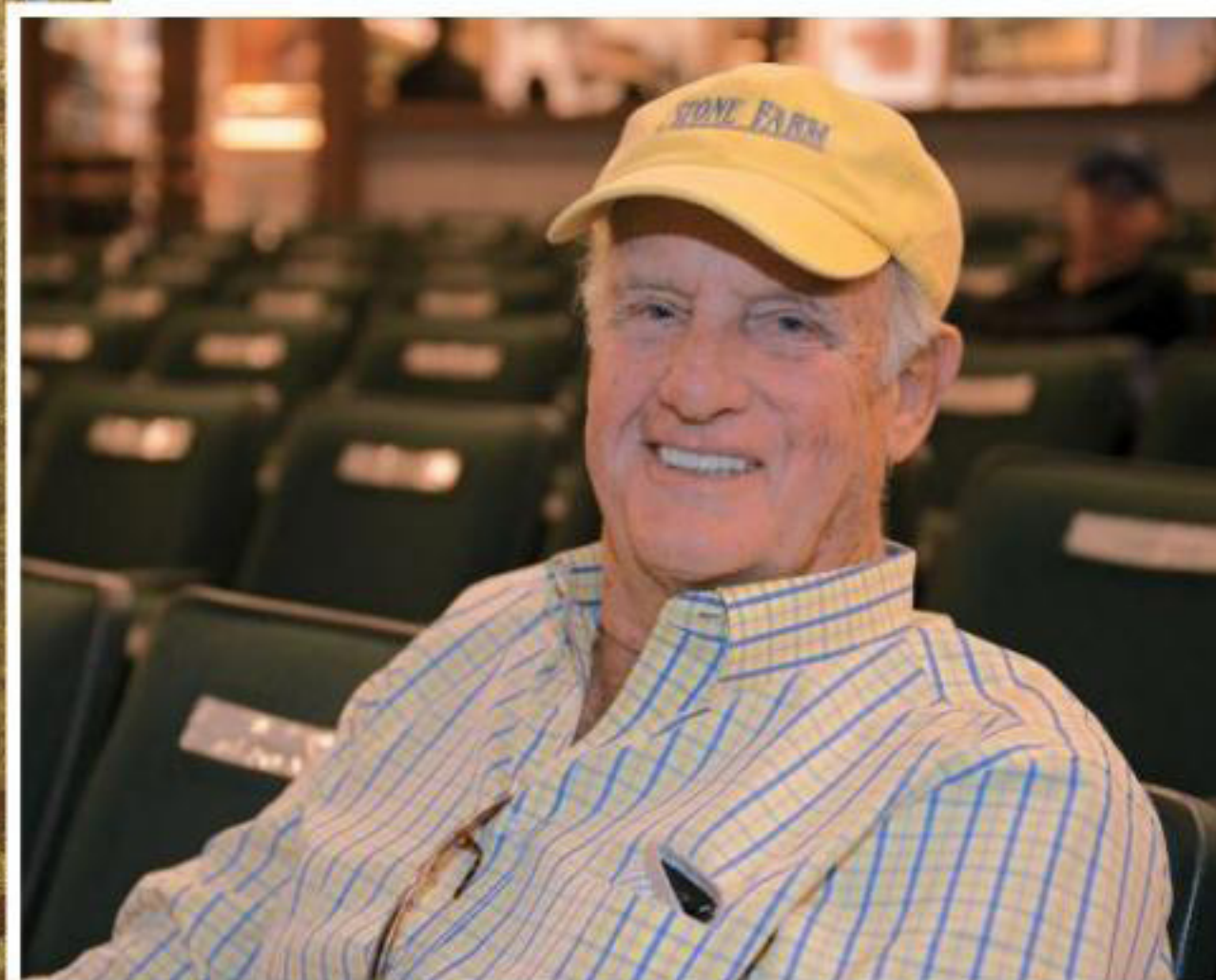





Arthurian Legend

Arthur Hancock III, who has always done things his way, prepares the next generation of his family to guide his storied Stone Farm

By Lenny Shulman




Arthur Hancock III has nurtured Stone Farm for 50 years.



hat began as a short-term, coming-of-age test has blossomed into a 50-year success story. And what could have been a Shakespearean tragedy has instead become a feel-good triumph filled with comedy that is barreling toward a gratifying, next-generation succession.

