

## WinkWorld March - April 2006

Tucson, AZ, March 3, 2006

Ranch property of Mrs. Bazy Tankersley, a legendary Southwest Arabian Horse Woman and Long-time Supporter of Children and Community

### **Kids + Books + Horses = Literacy**

*The school bus pulled to a stop, and dust, from my dear desert, flew in all directions. A small hand reached out of the open window and waved at me. The hand soon disappeared inside the bus and soon reappeared. This time the little hand was wildly waving a book-I had just been introduced to the **Black Stallion Literacy Project**. Soon the child came off the bus, clutching his copy of *Little Black, A Pony* by Walter Farley. Black eyes twinkling and grinning from ear to ear, he ran to the horse pen and madly began searching for the ~real~ little black pony.*

Every now and then, we unexpectedly find hope in the future. This is exactly what was given to me recently when my friend and colleague of many years, Dr. F&eqcute; Brittain, invited me to come watch children read to horses. What? Read to horses?!

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Read on, as Fé tells her story.

The children lined up in the dust of the barn to pet *Swashbuckler*, affectionately known as "Swash," a magnificent Arabian white stallion. I moved forward to guide the little ones, as they stroked the large animal. Petting *Swash* along with the children was my reward.

Mrs. Tankersley has long supported education, and particularly of children's reading development. This week 2500 first grade children were visiting the horse ranch from Tucson's schools. Many of the children came from lower socio-economic communities and had never experienced horses. Some of them did not yet speak, much less read, in English. Their families often struggled to pay bills and had very little left over for books, much less trips to the country life.

The previous week in the participating schools, the first grade classes had read *Little Black, A Pony*, and the children were eager to tell the story. Small groups of 20 to 25 children sat on the hay bales in semi circles around the horses, enclosed in pens, which served as an activity center. Each center focused on a different aspect of horses: tack, feeding, grooming, and horse shoeing. Each short session concluded with the children petting the horse and reading to the horse. Throughout the morning, the children rotated among the centers in the horse barns.

At my station, first I talked with the children about shoes and horses; I told them that even horses, as big as Swash, needed shoes. The horse handler lifted each of Swashbuckler's feet to show his iron shoes. Then, I asked for a "brave" volunteer, but before I could even finish my sentence, most of the hands were enthusiastically waving in the air. I continued and explained that I was going to "shoe" the volunteer, and eventually I chose a quiet little girl to help me demonstrate.

The plastic bucket held quite an array of fierce-looking tools. As the brave little girl stood with her back to the other students, she held on to the fence, as I placed her raised foot between my knees. I proceeded with my farrier work, and grabbed the rasp, a huge metal file, and pretended to file her little shoe. Next, I took the snippers, a monstrous pair of clippers, and pretended to cut off any rough edges from the bottom of her shoe. Finally, I reached into the bucket and took a huge, heavy horse shoe, long nails, and big hammer, and I began to "pound" on her foot. During each phase of the process, I heard the other students say, "oooooh" and "ahhhh," and I would yell out to the little girl, "Does it hurt?" Giggles followed. Eventually, I was able to "shoe" each little first grader, who, without exception, checked the bottom of his/her "shod" shoe.

Next, the children took turns reading a portion of *Little Black, A Pony*. One-by-one each came forward and stood close to the fence and, nose-to-nose, each read to the large stallion.

We, adults, who had volunteered to be presenters, remembered an event, which happened the previous year when a large group of 4th graders was safely loaded into their school busses, only to find out that one student was missing. (Every teacher's nightmare!) In a bit of a panic, we all began to search the barns and surrounding mesquite bushes. "Maria, Maria," we yelled. Finally, to the relief of all, we heard, "She's here. She's here." We ran to that barn, and there was Maria, all alone, quietly and happily reading to one of the Arabian horses.

The teacher returned with tears in her eyes and Maria by the hand. "In the years she has been with us, she has never read aloud in class. In fact, I did not even know that she could read," the teacher said.

Wondrous things do happen when children get to read to horses.

Al-Marah Arabian Horses and Mrs. Bazy Tankersley  
[www.al-marah.com](http://www.al-marah.com)

The Black Stallion Literacy Project  
[www.theblackstallion.com](http://www.theblackstallion.com)

Walter Farley is the author of *Little Black, A Pony*.  
[www.venicefriends.org/Literary\\_Landmark.html](http://www.venicefriends.org/Literary_Landmark.html)