

In Memoriam of.. Don Forbis

by *Joe Ferriss & Cynthia Culbertson*
photos from Forbis collection

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He was always curious, always generous and always helpful.
He touched many lives and helped many people.
How fortunate it was to know him and how fortunate
for the Arabian horse as well.”



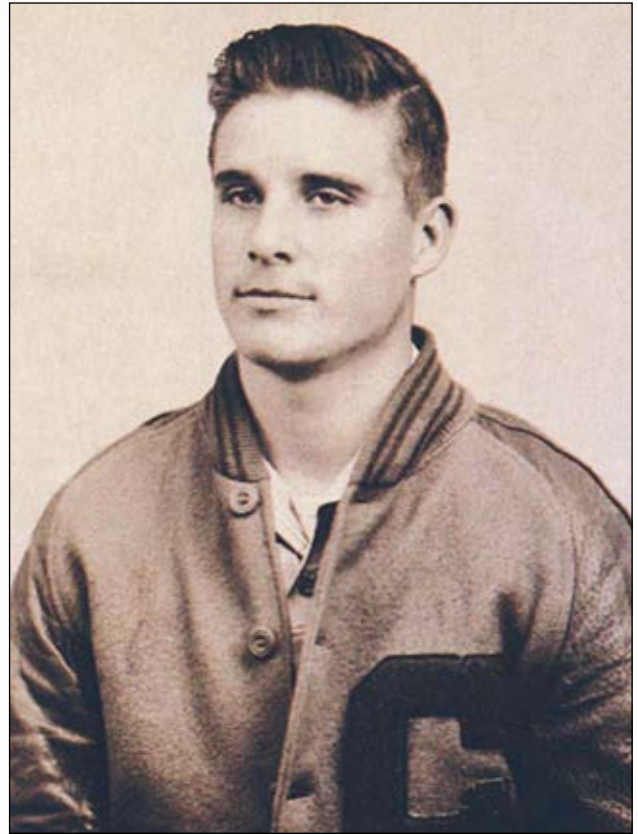
Don leading out his favorite buddy U.S. National Champion
Ansata Ibn Sudan (Ansata Ibn Halima x Ansata Bint Mabrouka)



Don with Ansata Ibn Sudan. Sparagowski photo

On January 10th of 2009 a memorial service and reception was held to celebrate the life of Donald Forbis who passed away in December 2008 at the age of 81. The world had lost half of one of the most famous couples in Arabian horse history – Donald and Judith Forbis, founders of the renowned Ansata Arabian Stud.

Don grew up in Chickasha, Oklahoma, riding, training and racing the family quarter horses while also becoming a local football star. During World War II he joined the Navy where he saw action in the Pacific. After attending Tulsa University, he was hired by the Halliburton Oil Company as a field services manager to work in countries around the world. In 1957 Don was assigned a position in Turkey where both fate and chance came together as he met Judith Freni who was also working there with the International Cooperation Administration.



Young Don Forbis, football star

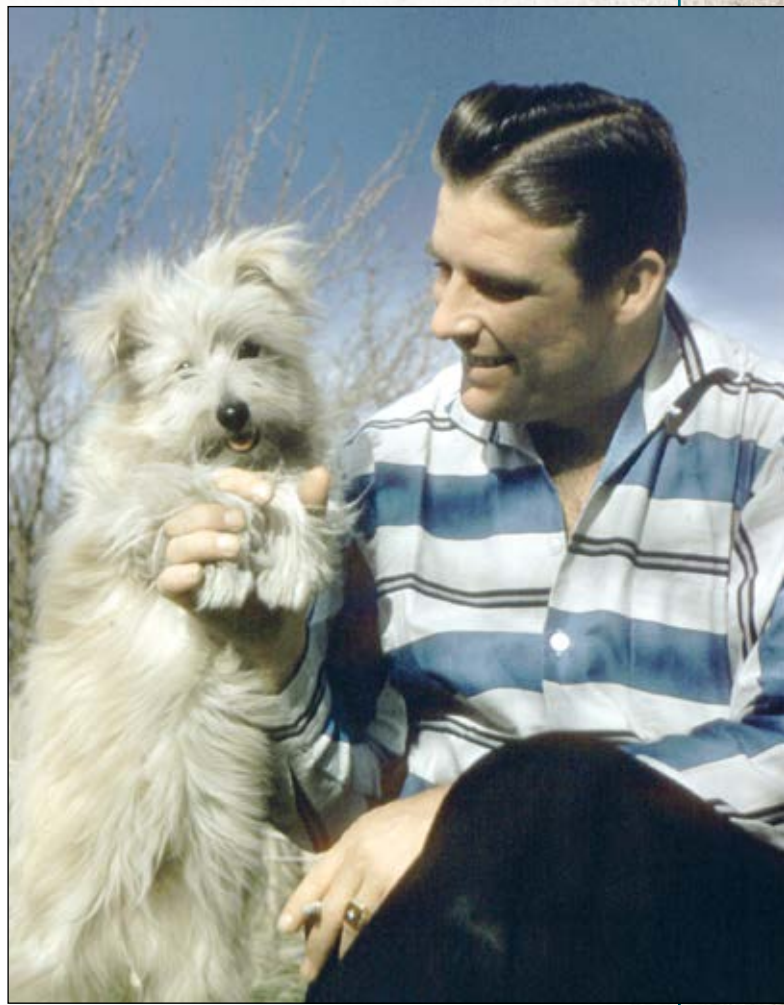
Ansata Arabian Stud in Mena, Arkansas
Sparagowski photo





