

Imprints
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— by Dianne Fay —

Much like the landscape, our New Mexico horse community is varied, vital, colorful, active, and thriving. What we are now didn't just happen. Throughout every phase of growth, there have been those special folks who have left their marks, their *Imprints*. They are worth knowing. We will introduce you to some of them who have had a lasting influence on what we now enjoy. Some *Imprints* were larger than others, some smaller, but all are important.

Dianne

Merry Cole

Merry was born with “show biz” in her blood. Her parents were professional puppeteers known as The Cole Marionettes and, as a child and into her teens, Merry performed with her parents throughout the Midwest. In addition, she performed as a trapeze artist and was a popcorn vendor at a circus where she also had a dog act and rode the elephants in various specialty acts. When not working, Merry took every opportunity to watch the bareback riders and became totally enchanted with the activity.

After graduating college, Merry married Alan Cole — yes, same name. Her name became Merry Mirth Cole Cole. At that time, Alan was in the Air Force. After his assignment in England, they returned to the United States in the fall of 1957, where Alan taught at the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs. The Coles were, of course, active in the local theater group. It was there that Merry purchased a horse and was involved with a mounted, square dance team known as The Saddle Bags and their Dancing Nags. Prior to this, Merry did not know how to ride. However, as a result of being drafted into this group, she quickly learned. By now, Merry and Alan had three children; all of them became involved in Drill Team riding.

From Colorado, the family moved to Virginia where Merry and the children became interested in Pony Club activities. The club that the Coles joined, of which she later became DC (President), was one of the three largest in Virginia and sponsored various instructive “camps” for members. One featured a clinician who arrived with her vaulting horse and gave instruction.

Merry's daughter, Merry Jr., announced that she wanted to vault. What was a mother to do? They attended the clinic. As fate would have it, Merry, because of her fascination with bareback riding and vaulting, had been looking for this particular clinician for some time. The woman was selling a book about how to teach vaulting, which

Merry quickly acquired. And, with book in hand, Merry began her career in vaulting. After a time, with Merry as primary “mover and shaker,” vaulting became so popular that she found it necessary to relinquish her position as DC to concentrate on her first love.

As with all equestrian disciplines, special tack was needed. Merry said, “I knew I needed a vaulting surcingle but they were quite expensive, and my funds were pretty low.” While visiting a tack shop in Maryland, she came across a used, Kieffer surcingle. After some haggling, Merry walked out with the prized and much needed surcingle. The pieces were slowly coming together.

It was now time to find the horse(s) that would wear that surcingle. Merry tried out a few of the horses in the stable, none of them worked. Though disappointed, she continued to look for just the “right” horses.

It was serendipitous that a woman called and told Merry that she had a horse that just might fit into the vaulting program. That mare, Topaz, became the first vaulting horse in Virginia. The owner, Chris Bucerika, became Merry's first assistant coach. Chris, still in Virginia, teaches and has her own team. Though Topaz is long gone, she is remembered fondly for her contribution to vaulting.

During that first year, 10 children from the Pony Club received first level trot awards. From this the Great Falls Pony Club Vaulting Team was formed. The club celebrates its thirtieth year in 2009. It was the first and is the largest vaulting team on the East Coast, and Merry can look back with pride for having contributed so much to this entity.

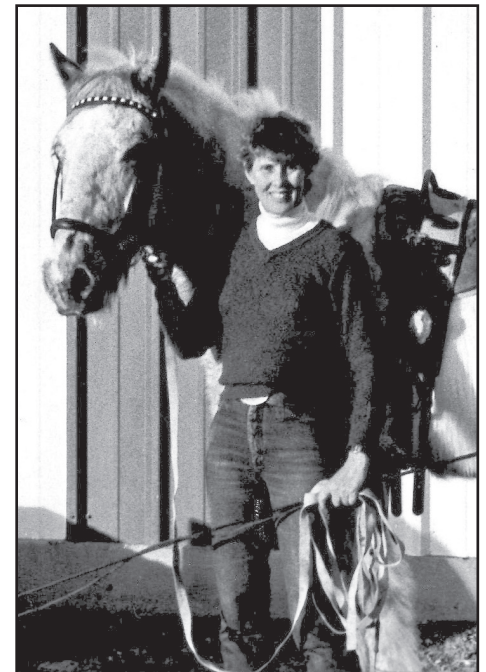
Vaulting was born in Europe. Noted “O” rated Dressage judge, Liz Searle, brought it here from Germany. With Jeff Moore, her star pupil and now an “O” rated judge himself, Liz established vaulting in the United States. Merry worked with Jeff on the first committee related to vaulting for the United States Pony Club and has been

