



## **Gordon Hannagan The luck of the Irish**

From The Quarter Horse Journal December 1998 –  
article and photos by Jennifer Barron

### **Given the choice, would you rather be lucky or smart?**

Gordon Hannagan, long time auctioneer and Quarter Horse breeder, would rather be lucky. And this man must have kissed the Blarney stone at least once in his life because Lady Luck has definitely smiled on him.

Between his careers as an auctioneer and horse breeder, Hannagan has owned, sold, seen and passed up opportunities to buy many of the great ones.

The 67-year-old man's voice booms – even when he's not calling bids – and as he sits behind his desk, every story he tells brings smile to his face, and he laughs as he recalls his wilder days. Thankful now for the chance to rest his voice, Hannagan keeps busy running “Gordyville,” his own sale barn and show facility. After undergoing heart bypass surgery in 1989, Hannagan values his time at home, selling his own sales with his sons and admiring the crop of weanlings at his place in Penfield, Illinois. And this man's not afraid to play favorites – he picked the apple of his eye, a blue roan colt, and hopes to campaign him in a couple of years.

### **Family man**

Hannagan grew up on a farm – the youngest of 10 children – in Danville, Illinois, and got his first horse at the age of eight. As a teenager, he drove a truck for his father and managed to trade a few horses on the side, something that would become a full-time career later in life.

Hannagan's wife, Jan, grew up only 100 miles away from Danville. The pair met by what Hannagan calls chance, and what his wife recalls as more of a blind date. It seems that a young Hannagan saw his future wife compete at a rodeo and followed her around to a couple more until a mutual friend set them up. Jan earned a college degree in physical education and now is an integral part of Gordyville operations.

The pair raised six children, three boys and three girls, and have four grandchildren. Of the daughters, Mary runs the horse shows at Gordyville, manages the breeding operation at home and shows cutting horses ; Patty manages the flea markets, has a beauty parlor and two children, and also shows cutters; and Jody is a sale representative for a veterinary supply company and shows reining horses. The sons, involved in horses as kids, showed more interest in the business end of the operation. Eddie runs a grain elevator, is an auctioneer and has two kids; Jim manages Gordyville and also auctioneers; and Buddy manages the farm and the grain trucks.

When it comes to his children, Hannagan makes it quite apparent that he is proud of what they have become. The men of the family sell a lot of real estate together, as well as horses, and Hannagan has taught them the importance of being an auctioneer that sellers and buyers respect.

Hannagan's daughters are the horse-women of the family. He's not afraid to boast about

Mary's non-pro three-year-old cutting futurity win at this year's Congress, Jody's 1994 reserve world championship in reining or Patty's state cutting win. But watching them is another story. He doesn't. They make him too nervous.

## Auctioneer

Any auctioneer worth his salt has to be charismatic, keep the sale moving, not back down when buyers are hesitant and keep in mind the interest of everyone involved. Hannagan learned these traits over his years in front of the crowd. It took hard work and little luck to get where he is today, but his interest in the business started at a young age.

"When I was in high school, I went to the Chicago International Livestock Show," explains Hannagan. "A friend and I went to hear Roy Johnson sell the champions there."

Hannagan's own auction career began with a stroke of luck. One Saturday night he happened to be at a horse sale where the auctioneer wasn't feeling well. A man volunteered Hannagan to help, saying, "Gordy can sell the slaughter horses for you." The auctioneer asked Hannagan if he was an auctioneer, to which Hannagan replied with an honest, "No, but I can sell these horses." So the auctioneer let him up on the stand and the career of a legendary auctioneer took off.

About a year later, in a strange twist of fate, Hannagan says, "I took my folks to the funeral home one night — what a place to start your auctioneer career off — and a guy came up to me who heard I was an auctioneer. He said to come on over to his place and he'd put me to work."

The sale barn had sales twice a week and they let Hannagan sell eight or 10 of the slaughter cows, and soon all of them. This continued from August until January — without pay. After getting his name on the payroll, Hannagan found another sale barn to work on Saturdays, and another on Tuesdays. In a short time, Hannagan occupied the auction stand every night of the week in various barns around Illinois.