Arthur Hancock III, scion of the Thoroughbred world's most famous family, was sent by his father six miles down Winchester Road from his home at legendary Claiborne Farm a

half-century ago to prove himself as a horseman. Although oddsmakers of that time would have considered him a decided longshot, Hancock, with a significant chip on his shoulder,



Hancock learned the importance of good land for raising good horses from his father, Arthur B. "Bull" Hancock Jr.

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Sunday Silence, a horse no one initially wanted, won the 1989 Kentucky Derby and Preakness Stakes for Hancock and partners.

became a masterful breeder, raiser, seller, and owner of champions and high-class Thoroughbreds, and has made Stone Farm one of the most respected operations in the world.

One need only look to 2019 Horse of the Year and champion turf male Bricks and Mortar, who was born and raised on Stone Farm for longtime client George Strawbridge Jr., as proof of Hancock's acumen. Earlier, Hancock co-bred and co-owned Kentucky Derby winner Gato Del Sol, raised and co-owned dual classic winner Sunday Silence, and co-bred Derby victor Fusaichi Pegasus. He has not slowed down. In the past five years Stone Farm has bred grade 1 winners Air Force Blue, Ascend, Mastery, and Roadster.

Hancock utilizes the storytelling ability of a songwriter, which he is, to entertain friends and clients. And he sprinkles in a touch of metaphysics, often taking omens to heart, such as when he observed a hot-air balloonist take to the sky near Stone Farm the morning Ascend won the grade 1 Woodford Reserve Manhattan Stakes in 2017.

Tall and thin now in his mid-70s, Hancock, known as "Hawk" to his friends, was running on parallel tracks back in the 1960s. He had inherited blood as a master horseman, a vocation begun by his great-grandfather, Capt. Richard J. Hancock, who had learned about horses while serving in the Confederate Army in Virginia. After the Civil War, Hancock established Ellerslie and built it into a thriving horse farm. The

Captain's son, Arthur B. Hancock, took to the horses as well and moved to Kentucky after courting and marrying Nancy Clay, a Bourbon County native. They began Claiborne in 1912.



Hancock leased Stone Farm before taking the helm after his father's death in 1972.

Arthur B. "Bull" Hancock Jr. came along, helping his father build Claiborne into the premier breeding station in the United States by mixing domestic and imported

equine blood to create superior racehorses. But his son Arthur III was not prepared to walk a straight line from his lineage into the future. Much to his father's disapproval, Hancock heard the siren call of music and developed a love for bluegrass and country, and devoted much of his time to that pursuit. He also developed a taste for hard drinking and good times, even while excelling at Vanderbilt University as a star on the swim team.

After singing on a local radio station one night, Hancock returned to Claiborne, where his father greeted him caustically: "Look, here comes the canary." Bull Hancock had devoted much time to teaching his eldest son the ropes of the horse business, and he feared those lessons were being wasted. Father and son had a difficult relationship, which Arthur III took pains to improve after college.

He went to New York for a year, working in the barn of trainer Eddie Neloy to learn the racetrack side of the horse business. Returning to Claiborne in 1967, Arthur



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Kentucky Derby trophies and other gilded prizes of the Turf attest to Hancock's success.

III worked for his father three years before Bull Hancock passed down a family tradition to him.

"He had Stone Farm, which was 100 acres, which he leased to me, and told me to go run the farm and pay the bills," Hancock said. "That was 1970. My grandfather had sent Daddy to Ellerslie in Virginia for a year as well. Granddaddy said to him, 'Make it pay and I'll hire you back; if you don't, go on and do something else.' This was the same kind of deal. Daddy didn't tell me in those words, but he did tell me



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what my grandfather had told him.”

Hancock went to earning his keep immediately. Punctilious, a mare he bought for \$13,000, hit with The Pruner, who became a three-time stakes winner of nearly \$300,000. Hancock bred Punctilious to the Claiborne stallion Forli and got a colt he couldn't sell because of a bump on its leg. The legendary trainer Vincent O'Brien liked the colt and told Hancock he would bring the “lucky” Englishman, Charles St. George, in to co-own the horse with Hancock.

“You don't think luck really matters, do you?” Hancock asked O'Brien. “I think it means everything,” O'Brien answered.