Adventures in Turkey

Don and Judi were immediately attracted to each other and shared a mutual love for horses and other animals. In March of 1958 they married and shortly afterward became involved with racing Arabians in Turkey. It was quite a challenge for a western couple to compete against Turkish locals in horse racing especially with Judi Forbis being the jockey – an almost unthinkable event in this traditional society. Soon they won the respect throughout the region and developed a sincere appreciation of the people and culture of the Middle East. Then their quest began – the search for the ideal Arabian horse. Having traveled throughout the Near East visiting Bedouin and noblemen, princes and peasants, they gained the knowledge and experience that would lay the foundation for Ansata Arabian Stud.



Don in Turkey with one of his beloved dogs

The founding seeds for Ansata were discovered during their travels to Egypt where they selected the weanlings *Ansata Ibn Halima (Nazeer x Halima), *Ansata Bint Mabrouka (Nazeer x Mabrouka) and *Ansata Bint Zaafarana (Nazeer x Zaafarana), bringing them back to the U.S. in 1959. Later they were to import to the U.S. more significant horses from Egypt including the legendary Ansata Bint Bukra (Nazeer x Bukra). Through their remarkable combination of talent and artistic sensibility combined with wisdom, horsemanship skills and love of the Arabian horse, they became among the greatest breeders of Arabian horses in the world.

For five decades the Ansata experience has been a joyous triumph for Don and Judi Forbis as well as all who



Don Forbis showing Ansata El Nisr (Ansata Ibn Halima x Ansata Bint Zaafarana) to U.S. National Top Ten Stallion Championship



Don with Ansata Ibn Halima

love the Egyptian horse. One unforgettable memory is seeing Don with one of his favorite stallions, Ansata Ibn Sudan. It was such a sight, this ivory carved Adonis-U.S. National Champion stallion Ansata Ibn Sudan (*Ansata Ibn Halima x *Ansata Bint Mabrouka) being playfully led by this large, chiseled, Burt Lancaster like man. They were a memorable duo at many Arabian

horse presentations. While all eyes were on the splendid example of a noble and handsome Arabian stallion, it was clear that Sudan valued his handler as his equal.

In 2008 the Forbises celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary as well as five decades of breeding Arabian horses. Special events were created to honor this

Don and Judi Forbis on the fence of the EAO in 1959





Don, Judi and Ansata Ibn Halima at their Lufkin, Texas ranch before moving the Ansata farm to Mena, Arkansas in 1980
Sparagowski photo



HRH Princess Alia, Don and Dr. Hans Nagel

momentous occasion. A memorable celebration was held in their honor in Qatar hosted by the famed Al Rayyan stud and again in Lexington, Kentucky at the Pyramid Society's annual Egyptian Event. Sadly, shortly after this, it was discovered that Don Forbis had cancer, and although he fought a courageous battle it was one he could not win. Yet he was indeed victorious, living a long and glorious life, realizing his wishes and dreams, and most importantly giving to so many his generous wisdom and guidance.

As with all memorial gatherings it was with laughter and sadness, gratitude and lament that people from all over the globe gathered in Mena, Arkansas to pay tribute to this legendary figure, Don Forbis. The service was conducted by Father Joseph Tharakan and touching eulogies were given. First to speak was Judi Forbis, holding her the beloved family Chihuahua, Leezabeth, who had watched over Don's final moments sitting on his lap right to the end. Judi's tribute was deeply touching and it was followed by a who's who of speakers each relating the impact that Don had on them. They included: Dr. Hans Nagel from Germany, President of WAHO; Omar Sakr from Egypt, President of Egyptian Horse Breeders Association in Egypt; Henry Metz, President of The Pyramid Society, Gary Newcomb, President of First National Bank, Arkansas, and Bart Van Buggenhout, Manager of Al Rayyan Farm in Qatar. The service was concluded by a formal military funeral presentation of the American Flag conducted by several veterans and led by LTC Michael Stylianos, U.S. Army,



EAO Filly with Don

an Egyptian Arabian breeder inspired by the Forbises. The reception which followed was filled with people taking turns telling colorful stories about Don's special sayings and bits of wisdom, as well as the legendary adventures of being a passenger in anything that Don was driving or piloting. It became clear that he was a larger-than-life figure who touched many people worldwide. Christie Metz lovingly prepared a special booklet filled with pictures and written memories by many who knew Don Forbis. The comments and stories revealed that Don Forbis affected many lives with his humor, wisdom and generosity of spirit.

