

"The Horse of the East in the



Cynthia Culbertson
with Ansata Manasseh

Land of the West"

An Interview with Cynthia Culbertson

■ by **Monika Savier**
photos by *Richard T. Bryant*

Cynthia Culbertson has been a staff writer for DESERT HERITAGE Magazine for many years. She also lived in Saudi Arabia for over a decade. As part of our profiles of staff writers and their breeding concept, I asked Cynthia to tell us about her long experience between two worlds. The recent WAHO conference at Damascus provided an excellent opportunity to talk with her about her responses to the country, the horses and the natural environment.

"To me straight Egyptians represent an exceptional

Monika: *What do you think about the horses and the country here? Did you expect this?*

Cynthia: *Syria was simply fantastic! There are few countries with more layers of human history than Syria, and if you combine this with magnificent historical sites, warm and gracious people, beautiful cities and lively souqs, it should certainly be at the top of anyone's list of places to visit. Syria, its Arabian horse breeders, and Basil Jadaan in particular, did an incredible job of hosting the recent WAHO conference and provided us with an experience that was truly unforgettable.*

From another perspective, I have always felt that to understand the Arabian horse, you must view him in the context of his homelands. While many breeders may appreciate the origins of the breed from an intellectual standpoint, there is something pro-

found about breathing the desert air and experiencing the harsh environment that fostered these horses. It is a bit like learning a language. One may achieve certain fluency outside of the cultural context – but to embrace it from a literary standpoint – to rejoice in its poetry – you have to immerse yourself in the culture from whence the language developed. I believe the same is true of the Arabian horse. Visiting their ancestral homelands will serve to illuminate your perception of what the Arabian horse is, and what he is not.

Monika: *I know you are primarily associated with the straight Egyptian, but we saw many Syrian desertbreds and horses referred to as the "pure Syrian" Arabians. What do you think this term really means, and how do these horses relate to*



Ansata Manasseh
(Ansata Halim Shah x Ansata
Alima by Jamil)
Dahman Shahwan, Bukra Family

Ansata Manasseh
in his corral overlooking
the Sacramento Mountains

group of horses based on some of the finest Arabians

the straight Egyptian horse?

Cynthia: Ah, this is a good question, because it serves to illustrate that eventually, in any Arabian pedigree, the end point is the same - you reach horses bred in the desert. Yet within that framework you have many differing opinions as to which are the true, elite, asil horses of the desert. Are they only those bred in the desert versus bred in the city? Were the elite only bred in the South, versus those bred in the North? It is important to realize that these horses were originally developed by a nomadic population which knew no national borders. Historically, the same horse which was foaled in the Nejd (modern Saudi Arabia) may have traveled to the north (modern Syria) later in its life - this is quite easy to understand looking at the migratory routes of certain tribes, like the Anazeh, for example. On the other

El Miladi
Zaynah
(Zedann x
Ansata
Nawarra)
Dahmah
Shahwaniah,
Bukra Family



*ever to leave the desert
well deserving of preserving as*

a vital bloodline group within the breed.”

hand, geographically isolated terrain, like the Nejd or southern Arabia, was less likely to experience outside influences, so the horses that remained in these areas might indeed differ in type. It really becomes complex, doesn't it? Yet in some respects, calling a horse "pure Syrian" or "straight Egyptian" is a simply a by-product of modern nationalism and an arbitrary definition or two, especially when you remember that all of the pedigrees are intertwined - a desert bred horse from Syria ended up in

Egypt and became a part of that breeding program and its descendants are now "Egyptian." One Syrian breeder is now using Egyptian blood, so if he outcrosses a "pure Syrian" mare to an Egyptian stallion, will the results ever become "pure Syrian" one day, just as the descendants of that Syrian horse became "straight Egyptian?"

Monika: Have you changed your vision of an ideal Arabian

"Many great breeding horses are not show horses and



El Miladi Zuraiq
(El Hadiyyah x Bint El Tareef)
Hadbah Enzahiyah,
Yosreia Family



based on your experiences in their homelands?

Cynthia: Well, the desert bred horses remain very interesting to me. I envy those who actually saw these indigenous horses before mechanization forever changed the way of life which created the horse in the first place. For someone of my generation, I can only extrapolate an opinion from what I can see – and I have made a point of visiting as many desert bred horses as possible. They do have something to teach us – if only we open our eyes.

The desert breds, such as those we saw in Syria, as well as those I have seen in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries, are a good example of how you can learn a great deal about type by seeing horses that were not selected for a westernized show “silhouette.” While this “silhouette” is easily identifiable – consisting of a dis-

hed head, an arched neck, and a flat topline – many elements of Arabian type are missed by those seeking only that profile. There are other subtle elements of type found in abundance in desert breds, and many of these elements are just as deserving of preservation as the more obvious ones. So yes, I absolutely believe my view of the Arabian horse has changed from seeing desert breds in the homelands of the Arabian.

