LITTLE PONIES SHOW BIG!

Elmer D. Williams is best remembered in Northeast Missouri for his national champion Shetland ponies. His Sunny Acres Pony Farm is located one-quarter mile north of Kirkville on Highway 63.

Mr. Williams' interest arose when his father, Ira Williams, bought a small Shetland pony for Elmer's 2-year-old son, Robert. Mrs. Williams recalled her husband telling her that Ira bought the pony because "he felt every Williams should have a horse."

The Williams' first ponies were kept on a two-acre lot at 1304 South Cottage Grove. His ponies soon outgrew the small acreage. Wanting a larger area, Mr. Williams established the Sunny Acres Pony Farm in 1946. The farm consisted of 57 acres of land and one barn approximately 140 feet long.

In 1949 Elmer and his wife, Frances (Evans) Williams, bought their foundation stock, six registered mares, from the Fred Willmant herd in Richards, Missouri. That same year, they also bought one stallion from the Ted Welch farm in Exline, Iowa.

The Williams' first contest was hosted by Dr. R. O. Stickler in 1947. This show was held on Route 11 East approximately where the Kirkville city limits are now. Their son, Robert, wasn't old enough to show yet, so Mr. Williams asked some neighbors to show their ponies in this contest. Mrs. Williams said, "Among those recruited were Tex Findling, Sue Allen, and Barbara Clark." The Williams' interest soon grew from raising their registered ponies to showing their Shetlands in different contests throughout the Midwest.

When the Williams' started going to shows, Mr. Williams would have to take time off from work. He was managing the Mackie-Williams Grocery Store on Highway 63 South, where Cash Saver is today. The store opened in 1947, and ran under this arrangement until 1962. In 1962, Elmer purchased the store from Mr. Mackie and Mrs. Mabel Williams after the death of her husband, Minor, and changed the name to Elmer's Hy-Klas. In 1970 he sold this store to Jim Welch.

In the 1950s, two of their ponies, Kings Color Flash and Society Man, carried the color flags for many shows throughout the Midwest. The color flags officially started the show. The ponies were shown by the late Roy Sutton and Mr. Williams' son, Robert. Kings Color Flash and Society Man were two fine examples of the Williams' stock.

Selection of the ponies was a very important factor. The selection was a family affair with each member looking the herd over and discussing what they did and didn't like in a pony. Some specific traits they looked for were big bold eyes, sharp ears, a long neck, and a short back. However, in spite of the physical traits Mrs. Williams stated that, "If the pony doesn't have the personality and heart you can't make him a winner."
This aerial photo shows the layout of the Sunny Acres Pony Farm located on the outskirts of Kirksville. Note the length of the barn, the training track and arena behind it.

The Williams family started training their ponies at about two to three weeks of age. Mr. Williams and Robert, or Richard, would get the colts in the training area with their mothers and teach them to line up and pay attention to the trainer. Richard, the Williams' second son, had an infinite amount of patience with the colts. "Showing the colts was his speciality," Mrs. Williams said. Richard would sit on a bucket for hours teaching a colt how to pose in the ways he wanted for showing. "Thanks to Richard, we won many blue ribbons in colt classes," Mrs. Williams said. Richard began showing when he was 12-years-old at surrounding state fairs, mainly Iowa, often beating the professionals.

The next stage of training was for yearlings shown-in-hand. Showing-in-hand involved posing the ponies in the ring, where they would be judged, and then the handler would lead them along the perimeter of the ring at a walk, then back in a trot.

The third year the pony would be shown in harness, which involved dressing them up in their attire and entered into the ring at a trot, then judged. In this class, the harness had to be immaculate and the pony spotless. Mrs. Williams said, "Ponies are just like children, they all have a different personality. Some will do exactly what you want, while others need much more training." Showing their ponies wasn't always easy. There were many, many long hours spent training the ponies and grooming them for competition.

Late spring and summer were the high points of the year. This was when the hard work during the fall, winter and early spring paid off. The entire family went to the shows, because exhibiting the ponies was a family interest. The Williams' would attend shows as far away as Ft. Worth, Texas, and Oklahoma. As a rule, they would get to the shows a day or two before the actual contest and stay in a motel. Ponies they had sold entered many state fair contests in Nebraska, Texas, Missouri, Illinois, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Louisiana, California, Oregon, Iowa, South Dakota, and Michigan. Mrs. Williams said, "Our ponies nearly covered all of the shows in the Midwest."

The American Royal in Kansas City and the International Horse Show in Chicago, Illinois, were two of the more prestigious shows at which the Williams exhibited their ponies. They entered twice at the International Horse Show placing very high each time and winning the highest award, the National Futurity Award in Harness, in 1962.

Mr. Williams received countless ribbons, trophies, and silver items such as platters, bowls, and cups. One item didn't necessarily mean more than the other, it just depended on what the show officials wanted to give as the prize.

Not all of the Williams' ponies showed turned out to be winners. Those ponies that did become champions were Modern Aire, Bugle Ann, Witchdocto, Kings Rhapsody, Marvel Maid, Airborne Rocket, Velvet Touch, and the incomparable Billy Jack. Billy Jack was their favorite of all the ponies, simply because he was the best the Williams' ever had. He won the National Harness Championship in 1968 and 1969, being shown by Richard. Also, he won the National Championship in-hand in 1963 and 1965 with Mr. Williams showing both times.

Once the ponies made a name for themselves, they were either sold or kept as breeding stock to sire future champions. Billy Jack was sold to Roy Strawacker of Ottumwa, Iowa, and shown by H. D. Harrison, Jr. of Kirksville. At the height of the breeding business, the family had approximately 150 ponies, selling only about 25 to 30 ponies each year. One champion pony, Modern Aire, sold for $30,000. Not all of the Williams' ponies sold for this much, in fact, few came close. Other ponies were sold to breeders all over the United States and Canada. Mrs. Williams stated that those ponies did just as well for the buyers as they did for them. The family was very pleased to see this.
Mr. Williams served as National Director for the Shetland Pony Association from 1960 to 1970. He was Area Director of the Central State Pony Association which made him responsible to help organize and run pony shows throughout the Midwest.

In 1970, Mr. and Mrs. Williams slowed down with the showing of their ponies. It was around this time that Richard, Elmer’s youngest son, left for college. Mr. Williams continued to breed and raise ponies even after both boys were gone, but he never showed them like he had earlier.

The Williams’ purchased a linen rental service, Sun Brite Laundry, in Kirksville. This linen service was operated by the Williams until 1979.

Mr. Williams also bred Dalmation dogs for show and sale. He sold many puppies, but never showed any himself.

Mrs. Williams recalled that in 1979 the Budweiser Clydesdales were touring the northeast Missouri area. She said, “Budweiser had their Clydesdales stabled in our barns, it was at this time they saw the puppies.” The trainer for the company in St. Louis, purchased 12 to 15 Dalmations from Mr. Williams.

Mrs. Williams stated that her husband had started raising Hackneys, another breed of ponies, about this time. She said, “Elmer had dreams of showing these ponies like he had the Shetlands.” But this dream was cut short when Mr. Williams passed away in December of 1983.