter if it was a \$10,000 claiming race or a stake."

It was Fontaine's enthusiasm that encouraged them to buy Needles as a two year old, even

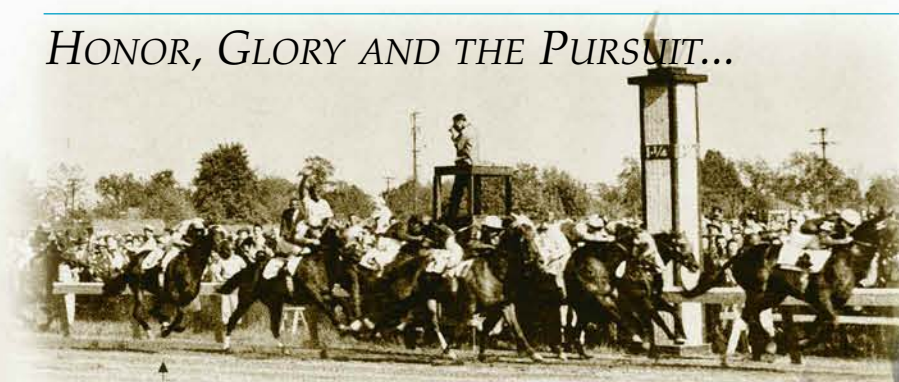
though the partners were considering getting out of the racing business at that point. The rest is history. With Fontaine as his trainer, Needles was voted champion 2 year-old of 1955, becoming Florida's first champion, and as a three year old became the first Florida-bred Kentucky Derby winner and earned three year old champion honors, wrapping up 1956 as the leading money-winning horse that year.

"Needles had the ultimate closing style, the jockey just had to stay out of his way and not think for him," Heath recalled. In fact, watching Needles race could be emotionally taxing. The colt was some 25 lengths behind coming down the backside in the Kentucky Derby, and many figured he wasn't even a factor in the race at that point. Opal (nicknamed "Budgie") Heath actually checked herself into the hospital while suffering from nervous exhaustion immediately after Needles' Kentucky Derby win. His running style could do that to a person.

## Horses are the Key

"We're in this because we love the horses," Kim says with sincerity. "That's the whole thing in a nutshell. What it comes down to in the end is the horses."

Kim has defined herself as "a horse-crazy girl who never grew out of it." Although she didn't own her first horse, a Tennessee Walker, until age 18, by that point she was old enough to know the "horse craziness" was there to stay. While attending the University of Florida to study Fine Arts, Kim put herself through school working as a groom, foaling attendant and veterinary assistant. Several years later she owned and managed a small breeding and boarding operation, then dove deeper into the Thoroughbred industry by working as a bloodstock agent.



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Farm manager, Elmo Shropshire, who first recognized Needles' potential, with the Heath children, Heather, Bonnie Jr. and Hilary. (photo by Jim Jernigan)

The Tennessee Walking Horses that were Kim's first love followed her down the Thoroughbred road. Her beloved black show mare, Solar Heat, died at Bonnie Heath Farm at the advanced age of 31, and the mare's last daughter, Christabell, remains as Kim's pet and a most cooperative test mare when it comes to breeding the young Thoroughbred stallions.

Bonnie Heath III admits the horse bug bit him hard and early. "I was diseased at birth," he laughs. "I was going to the track with my dad when I was just four and five years old. I used to sit on Needle's pony horse, 'Rusty,' and watch Needles work. I've always loved the horses."

A former stockbroker, Bonnie finds that business has more in common with Thoroughbreds than one might think. "Horses are a lot like stocks and bonds - there's not always a ready market, and the risks are similar between horses and finances."

Bonnie Heath Farm had enjoyed 35 years of history-making involvement in the Florida Thoroughbred industry when the senior Heath, then 75, faced the tough decision to either shut down the farm or find someone to take it over. In January 1991, he officially passed the torch to

his son and daughter-in-law, and Bonnie and Kim took over running the farm.

As fate would have it, the first foal born on the farm after their take-over was Holy Bull. Kim and Bonnie agree that the gray colt who raced his way to Horse of the Year honors has been one of the highlights of their involvement with Thoroughbreds. "His story had such a fairy tale quality to it and Jimmy Croll kept us all involved," says Kim. "It was like our brother was racing. When he got popular, the public just went nuts over him. We were almost embarrassed by some of the publicity we got during that time."

The Heaths make it a point to visit "The Bull" at Jonabell Farm whenever travel takes them to Lexington. "You can tell he recognizes Kim. He remembers her voice," says Bonnie.

One of the savvy ways that Kim and Bonnie kept the farm in the black was their knack of buying older stakes-winning and stakes-producing mares and getting a few more foals out of them. Once those mares were no longer producers, however, the Heaths either pensioned them on the farm or found them loving, permanent homes.