Monika: Tell us why you are involved with straight Egyptians.

Cynthia: To me straight Egyptians represent an exceptional group of horses based on some of the finest Arabians ever to leave the desert – well deserving of preserving as a vital bloodline group within the breed. While I enjoy a good Arabian horse of



many great show horses are not breeding horses"

any bloodline, I knew that if I wished to breed, the straight Egyptian was the horse I would use. I was also quite fortunate in the late seventies to be able to take a year off from my university studies in Arabic and work at Ansata Arabian Stud for a year. I will forever treasure my memories of the wonderful Ansata horses that are legends today - *Ansata Ibn Halima, Ansata Ibn Sudan, *Ansata Bint Bukra, Ansata Shah Zaman, Ansata Halim Shah and so many more. During this time I also spent considerable time visiting other landmark farms - Gleannloch, Bentwood, and Glorieta to name a few. This was a priceless education. I could see and study the offspring of Nazeer, Alaa el Din, Antar, *Morafic, etc., as well as many representatives of famous damlines. Soon after, in the early 1980's, I traveled to the EAO and also saw several of the major sires that remained in Egypt, such as Ikhnaton, Hafez Antar, Emad, and great mares like Safinaz and Bint Ibtisam. I admire all of those breeders who take the time to study pedigrees and photos of ancestral horses, but I have to say, there is no substitute for having seen these animals in the flesh. Occasionally an old photo can be very deceiving and sometimes elicits a prejudice against a horse that is not entirely deserved. To this day, many of my opinions about bloodlines were formed during these years.

Monika: What about your own horses and breeding program?

Cynthia: After I graduated from university, I managed to find a *Morafic son living in relative obscurity, so ended up with a degree in Near Eastern Languages and Literature and a straight Egyptian stallion - all in the same month! His name was Zedann and his mother was the beautiful Alaa el Din daughter *Omnia. I have always felt that this stallion could have been as

influential as many other *Morafic sons had he had the right opportunities earlier in life, but he was a great joy to me and I was fortunate to breed some daughters from him that were truly exquisite in type.

Today, I have only a few horses and one of them is a daughter of this *Morafic son out of Ansata Nawarra. Interestingly, all of my horses in the last ten years have been grandchildren of *Ansata Ibn Halima or *Morafic, and this is true even today, when I only have three mares and a stallion. I was quite fortunate to have owned two Ansata Halim Shah children, both bred by Ansata, both from the prized Bukra family. I will always be grateful to Judith Forbis, who has been a treasured mentor and friend for many years, for allowing me to own the wonderful Ansata Manasseh, who is still with me. As far as a philosophy about breeding, I have to say that whenever I see a pedigree, I still look at the damline first, which is a time-proven approach when it comes to breeding. Also I believe it is so important to keep learning and keep an open mind!

Monika: Tell us about your career and what took you to Saudi Arabia.

Cynthia: Ironically, it was an interest in the history of the Arabian horse that led to my studies in Arabic and Arabic literature. I was always frustrated to be learning about Arabian horses from the point of view of Europeans and other



"It is exciting to see so many young and enthusiastic breeders in the Arabian Gulf and I believe they now have



Glorieta Gashahla, at age 24, is one of the last remaining straight Egyptian daughters of Ansata Shah Zaman. Hadbah Enzahiyah, Bint Samiha family.

Westerners who visited the desert. This is not to say that their viewpoints were not important - quite the contrary. But on the other hand, I thought why not learn about Arabian horses from the literature of the Arabs? Of course I drove my professors crazy with my obsession - every paper had to do with the Arabian horse in literature, which was a valid topic, of course, so I persisted over the years. I have done several translations from 9th-12th century Arabic on the topic of Arabian horses and someday hope to compile them into a nice volume in English so they are accessible to those who do not read Arabic.

Living in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia for ten years was also a delight for an Arabian horse lover. Despite some overt cultural differences, my time there was a great pleasure, and I still consider this country my second home. I made many lifelong friends and took every opportunity to learn more about the desert and its peoples. To me, differences in culture are not "right" or "wrong" but simply "different" and viva la difference! I learned so much from this culture - especially the art of hospitality, which is unrivaled. In many ways, this is a culture of subtle sophistication: each guest is made to feel special and admired by the other

guests; a negative or problem is never openly discussed; a point is made in an oblique and face-saving way. Emulating this art has served me well throughout the world!