The first big break Hannagan made into the auction ring came at a Quarter Horse sale in Chicago. The auctioneer had no idea what he was selling (something that Hannagan says will hang an auctioneer). Two horse traders that knew of Hannagan's talents on the auctioneer's stand asked him to sell their horses in the sale.

Was it destiny or just another stroke of luck that the director of the Chicago International Livestock Show Sale sat in the crowd that night and heard Hannagan? Either way, he approached Hannagan and asked if he would be interested in auctioneering the Quarter Horse sale at the 1959 Chicago International. "That scared me to death and I told him I couldn't do it because I didn't have the money to promote it," says Hannagan. On the way home that night, Hannagan told a friend's father-in-law about the missed opportunity. "You give me 10% of the profit and I'll furnish you with all the money you need." Once again Hannagan capitalized on his luck in life.

Following his inaugural "big sale," Hannagan sold out of various sale barns in Illinois, moving

## Gordyville, U.S.A.

**A place not found on a map of the United States, but definitely on the horse world's map.**

Following his big break at the '59 Chicago International, Gordon Hannagan headed home to rent out a number of sale barns in Illinois. Fed up with the situation on the way home from a sale one night, Hannagan told his wife he would build his own place to have horse sales.

That led to the building of the first half of Gordyville. The name really is not quite as unusual as some would like to think. The site had previously been a car lot called "Jerryville" because the owner's name was — you guessed it — Jerry. Surrounded by cornfields, it houses two indoor arenas 583 stalls, an outdoor arena and another building for auctions. The facility hosts all breeds of horse sales, shows and rodeos, as well as farm equipment, antique and estate sales and flea markets.

One of the premier events of the facility, the Breeder's Classic Sale held in October, allows horses consigned to the sale to be entered in a \$20,000 added futurity for western pleasure and hunter under saddle horses in July. The consignor of the horse that wins the futurity, regardless of whether the horse changed hands at the sale, receives a \$2500 bonus.

The people who visit Gordyville have one thing in common. Hannagan says, "Everybody seems to enjoy it when they come to Gordyville, I've had people come up to me when I'm traveling around and ask me my name. The first thing they say is, 'Oh, Gordyville. We've been there and think it's great.'"



from barn to barn as he outgrew them. Finally, one night on the way home from a sale, Hannagan made the decision to buy his own place to hold auctions. Thus came Gordyville, the facility that includes one outdoor arena, two indoor arenas, the capability to hold more than 500 horses, a building for antique sales, a bar and grill and an office. The facility hosts the Breeder's Classic Futurity Sale in October and the Breeder's Classic Futurity in July, as well as a number of Quarter Horse shows and other breed shows, horse sales, rodeos and auctions.

The '59 Chicago International sale also got Hannagan's foot in the door to sell horses at the great ranches across the country. One of the fondest memories Hannagan recalls is the story of getting the sale at one of the monumental ranches in the industry.

"When I got the King Ranch, I cried. I sat in the office and tears were coming out of my eyes," Hannagan recalls. "My wife came in and asked who died, and I said, 'I just booked the King Ranch.' I was the second man to ever sell it; Walter Britten sold it first. I think he was one of the first men to sell Quarter Horses in a sale in Texas."

First on Hannagan's list of people to tell about the prestigious job was Ike Hamilton, a peer in the auctioneer world and close personal friend who helped Hannagan break into the business. Hannagan recalls, "He was a

complete gentleman. He was really pleased for me. Most guys would have been so envious."

When sale day came along, Hannagan admits that the nerves got to him a little bit. "I don't remember giving the opening remarks and I forgot to introduce the ring men, I don't remember selling the first five or six horses; I was so carried away. When you get a sale like that you just get so high. I sold horses all over the country and after the first two or three years I never did get nervous. Boy, I tell you what, the King Ranch made me nervous."

Ask anyone where they were the day President Kennedy was assassinated and they can tell you. On that historic day, Hannagan found himself at the Chicago International for his fifth year of auctioneering that sale.