From my own perspective, Don was a combination of father figure and "buddy." I often drove down to Arkansas to work with Judi on producing the books she was writing. Judi and I would work long hours in the big barn office or in her study. Once in awhile Don would take me aside and say, "it's time to take a break!" So off for the long drive to town we would go with a grocery list for Judi. Riding 'shotgun' with Don was as adventurous as a wild west stagecoach ride. I did not know it was possible to careen around curves at that speed on the Arkansas back roads, scattering gravel along the way. But somehow I felt safe in that big Cadillac with this seasoned pilot, surrounded by lots of steel. We would talk about clever ways to repair things and about one of my favorite subjects: old cars. Don would get enthusiastically engrossed in the conversation – so much so that when we returned back to the farm Judi would discover that he forgot one of the most

important items on the grocery list. But he would just shake his head and say in a frustrated voice, "C'mon Joe we're going back to town right now!" So off we went for one single item. I remember one trip when he told me about a rumor an old farmer had relayed to him -- tucked away in the back woods of Ansata, way back off the trail that leads down to the stables were some rare old cars, rusting out in the wilderness. No one had been back there in decades. Don had wanted to investigate but knowing how much I loved old cars, he waited until I could go with him. He said it was reported that there were Terraplanes, Studebakers and all kinds of rare cars. So one time we hiked way back into the woods and sure enough we encountered a small gravesite for a few old cars, mostly from the 1950s. We were both as excited as kids at a candy store. We discovered some of the cars had been poached and stripped long ago. There were no Terraplanes but there were still some interesting steel carcasses, including a huge 1958 Oldsmobile. I told Don there was enough chrome on this vehicle that you could sell it off and pay the Ansata electric bill for a year! He had a big laugh and then we decided to let all of it rest in peace and as far as I know no one has ever been back there again. But it was the joy of discovery I shared with Don that always reminded me of his youthful side that lingered all of his years.

Cynthia Culbertson, who has known the Forbises since she was a teenager, also has many fond memories of Don: "In 1979 I took a year off from my university Arabic studies to go work at Ansata, which was a dream come true for a young enthusiast of the Egyptian Arabian



horse. Don was always kind, generous and fatherly to me. He consistently referred to those younger than him as 'you kids.' I must say this never changed, and it always brought a huge smile to my face to be referred to as a kid when I was grown and had a 'kid' of my own. He was also a consummate gentleman of the old school, protective and courtly with the ladies. Some of my favorite memories with Don were at shows like the Salon du Cheval where Judi was judging and he and I would sit in the audience and talk. I loved hearing stories of the Arabian peninsula in his early days in the oil fields. Aside from the horses, this was a man who could personally document times and places that would never be known to many of us. He



Ansata Ibn Halima with Tom McNair and Ansata Ibn Sudan with Don at Ibn's 20th birthday party



was also enormously proud of Judi and her many accomplishments and never missed an opportunity to express that pride to others. As we would watch a beautiful horse trot into the arena, a vision of the classic type for which Ansata was renowned, Don would turn to me and say, “That one looks like it has a bit of ‘old IB’ in him, referring to their beloved foundation stallion, *Ansata Ibn Halima. And sure enough he was right!”

After the reception for Don was over, many gathered in the evening at the Forbis residence for more stories and memories. Just before sunset, a group drove to the old Ansata Arabian Stud, which had been sold, for one more memory. We gathered at the gravesite of Ansata Ibn Halima, Ansata Ibn Sudan and other famous legends from the breeding program, to propose a toast to Don and for all that Don and Judi have done for the Arabian horse. It was noted that later a portion of Don’s ashes will be scattered at this same site.



Don Forbis with Sheikh Abdul Aziz Al-Thani during the Forbis 50th anniversary celebration in Qatar



Don and Judi being inducted into the Arabian Horse Trust's Tent of Honor in 1988

Judi Forbis continues her dedicated work on behalf of the Egyptian Arabian horse including working in Qatar on an Arabian Horse heritage project as well as advising various breeders of Ansata bloodstock.

Don will always remain alive in the hearts of all who knew him. He was great builder and creator of things. He was always curious, always generous and always helpful. He touched many lives and helped many people.

As Judith Forbis often recalls:

“That which we hold in memory remains ours, unchanged, forever.”

Seventeen years have gone quickly by since he passed away. How fortunate it was to have known him and how fortunate for the Arabian horse as well. □