Monika: *As an American, what do you think of the current status of the straight Egyptian in your country?*

Cynthia: *Let me begin with the positive - I believe the U.S. played a monumental part in the history of the Egyptian Arabian - the formation of the Pyramid Society, breeders who made historic importations, and much of the credit for establishing the Egyptian Arabian as a premier bloodline group in the breed. Look at almost any pedigree of an influential Egyptian Arabian today, and you will see an American influence. Yet, in recent years, although there are a handful of dedicated farms holding the banner aloft, the foundation of these great American Egyptian horses has left the country. This is quite sad to me. I think one of the major problems is that the Arabian in the U.S. became a "stylized" horse - elements of our famous trotting breeds, like the American Saddlebred, crept into the consciousness here. Our judges were not breeders. Then, for an Egyptian Arabian to win or compete in this arena, certain bloodlines were*

embraced which could emulate this look, and suddenly the essence of what made the Egyptian Arabian special was diluted, sometimes to a fatal degree. This is a great challenge for those breeders who are left. To a small (very small) breeder like myself, it becomes more than a little difficult to try to find a stallion in the U.S. to breed to a special mare. Yet everything in life seems to be a cycle, and I foresee importations from the Arabian Gulf countries as an important step for the future – now it is the U.S. who needs outside blood, which may, ironically, come once again from the homelands of the breed.



Zedann

(*Morafic x *Omnia by Alaa el Din)
was El Miladi's first straight Egyptian
and a stallion with breathtaking
movement and incredible presence

*a pivotal role when it comes
to the Egyptian Arabian horse.”*

It is exciting to see so many young and enthusiastic breeders in the Arabian Gulf and I believe they now have a pivotal role when it comes to the Egyptian Arabian horse. Of course, I also have a great affinity for many breeders in Europe, who have also done a wonderful job in breeding straight Egyptians.



Monika: *As a regular writer for Desert Heritage, which as you know, is based in Milan, you are a long way away from Italy, tell us about where you live now?*

Cynthia: *After I returned to the U.S. from Saudi Arabia I must admit the culture shock was quite overwhelming. So I elected to leave behind my career as a management analyst and move to New Mexico with my family, devoting myself to raising my young son. Ironically, Carl Raswan once said that the high deserts of New Mexico were an ideal climate for the breeding of Arabian horses due to their similarity to the deserts of the Middle East. I agree completely! Also, and I mean this in the kindest possible way, New Mexico is probably the state in the U.S. most like living in another country. There is a unique convergence of cultures – cowboy, Native American, and Hispanic – which makes for a delightful atmosphere. The scenery is fantastic, the population is small, and there is a sense of freedom and light that is magical! Artists and writers flock here because the natural beauty is so conducive to creativity.*

Monika: *What you are doing now and what are your future projects?*

Cynthia: *I love inspiring people when it comes to the culture and folklore of the Arabian horse and it is amazing how hungry people are for this type of information. In the last year I have been working with Christie and Henry Metz of Silver Maple Farm who have always had a huge dedication to the breed. Their magnificent library and art collection is an inspiration and I look forward to being a part of their future educational endeavors. Another exciting project is the museum exhibit, "A Gift of the Desert: The Art History and Culture of the Arabian Horse" which will be the largest museum exhibit ever assembled on the breed and will be held in
Kentucky at the
International
Museum
of the*



Horse during the 2010 World Equestrian Games. This exhibit is being sponsored by the Saudi Arabian Equestrian Federation and I am honored to be one of the curators.

Of course it is wonderful to profile influential horses of the past, as I often do for Desert Heritage, and it is a privilege to be associated with this magazine. I am also thankful to Gigi Grasso for the opportunity to do two books with him, although I always joke that nobody reads the writing because they only look at the photos! I have loved working on many projects for the Pyramid Society, especially with Darryl Larson in producing historical DVD's.

Monika: *Do you have any advice for new enthusiasts of the straight Egyptian?*

Cynthia: *The attention span in the modern world is diminishing. Today, we want everything instantly as demonstrated by e-mail, mobile phones and the internet. Yet breeding Arabians is, by definition, an enterprise which requires patience. Time is measured in generations. The internet, to take but one example, is a great tool. Yet I am quite frustrated when people use it to randomly seek information from others – others whose horses they have never seen, whose programs are a total unknown. This is more than a little dangerous. To me, traveling to meet breeders and seeing their horses is always the best path. The Arabian horse is a great ambassador – a by-product of such travel is an exposure to other countries and cultures which is invaluable. Once you find horses you like, direct your questions to those breeders. Don't overwhelm them – learn enough to ask fewer questions, but good ones. Read. The books by Judith Forbis are a perfect example. Dr. Hans Nagel is another breeder who has put his philosophy into a book. When it comes to showing I personally do not believe this should be a primary objective, but rather a reflection of achieving certain breeding goals. Many great breeding horses are not show horses and many great show horses are not breeding horses. It is so important to learn the difference! But in the end, I cannot think of a more wonderful passion than the Arabian horse, and a more wonderful Arabian horse than the straight Egyptian!* □