“That was Dapper, the first horse I ever named,” Hancock said of the homebred who won the 1973 Gladness and Tetrarch stakes. “I sold pieces of him

“
IT'S A PEOPLE
BUSINESS, AND
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—Arthur Hancock

for a lot of money, and that helped get me going.”

Hancock, though, would not get the opportunity to return to Claiborne and work with his father. Bull Hancock died unexpectedly in 1972 when his elder son was still at Stone Farm. Arthur returned to Claiborne for several months before the executors and advisers who had the decision-making power over the farm decided that Arthur's younger brother, Seth, would be a better choice to captain the Claiborne ship going forward.

“I was the oldest son, and my expectation was that I would run Claiborne,” noted Arthur. “And I was happy to run it with Seth. But he was married and more settled than I was, and he's certainly done a great job there.”

Hancock could have stayed on at Claiborne but bristled at the thought of having to answer to his



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father's major clients, who wielded considerable power within Claiborne.

"I knew I didn't want to work that way," Hancock said. "I've got one life to live, and I knew I had to see what I could do on my own. So I resigned, got in my car, and drove out of Claiborne with tears coming down my face. I met my friend Paul Sullivan at a bar and told him, 'One of these days I'm gonna win the Kentucky Derby and be bigger than Claiborne.' And he turned to the waitress and said, 'Bring this fool another Budweiser.'"

The lessons visited on the son by his father didn't go for naught. Along with the guitar pickin' and the hard living, Hancock had soaked up the generations of knowledge imparted to him. And he had that knack for good fortune as well.

"[Legendary breeder] Warner Jones looked at me one time, and said, 'God-damn, you're lucky.' And that's probably what it's all about," said Hancock. "But my father taught me very well. I knew what I was doing. He showed me how to judge good horses. I watched mares foal. Spent nights with the vet treating horses. Daddy taught me about having good, fresh land; good water. He was taught by his father, who was taught by his father. That was a lot of knowledge being picked up and passed along.

"One day I remember Daddy telling me, 'I'm not as smart as some of these sons of bitches, but I'll outwork them all.'" Hancock, in his Stone Farm office, pointed to a brass plaque above the fireplace that reads, "The only happiness in life is a job well done." "That's what Daddy thought, and that's one thing I can look back 50 years and say: I've always worked hard."

By 1974, Hancock had tripled the size of Stone Farm and built a stallion barn.

BOBBY SHIFLET/FRAMES ON MAIN PHOTOS

Hancock, who delights in storytelling and believes in omens, would find significance in the appearance of a rainbow over Stone Farm or a cat outside a particular barn.



Arthurian Legend



RICK SAMUELS/THE TONY LEONARD COLLECTION, RIGHT



THE TONY LEONARD COLLECTION

Arthur and Staci Hancock, married for 43 years, have raised six children. The young family joins Sunday Silence in a 1989 photo.

Some connections from the music world such as songwriter Bobby Russell (“Little Green Apples” and “Honey”) and singer/guitarist Ray Price sent mares to board, as did Roy Bowen, Leone Peters, and Ike McReynolds. Hancock was off and running.

“I’ve always said that when you see a turtle on a fencepost, he didn’t get there by himself,” Hancock noted. “Those clients over the years have trusted me, and we’ve liked each other. It’s a people business, and you have to make a personal connection.”

Hancock made a crucial personal connection while on the Keeneland sales grounds in the mid-1970s at Warner Jones’ barn. He asked Jones about a pretty blonde girl who was showing horses.

“Her name is Staci Worthington,” growled Jones, who was every bit the rogue that the young Hancock was. “You leave her alone. She’s a nice girl.”

Staci and Arthur Hancock have been married 43 years. And Staci brought more good luck. Five years after their wedding, Stone Farm homebred Gato Del Sol won the 1982 Kentucky Derby, fulfilling a dream.

And it wasn’t lost on Hancock that he won the Derby before Claiborne turned the trick two years later with Swale.



RICK SAMUELS



BOBBY SHIFFLETT/HANES ON MAIN

Staci Hancock champions Thoroughbred aftercare and helped bring Gato Del Sol home in 2000.

After Arthur had built Stone up to its present-day 2,200 acres, the tax laws changed, and suddenly he was overexposed, and the farm’s future was very much in doubt. Raising a young family, Staci became the bedrock of the operation.

