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PHOTO ESSAY

TRYON: HORSE COUNTRY

Poised to become a world stage for equestrian sports, this Foothills town of rolling pastures and woodlands is home to some 1,600 residents — and one horse for every 2½ people.

written by SUSAN STAFFORD KELLY

PHOTOGRAPH BY JACK SOROKIN

The stable at Still Creek Farm, near the Tryon International Equestrian Center, is one of many facilities in the area where champion horses are groomed and trained for competition.

THE SIGNS ARE SUBTLE AT FIRST: Fire hydrants painted as huntsmen. Businesses bearing "Boots and breeches welcome here" decals. Life-size painted horses striking poses at random locations. Jockey statues by driveways. And then you'll see Morris the Horse, a giant red, black, and white replica of a child's pull toy by the railroad tracks that slice through town, and you'll understand: Tryon, this Foothills community of only 1,600 people, is synonymous with horses, and has been for a century.

Until I married, my address was Tryon Road, in Rutherfordton. No house number — just Tryon Road. That very road led to Tryon, and we visited regularly. My mother went for "whiskey and a decent piece of lettuce," as she still puts it — Rutherfordton being "dry" until 1979, with limited produce pickings. I went for riding lessons, which began with memorizing parts of the horse: *Flank. Hock*. The second lesson was parts of the saddle: *Pommel. Cantle*. Only then did I get onto the horse, and into the ring.

For her own daughter's riding lessons — and obsession with all things equine — Libbie Johnson moved to Tryon from Charlotte 15 years ago. Johnson is the coauthor of the coffee-table book *Tryon Style*, and an archivist, photographer, promoter, and all-around lover of Tryon. Not a day goes by that she doesn't think of, and thank, the man who brought horse culture to the area: Carter Brown.

Though named for the eighth colonial governor of North Carolina, William Tryon, and incorporated after the Civil War, Tryon credits Carter Brown

In Tryon, the horse country motif is everywhere — atop a weather vane, in life-size replicas, and even on fire hydrants painted as huntsmen. The town's storied mascot, Morris the Horse (right), welcomes visitors to downtown.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JACK SOROKIN

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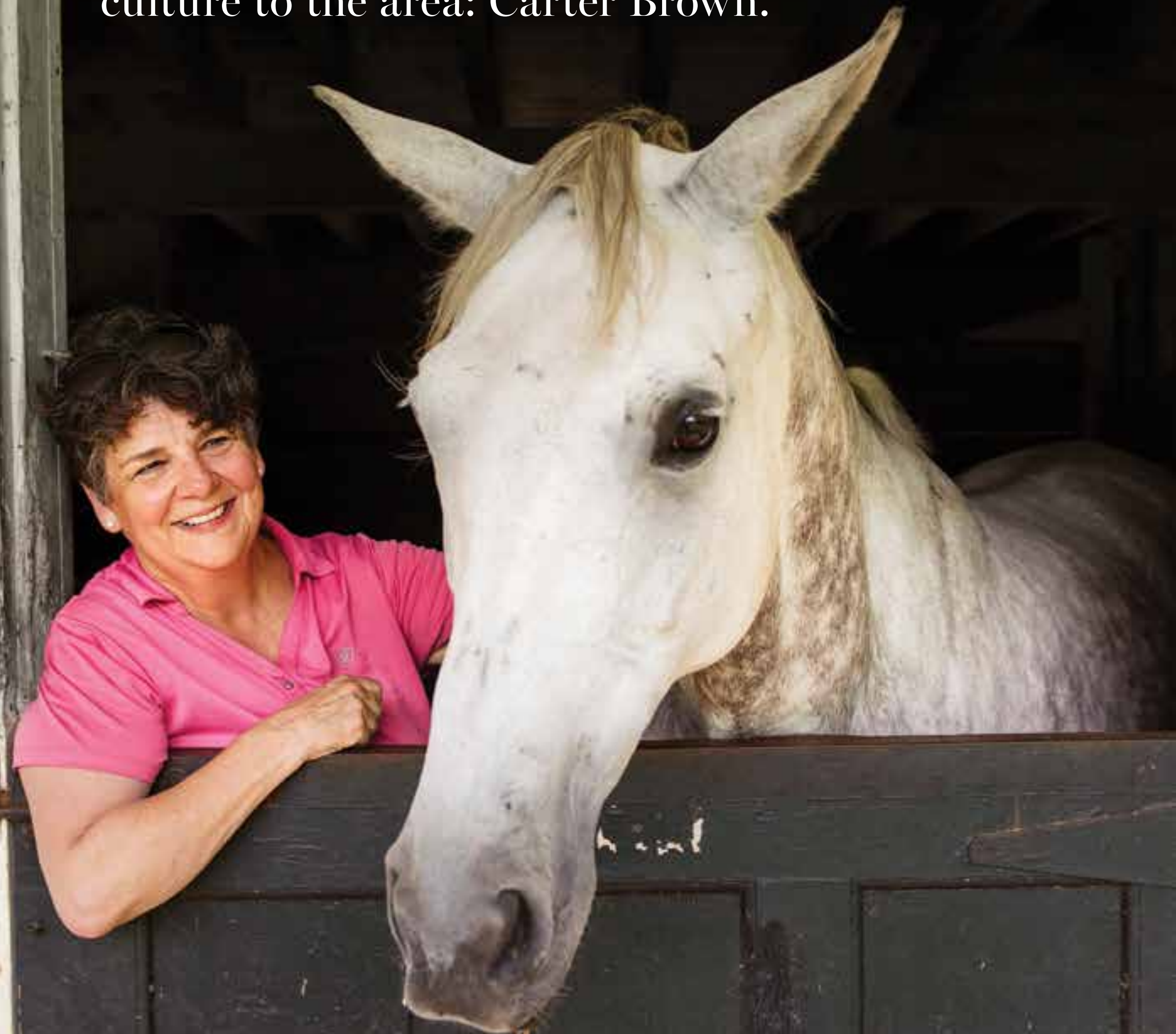


