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A Special Place



Jim Aikman preserves 88 acres of his Hide-A-Way Farms through the Central Indiana Land Trust

By Shawndra Miller

»Jim Aikman remembers the first night he spent at what was to become Hide-A-Way Farms. It was the winter of 1939, and he was just a boy. His parents had purchased 71 acres for \$6,000 – rolling hills that straddle the county line between Marion and Johnson counties. With its woods and pasture, and Buck Creek flowing through it, the farm would soon become his playground, and eventually his passion. But that night, all he knew was that it was cold.

“We slept in a corner of the old original house, and the fireplace was the only source of heat,” the 87-year-old remembers, indicating the 150-year-old farmhouse, now expanded. The house was so unsound at that point that the winter came roaring inside. “Mother and Dad and I got up the next morning and shook the snow off the blankets.”

Aikman would grow up to work in a family business that marketed food service equipment to nursing homes, restaurants and hospitals. But in the decades since that introduction to the place, Aikman's first love was always the farm. Going to school in nearby Acton and Franklin, and later to Indiana University, he knew where he wanted to spend his time. He started training horses in 1950 and 14 years later would move back to the farm permanently, swapping houses with his folks.

By then the Aikmans' land had expanded beyond the original 71 acres, becoming a horse farm specializing in American Saddlebred breeding, training and showing.

Starting in the early 1970s Aikman owned stud stallions, which serviced brood mares from all over the country. Meanwhile he trained and showed 24 world champions, mostly weanlings (about 5 months old) and yearlings.

His operation was successful enough to become a training site for others showing American Saddlebreds, and he produced a few DVDs and wrote a booklet on best practices. His success led to some high-profile clients. Asked who his most famous trainee was, he says modestly, "Well, I taught (Star Trek actor) Bill Shatner."

More recently, from his bungalow office — a site that used to hold the family chicken house — in 2003 Aikman organized the All American Cup, a stallion show and auction that's been going strong ever since.

On a breezy May afternoon, he sits on the bungalow porch with longtime friend John Hale and reminisces. Inside the office, framed photographs bear testimony to Hide-A-Way's many victories in the arena. One shows Hale and Aikman working a colt together in the ring.

"In that field right there, three special horses are buried," Aikman says, gesturing to the pasture where a few yearlings are visible. In

its heyday, Hide-A-Way's hooved occupancy would have numbered closer to 30. Adjoining the bungalow is a barn, but it isn't the original structure. In 1988 the barn caught on fire when it was struck by lightning, and a world-renowned stallion named Wild Country died, along with three of his weanlings.

Then there was Firefly Supreme. That was the prize stallion whose first and last breaths were witnessed by Aikman — the horse he names as his favorite of all. There at his birth, Aikman recognized a future champion. The stallion not only won prizes himself, but sired many champion "futura colts" — weanlings and yearlings that drew accolades in the ring.

The night of the stallion's death, Aikman remembers, "It was 20 degrees below zero. I walked in to see how he was doing, and he dropped dead right in front of me. He'd inhaled some cold air."

The barn today houses a new foal, only a few days old, and her mother, a chestnut brood mare. The two men walk over to check on the duo and watch the white-legged filly cavort along next to the mare in the field adjoining their ample stall. "John, if we can catch her," the sharp-eyed Aikman says of the mare, "she's got a halter over her ear." A strap of the halter has pulled forward, looping in front of the mare's ear.

Hale walks toward the horse, who dances away with the high step of a showgirl, her young one tight at her side. The two men slowly encircle her until she reaches a corner of the paddock, where Hale can reach up and flip the halter back into position behind her ear.

The mare's name is Call Me Grand, and the young one's name has yet to announce itself. Aikman likes to wait until he sees a foal's personality before naming it. "Sometimes they name themselves," he says, "by the funny things they do." He recalls a colt he christened Blazing Fire, because "he was always just a blaze when he showed off."

The level of mindful care that he's always offered his horses – training with a gentle hand, making their show preparations more like playtime than work for the colts – Aikman extends to the land itself. He made a move early this year to dedicate 88 acres to a conservation easement in an agreement with Central Indiana Land Trust.

The nonprofit organization works to preserve natural areas in central Indiana, and Executive Director Cliff Chapman says the legal agreement between Aikman and the trust is a win-win for all concerned.

A conservation easement, while placing land use restrictions on a property, is set up

according to landowners' desires – allowing them to continue active use of the land, as long as that use is consistent with the easement conditions. The organization has created 13 conservation easements over the last quarter century. Each of them remains with the property, regardless of change of ownership.

Chapman says Hide-A-Way is special not just because of its glacial hills, but because of the steep slope cut by Buck Creek, a spot where centuries-old trees escaped a long-ago timber harvest. "There are ancient chinquapin oaks and really nice red oaks hanging on to the slope above the creek," he says.

"It's an important part of central Indiana that needs to be preserved," Chapman notes.

"There is development happening out there, and we're not opposed to development at all, but if a landowner says they have a special place and would like to do something to protect it, we can be there for them if everything aligns, and it did in this case."

Negotiations took two years to complete. The timing of the deal allowed Aikman to take advantage of a December 2015 bill signed into law by Congress that permanently increased tax incentives for donating conservation easements.

“When you put so much time into a place, you want to preserve it,” Aikman says, noting that portions of the land might be considered “prime building spots.” He calls the easement agreement “perfect” and expresses relief that the land will remain as it is in perpetuity.

Even years down the road, if an anonymous purchaser takes possession of the land, the conservation easement will stay in force.

“This place is very special to us,” Aikman says. “I always knew I wanted to protect it.”

“When we signed the paperwork,” Chapman remembers, “there were tears that day. It’s really neat that we were able to do something that was so important for him. ... He’s not going to be here forever, but he knows that land will be there forever, and our job is to defend it and keep it that way forever. No matter who owns it.”

Hide-A-Way Farms, 8949 Baker Road, Indianapolis, is open to visitors by appointment. Contact John Hale at johnahale@sbcglobal.net for more information.

For more information about Central Indiana Land Trust, visit conservingindiana.org (<http://conservingindiana.org>).



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