“Arthur was pretty good about hiding his 2 a.m. walks, fretting about how we were going to make it,” she said. “It was a stressful time for the entire industry. So reaching 50 years is a big achievement, a big deal. It’s great, especially for Arthur who put himself out there and tried to do it on his own.”

Arthur Hancock credits Sunday Silence for saving the farm. A horse that nobody except Hancock wanted, the son of Halo, out of Wishing Well, was a sickly foal on the farm and nothing much to look at. Hancock unwittingly obtained him when the colt’s breeder turned him loose, and, in the hands of trainer and co-owner Charlie Whittingham, Sunday Silence became one of the most celebrated and significant horses in the Thoroughbred breed. He not only won the Kentucky Derby, Preakness Stakes, and Breeders’ Cup Classic in 1989 (defeating Ogden Phipps’ highly regarded Easy Goer in each race) for Hancock and partners, he also went on to become one of the great stallions of all time, albeit in

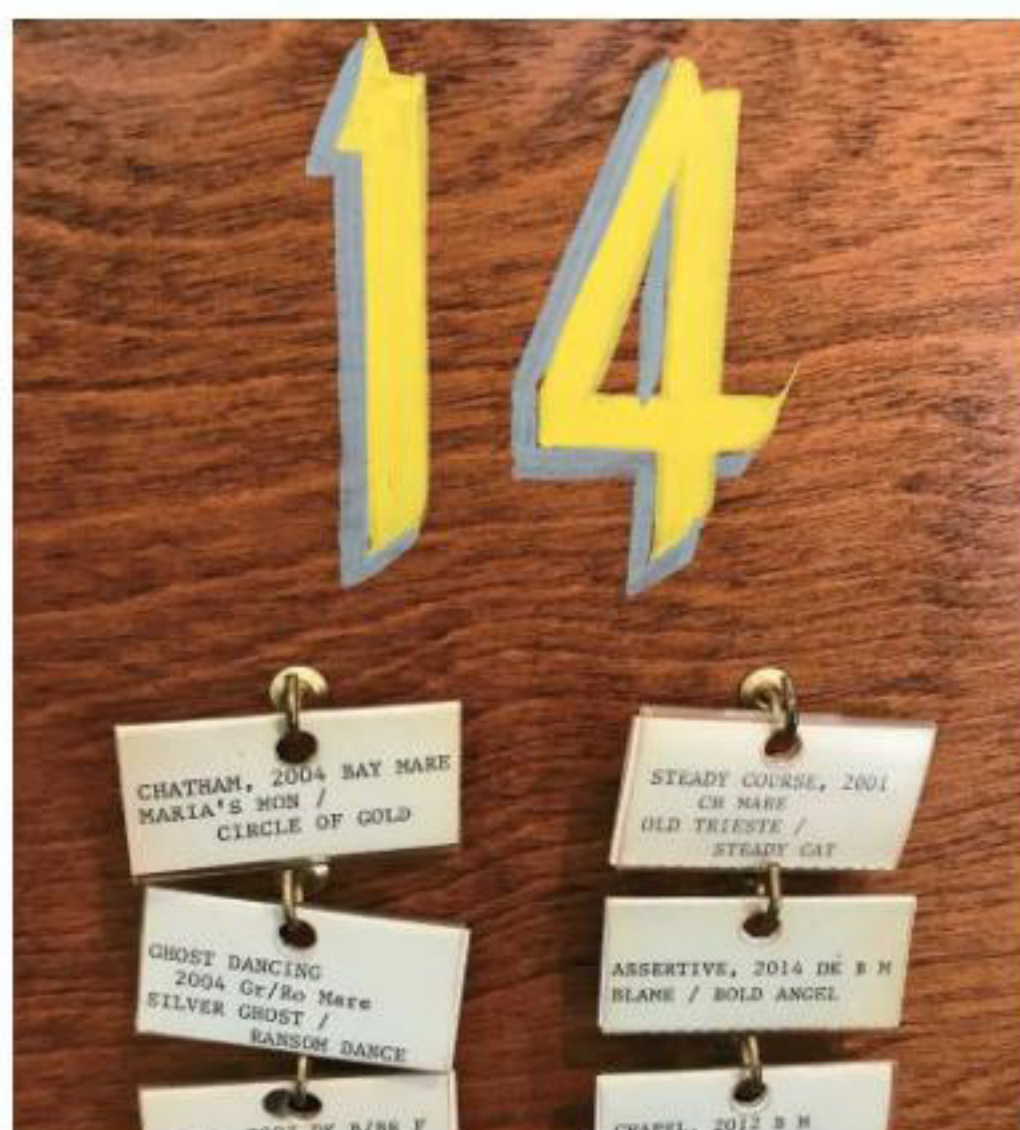
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The foaling barn has yielded Gato Del Sol, Sunday Silence, and Fusaichi Pegasus, along with Preakness/Belmont winner Risen Star.



