

MY LIFE AS A
WESTERN STUNT DOUBLE

FALL GIRL



Martha Crawford Cantarini
and Christopher J. Spicer

Fall Girl

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*My Life as a Western
Stunt Double*

MARTHA CRAWFORD CANTARINI
and CHRYSTOPHER J. SPICER



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On the cover: Martha and her horse Jim during a promotional shoot for *The Big Country* in 1958 (photograph © Martha Crawford Collection); background ©2009 Shutterstock

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To my friend Beverly King who encouraged me
when I was discouraged and would not
let me give up writing this story.



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Prologue

When Chicago's first swimming pool for horses was built in 1965, my jockey husband John Cantarini and I were invited to the opening. It was such a big event that reporters and photographers from *The Chicago Tribune* and other papers were there to cover it. The trainer had an exercise rider and his gentlest race horse standing by to take the first swim. When the big moment came, however, that horse would not go into the pool.

After a few awkward moments, the embarrassed trainer grabbed the shank and began to fight with the horse, whose eyes grew wide with fear. The man jerked so hard on the chain in the horse's mouth that the poor animal reared and fell over backwards with a bloody froth on his lips. This particular trainer had an ego as big as his reputation, and at that time a woman didn't interrupt a man with his kind of standing. So, I had to watch in misery for the horse until the trainer ran out of ideas and was so red-faced that he looked ready for a heart attack. Only then could I step up and quietly ask:

"Bill, would you like me to put the horse in the pool for you?"

Completely at a loss as to what to do next, and so frustrated and humiliated he couldn't speak, Bill just nodded.

"Okay," I said. "Give me a rope and twenty minutes."

Their curiosity piqued, Bill and the gathered press contingent agreed to wait. So, I led the horse over a little hill, out of sight of the pool and the people. Did that poor animal ever need a friend right then! When we were alone, I took the length of rope and put a hitch called a "come-here rope" on him. It's a war bridle of sorts and takes skilled hands to work it correctly, but I knew what I was doing. Then we proceeded to get to know each other.

After about fifteen minutes, I had taught him to come to me and put his head on my shoulder when I clucked to him. He learned quickly, eagerly, because he understood what he was being asked to do and was anx-

ious to please. I rewarded him and soothed him and finally led him back to the pool. The murmuring crowd fell silent as I kept walking right on down the ramp into the pool in my expensive dress, meanwhile clucking to the horse. To their surprise, that horse followed me right on in and put his head on my shoulder. Next thing, he was swimming around the pool. I handed the shank to the exercise boy, who was already in the water, and then they both swam around as the crowd applauded and cameras flashed. I thought I saw the horse eyeing the ramp, so I told the trainer to wave his hands as he passed by. Pretty soon, we were all waving every time they came around.

“By the way,” I asked the trainer, “what is that horse’s name?”

“Keep Waving,” he replied.

“I am,” I said, “but what’s his name?”

Believe it or not, that horse’s name actually was Keep Waving. The ensuing story and the pictures earned a spread in *The Chicago Tribune*.

A few years later, John was riding in Canada and we were having dinner with his agent, a former trainer himself. We were swapping stories about horses we had known when the agent commented about a very sweet horse he had once met that, “did the darnedest thing. Every time I cleaned out his stall, I would cluck to ask him to move over. Instead, he would come over to me and put his head on my shoulder.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing! I glanced at John, and then I asked the agent, “Was his name Keep Waving?” It was.

That story always brings tears to my eyes. I had no idea at the time that those few moments I spent with Keep Waving made an impression on him that lasted the rest of his life. I have always thought that what occurred between us all those years best exemplifies my attitude about my career as a stunt rider and trainer. The horses always came first with me, not the actors or directors or even heads of studios. Now, I can look back on a body of work of which I’m very proud, knowing that each of my stunts was performed as a team effort between this rider and a horse that understood exactly what I wanted and did it willingly.

I had an adventurous life, but I didn’t seek that out for the sake of it. Sometimes, such as with Keep Waving, I was honored to be a horse’s healer and guide. Sometimes, they were both healer and guide for me. Mostly, I just followed the scent of the horses.

Preface

Of the many stories I have lived to tell, two of them stand out first and foremost in my memory. One was of a little horse that captured my heart and made it his own, and the other was the story of my movie work when I was getting paid to do what I most enjoyed doing. It was my husband John who eventually reminded me that all the stories in my heart were really just the one story.

I seem to have been bursting at the seams for so many years with an unquenchable desire to share the story of my horse with all the horse lovers of the world and at the same time answer the myriad of questions about my movie stunt work. People over the years have been fascinated by what goes on behind the camera, even though it seems more has been written about what goes on in front of it. I've never seemed to match many people's preconceived idea of what a stunt girl should look like, so I've constantly been asked, "How did you become a stunt girl?" In truth, I really did step out of a stereotype and reach for a dream.

When I was working in the movies, there were only about twelve women that did stunts with horses. However, unlike most who were trick riders at rodeos, my career had started years before when my father hand-polished my riding as my mother sent me to modeling school and groomed me for a social life that was more to her liking. Obviously, my father won!

For a long time, I thought these stories would never be told. I tried a number of times, but none were successful. Then, one day I received an email from an author who had seen a photo of me standing with Clark Gable and who was interested in the story behind that photograph. When he heard me talk about my life, and of the difficulties I had encountered, Chrystopher Spicer said that he would help me in any way he could, and so he has. To this day we have never actually met, but somehow he has managed to look inside my heart and help me write this story.

While indeed the past might be another country, I've no idea who governs it. So, I would ask you to bear in mind while reading that it is many years since these events took place and, although we have endeavored to place events within the context of recorded history as accurately as possible, this story is after all based on my all-too-human memory and personal perception of that time.

Now, I see a dust cloud in the distance and I can hear hoofbeats, so I think it's time to roll that camera.

Martha Crawford, British Columbia.