"Kennedy was assassinated at about 11 a.m., and the sale was supposed to start at noon. You couldn't get people away from those TVs," explains Hannagan. "Finally, we went through all the bars and places where people were watching and announced that the sale would start at 3 p.m. come hell or high water. The sale went on and average \$1900 — not too bad. But, people were so unstrung that we had five fights during the sale. It was a mess."

As for Hannagan's philosophies of auctioneering, the fact that he has sold more than 30,000 acres of the county he lives in says a lot. "When you start in the auction business, it's your ability that gets you the job. But more than that, it's the confidence of the people hiring you," he explains. "I've done sales for people in this area who have farmed all their lives. Six times out of 10 all the money they have will come out of that sale. You'd better be on your toes and doing a good job because they are putting everything they own in your hands."

Hannagan has strong feelings about an auctioneer knowing his product; after all, that's how he got his big break. "A lot of people I see selling today don't know their product. You better know what you're doing. I know the horse business because I'm involved in it all the time," says Hannagan, who is known to appraise a horse in five seconds and be pretty darn close when it comes to what the horse sells for.

“We’ve always tried to run our business on the up-and-up, so that people can be proud of us and we can be proud of how we run our place,” he explains.

### **Quarter Horse breeder**

“In 1951, I started in the Quarter Horse business because I knew it was going to get good with all of the promotion,” explains Hannagan, who has as much pride in his breeding operation as his sale business. “It’s made me a lot of money. It has raised my family and me.”

In ‘51, Hannagan went to a sale in Greensburg, Kansas, and bought a Quarter Horse roping mare, sparking a successful breeding program that continues today. At one time, Hannagan’s father told him, “Gordy, leave them horses alone. You won’t amount to a damn messing with them.” But, with some lucky horse trading and sound purchases, Hannagan managed to prove his father wrong.

Quarter Horse history would be written differently if Hannagan would have had \$500 to buy a young colt named Two Eyed Jack (later inducted into AQHA’s Hall of Fame) at a Herman Mass production sale. Unfortunately, his luck fell into a small slump. However, Hannagan sees the missed opportunity another way.

“If I would have bought him, he would have been an average horse because I couldn’t promote him,” explains Hannagan. “Herman Mass showed him as a great two-year-old and then sold him to Howard Pitzer. Howard went on and had great success with that horse. But if I would have bought him, or one of the other guys kept him, that horse would never have been what he was.”

Larry Oatman, breeder of Baron Bell, had that weanling colt consigned to another sale that Hannagan auctioneered. Hannagan remembers the fall sale where he started the bidding at \$300, took it to \$375, and when no one bid on the horse, he charged Baron Bell to his own account. As Hannagan loaded the colt into his trailer, Ray Kennedy made an offer on Baron Bell. Hannagan sold the horse and never thought twice about it. Two years later at the Chicago International, Kennedy dragged Hannagan to the barn.

“He lead this big magnificent horse out of the stall and I asked, ‘What’s he?’ Ray said, ‘You owned him once for \$375.’ I couldn’t believe that horse. That year Two Eyed Jack was grand champion and Baron Bell was reserve.”

Hannagan’s stories about great horses are as common as cornfields in Illinois, but one conversation with sale manager Carol Whitman at Hank Weiscamp’s stands out in his mind. “I don’t remember if it was Carol or me that said to Hank that Skipper W was a great horse. Hank corrected us. He said, ‘He wasn’t a great horse. I made him great. I selected the mares that went to him.’” Hannagan agrees with that philosophy; a horse can have the potential to be great, but it takes the knowledge of the owner to make him great—not to mention luck.

The stories go on and on, never losing their luster, and the next story he tells always outshines the one before. Hannagan looks back on his days traveling from sale to sale and dealing in horses, and remembers the good people he met and all the fun times. “That’s what life’s all about. I used to never think about growing old or dying, and once in a while it enters my mind now.”

It is at these times that he is reminded of meeting Jack Buck, long-time announcer for the St. Louis Cardinals. Buck gave Hannagan a copy of his book, and now Hannagan lives by the last paragraph. “In Jack Buck’s book somebody asks him, ‘What are you going to do when you look the Good Lord in the Eye?’” He says, ‘I’m going to look at Him and ask how come He was so good to me.’”