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"They give everything to us. The least we can do is take care of them in their old age," says Kim. "They've been good to us; they've earned a home for life."

"It's not fair to take an old mare to auction," adds Bonnie. "I can't live with that. One of the positive changes we've seen in the industry has been the growing awareness that we have a responsibility to retired horses."

### Change in Direction

When Bonnie and Kim took over the farm back in 1991, neither the older or younger Heaths knew that within the next decade change would close the gates of the farm that was their namesake.

For years the hustle and bustle of Ocala had stretched far past Bonnie Heath Farm along State Road 200. Driving just west of I-75 through the blur of housing communities and businesses must have made newcomers pause to stare and wonder why a large horse farm was built so close to the city. Those who had lived here

longer knew the truth, of course. Ceaseless expansion and construction had rushed beyond the city limits, enveloping the once rural acreage.



photo by Cynthia McFarland  
Bonnie, III and Kim Heath

In 1997, the Heaths, along with neighboring operations Dudley Farm and Tartan Farms, signed a contract with the Siemens Group, a development firm out of Boca Raton. The

developers wanted 411 acres that was Bonnie Heath Farm and an additional 493 acres from the other two operations with the goal of converting them into a country club, golf course, residential housing and commercial businesses. The rich land that had raised great numbers of stakes horses would be groomed into golf greens and fashionable boutiques.

Throughout the zoning changes and county meetings, numerous citizens whose only connection with the horse industry was pure aesthetic appreciation, wrote letters to the editor of the local paper, voicing their complaint that the county was losing the beautiful horse farms that had attracted people here in the first place.

For Kim and Bonnie, however, the sale of the farm finalized what they had begun to see as inevitable. Marion County has become and will remain a haven for horses, but as Kim says, "it's tough to raise horses in the city," and Ocala's incessant expansion had literally grown right up to - and around - the boundaries of Bonnie Heath Farm. "It was harder on me than on Bonnie," she notes. "He was resigned to the fact before it happened, but I thought it'd be 10 years or more."

"It's the right thing to do," says



photo by Cynthia McFarland  
Now vacant, the lush pastures of Bonnie Heath Farm that border busy State Road 200 in Ocala, will soon give way to urban development.

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Bonnie. "The only time I had a problem was when my parents moved out of their house here on the farm in 1999, and that first time I walked into the empty house that I'd grown up in. We've lived and breathed this farm for years, but when they move the cheese, you gotta go. Plus, people need to realize what an incredible job the Siemens Group has done with their other properties. I've gone to see them and they are outstanding. They'll do the same thing here."

The Heath name will carry on its long-standing Marion County tradition as the new development, known as Heathbrook, begins construction

on its golf course and club house this spring. Siemen, the developer, is himself a partner in some race horse investments, and has a fondness for the animals that make the game possible. He has vowed to erect a permanent monument on Needles' gravesite at the Bonnie Heath stallion barn location, and will put a large bronze statue of the famous Florida-bred in the club house. (Many fans don't realize that Needles' heart and hooves were buried, following tradition, beneath a marker in the small circular courtyard in front of the Ocala Breeders' Sales pavilion which can be visited at any time.)

Kim and Bonnie currently serve as advisors to Dick Simon of Sez Who Thoroughbreds. Just don't call them "consultants." As Bonnie quips, "That's a man who knows 102 ways to make love but doesn't know any women! We come at it differently from many advisors, as most have not owned their own farm," he adds.

Bonnie Heath Farm officially closed its doors as a commercial farm in November of 1999. Kim and Bonnie undertook the laborious task of moving all of their own bloodstock, three stallions and clients' horses across town to Sez Who. Along with the horses, nearly a dozen faithful Bonnie Heath Farm employees including the Heath's longtime manager Kenny Breitenbecker, farm trainer Tom Caruso, and broodmare manager Tina Evers - also packed up and made Simon's farm their own. "We wouldn't be doing what we are now if we didn't have them," says Kim.

### Moving On

"I really thought life would slow down a little after the farm was sold, but it hasn't," says Kim.

While advising Simon on the many aspects of a commercial Thoroughbred operation, Bonnie and Kim also continue to race a few horses of their own. They bred and raised turf sensation Honor Glide and in 1999 bought into the partnership that owns the horse. Traveling to watch him race has taken the couple around the country and created many happy memories.

"All the traveling we have done because of the horses has been very exciting," says Kim. "Bonnie Heath Farm was the first in Florida to shuttle stallions back and forth to the Southern Hemisphere when we stood Honor Grades in New Zealand. We've made friends from around the world and have met horsemen we'd never have met if we weren't in the stallion market. Second only to the love of the horses are the wonderful people we've met and become friends with because of the horses."



photo by Cynthia McFarland

Kim and Bonnie walk the oak-canopied road through the heart of former Bonnie Heath Farm and the future Heathbrook Golf community.