The mare America welcomes her newborn Uncle Mo foal.



Tags identify the mare residents of barn 14. Right, a lawn jockey sports the Stone Farm colors.



Japan after Hancock could not find domestic breeders interested in the colt.

Staci and Arthur have raised six children, all daughters except for Arthur IV ("Little Arthur" to most, although that is a misnomer). And therein lies the succession plan at Stone Farm. While Arthur IV has worked at the farm and at horse sales, he is currently following his love of bluegrass music as a banjo player, the apple having fallen not far from the tree.

Thirty-something daughters Alex and Lynn are now working full time at the farm, sponging up yet another generation's worth of knowledge that will serve Stone well going forward. Both have traveled the world following their scholastic careers, and each has decided there is no better life than continuing the family heritage.

"I lived in France and in Chicago, where I studied comedy with Second City, but I knew I really didn't want that," said Alex. "I always wanted to live

here and be around horses, and there was a big pull to come back home."

Added Lynn, "There is a strong place association with Kentucky. It was valuable to have experiences elsewhere, but growing up here with the horses, it's like something out of a storybook. And the fact Dad built this business and created something special, and having the ability to learn from him..."

Their parents are delighted with their daughters' participation. "I think all our kids have picked up on our interest in the land and the horses," Staci said. "I'm thrilled Alex and Lynn are here and stepping up as young women in the business. They both had to work for these positions. Their father didn't just hand it to them, which is good."

Staci has also become an important figure in the industry. She is the founder of WHOA, the Water Hay Oats Alliance that has been lobbying to remove drugs from the sport, a position that has gained momentum, especial-

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Daughters Lynn, left, and Alex review stallion information with their father. Above and at right, Stone Farm encompasses 2,200 acres and includes a training track.

ly since the spate of breakdowns at Santa Anita Park in 2019, which traumatized the Thoroughbred world.

"I began as an advocate more than 20 years ago going back to Exceller," said Staci, referring to the star racehorse who was slaughtered in Sweden when his breeding career ended. "I was shocked that such a horse could come to an end like that. It woke me up, and I got involved in the anti-slaughter movement. When we were able to bring Gato back home from Germany, that was one of the best things in my life," she said, referring to the Kentucky Derby winner who returned to Stone Farm after his stallion career ended.

"I got involved in the political side of it and have continued with anti-slaughter and medication issues. Arthur has been talking about the medication issue for 30 years, and it's been great working together," she added.

Today, WHOA boasts 1,850 members and has helped lead the push to pass the Horse Racing Integrity Act, which is now co-sponsored by a majority of the House of Representatives and nearly a quarter of the U.S. Senate.

The act would create uniformity in medication regulations nationwide and put enforcement in the hands of the independent United States Anti-Doping Agency, which handles such chores for the U.S. Olympic teams.

"This is truly a bipartisan effort at a time when you don't see much of that," said Staci. "Let's try to fix this. Our fans don't want drugs in the sport; they contribute to breakdowns. It's important to show industry support for the act, and I feel encouraged."

Arthur Hancock's success with horses hasn't come completely at the expense of his other passion. He has put out several collec-

tions of original tunes, and his songs have ended up in the hands of musical giants. Willie Nelson and Ray Price recorded Hancock's "Run That By Me One More Time," and Grandpa Jones, Tex Ritter, and Bobby Osborne of the Osborne Brothers have put his compositions to vinyl.

Whatever the playing field, Hancock has put up winning points, sometimes under the most difficult of circumstances. Asked whether his exile from Claiborne had been injurious or inspiring, Hancock paused before replying. "It's my life, and I wanted to see what I could do with it. I remember thinking I may end up driving a truck and writing songs. But I wanted to prove something to myself and to everybody else that I could do it. The driving force was I wanted to be on the farm, close to nature, and raise horses."

Mission accomplished. **KM**



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