on the board of the American Vaulting Association since 1978.

While in Great Falls, she formed a team comprised of the best vaulters from various Pony Clubs. They competed in and won their first Vaulting Trot competition held in California. As she said, “It was such a cool victory for the new group.”

Alan and Merry moved to New Mexico in 1989 where, once again, Merry started from scratch. However, this time, she had her vaulting practice barrel; Potomac Express, a vaulting horse; and daughter Merry Jr., who was by now a Silver Level Vaulting, a “B” Pony Clubber, and a Training Level Eventer.

Merry taught and boarded her horses at Carlo's Stable, formerly the Rio Grande Equestrian Center, on Rio Grande Blvd. in Los Ranchos. She soon had 20 students and needed a larger facility. So the group was moved to the Pennybacker's stable and then to the Double L Stable. It was there that



1989 — Merry Cole with Potomac Express at Carlo's Stables, formerly Rio Grande Equestrian Center.

Merry realized her dream of bringing her present and former teams together when the team from Great Falls, Virginia, came to New Mexico. The Albuquerque Vaulters and the Virginia team worked together for a month prior to traveling to the Nationals in California.

While Merry was moving from one location to another, many of today's New Mexico equestriennes were starting their careers through vaulting. Denise Marino, Heather Robison, Sarah Williams, Anaclair Green, Stacy Galassin, Cheryl Teasdale, Susan Oaks, and Anne Schulte are but a few of those who can credit Merry for their debuts into other arenas of competition.

After three years Merry truly needed a permanent and workable location. Every Sunday, Alan and Merry would go out looking for property. In 1991, they finally found the perfect location in Corrales and have been there since.

From the time she started vaulting in New Mexico, Merry thought that there was a significant need to lure a national vaulters' event to her turf. Such an event would give much needed exposure to this activity. When the 1991 National Competition of the American Vaulting Association was held at Expo New Mexico, it was the first time that the event had been held outside of California. Teams attended from both coasts and points in between. This entailed a huge effort on the part of the local vaulting group. Not only was the event successful, but it introduced the sport to many who did not know it existed and/or wanted to know more.

The horses, of course, play an integral part in all of this. Merry looks first for horses with good dispositions. The average age is six years old (plus) and the preferred height is 16 to 17½ hands tall. A surprising amount of training goes into each horse because they, as well as the riders, are judged. She likes big horses with an ample amount of room on their backs, for obvious reasons. In Europe, the Warmbloods are popular. In the United States, Draft horses are more often the choice. Color is not a consideration. All horses must be trained to FEI standards. Merry's horses are kept fit in the off season by hunting with the Juan Tomas Hounds. At present, the Albuquerque Vaulters are working with five horses in varying stages of training.

To Merry's credit, she has produced numerous National Championships. However, she is most proud of the legacy she is leaving. Previous vaulters bring their children and

grandchildren to Merry. She has seen shy children gain confidence through vaulting.

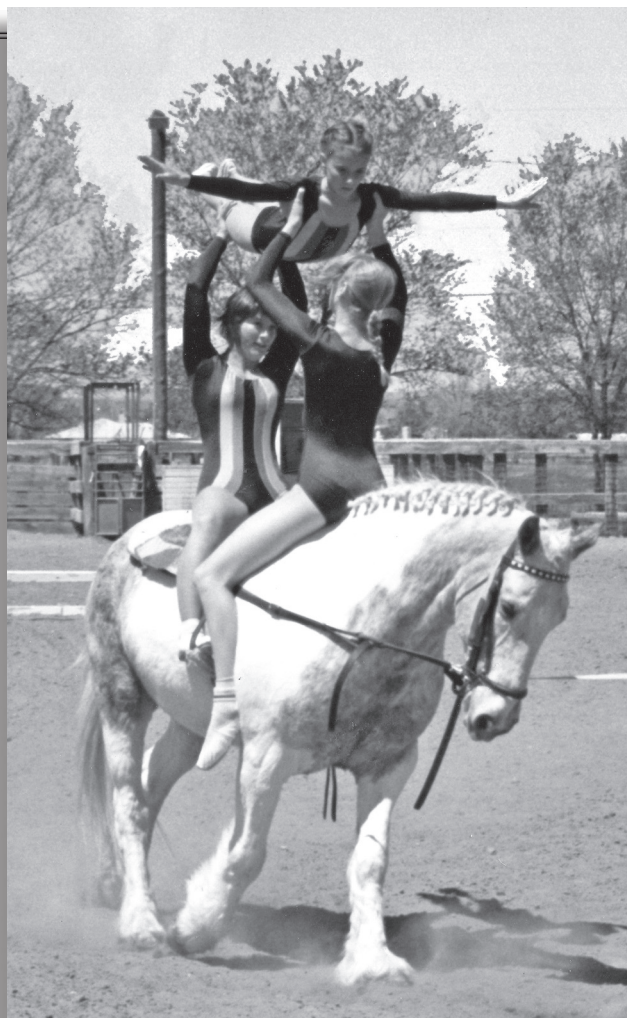
Because of her show business background, Merry has introduced her students to costumed demonstrations and Renaissance-themed events. Through these events they have gained a sense of history. Other benefits are coordination, balance, strength, creativity, trust, teamwork, responsibility, and self protection from falling. Vaulting boasts of having the best safety record of any equestrian sport. And . . . it is FUN! It serves as a positive base for sports and dance as well. She has seen evidence of these skills being carried throughout the lives of her students. Further, unlike other equestrian pursuits, the financial considerations are greatly reduced. Because vaulting is a team sport, costs are shared by all the members of the team.

Merry was the first in this region to do a vaulting show in conjunction with a competition. Colorado and Texas have followed suit and Theatrical Vaulting is now commonplace.

At the 2001 National Annual Meeting of The American Vaulting Association, Merry received the "Mentor of the Year for 2000" award. She has an impressive array of ribbons and medals on display among the gallery of photographs of her students.

Her advice for anyone who wants to get into vaulting is that they should have a flair for showmanship along with the ability to do a memorable presentation that is well choreographed. Merry feels that she has "closed the circle" that started with her parents and circled back to her and her daughter and granddaughters. Granddaughter, Hayley Hanson, has recently been added to the coaching staff.

Merry is never without a goal. Her current project is to get as many of her vaulters as possible to the Kentucky Horse Park in Lexington, Kentucky, for the 2009 National Championships that will be held from July 9-12. As if that isn't enough, she hopes to qualify two horses for the World Equestrian Games. This event will also be held at the Kentucky Horse Park, October 6-10, 2010.



1988, Albuquerque Vaulters at Bosque Farms Arena — Heather Drager, the "flyer," is held aloft by Cheryl Teasdale (left) and Merry Hanson (right).

We are richer for having this dedicated horsewoman in our midst. She has truly made a difference in the lives of so many. Where we once asked, "What is vaulting?" We now know. Thank you, Merry; your journey, though long, continues. The legacy you are forging, like your *Imprint*, is deep and long-lasting.



We are aware that there are many folks out there who belong in this series. If you know of someone(s), please let us know. You may e-mail Dianne Fay at Bolero24@msn.com

Dianne Fay, a published equestrian writer/photographer, has lived in New Mexico since 1973. She was director and instructor of the Rio Grande Equestrian Center, the Turkey Track Dressage School, and the Benchmark School of Classical Horsemanship. She has trained and showed horses in a variety of disciplines for more than 40 years.