Living in "Hunting Country," so called because it was a Cherokee hunting ground, gives trail riders like Libbie Johnson access to some 150 miles of private trails. Saddles, bits, bridles, and horse blankets are simply part of everyday life in Tryon, where the equine industry is everywhere.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JACK SOROKIN

The 1906 Pine Crest Inn (above) was established as a tuberculosis sanitorium, but was converted to an inn in 1917 by Carter Brown (left). Still in operation today, the inn's porched entrance welcomes weary riders with rocking chairs.

with putting the town on the map. Originally from the Midwest, Brown loved horses, horse people, and horse pursuits. In 1917, he moved to Tryon, recognizing perfect fox hunting territory: a mild "Isothermal Belt" climate, which meant a long hunting season; a rolling, unmanicured landscape with streams and forests; abundant natural quarry in foxes; and good "footing" — a terrain without holes and rocky soil that could fell a galloping horse.

Brown bought The Pine Crest Inn, originally built in 1906 as a tuberculosis sanatorium, and invited his wealthy, horsey friends from the Great Lakes area to Tryon. They came for "the season" — October to March — to fox hunt, often with their entourages in tow. One house on the Pine Crest grounds was used as a school for the visiting children. The inn had a staff of grooms, two stables, and 20 trained "hirelings," or hunt horses, available. Taking lavish picnics along, guests rode and hunted, and, in the evenings, left their boots outside the cabin doors for polishing.

A keen organizer, Brown set about founding the Tryon Riding and Hunt Club, a civic organization that continues to preserve equestrian traditions and raise money for local causes, as well as The Tryon Hounds, the Tryon Horse Show, and the Any & All Dog Show that still exists today. But for all of his enthusiasm for a pastime that carried the trappings of wealth, Brown never forgot the Tryon locals. His guests rode over nearby farmlands, and he held annual barbecues to which the poorer landowners and well-heeled alike were invited.

Brown, a Christian Scientist, believed foremost in the fun and sportsmanship of hunting and steeplechasing. In keeping with that principle, early horse show prizes were merely varying sizes of soup cans. When Brown discovered that his son had gotten a reward for riding the winning horse in a hunt, he made the boy return the money.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JACK SOROKIN; COURTESY OF TRYON RIDING AND HUNT CLUB (LEFT)

A fall hunt brings out riders in English tack and wearing classic "pink" coats, which, as legend has it, are named for the English tailor Thomas Pinque. Eager hounds chase the gray and red foxes that populate the area — though they'll go after a coyote, too, if they pick up the scent.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JACK SOROKIN

FOR HER 88TH BIRTHDAY, I TOOK MY MOTHER BACK to Tryon, a journey down memory lane to the town she once frequented. The main street, Trade Street — crossed by no fewer than 10 crosswalks — still curves gently alongside high railroad tracks unused since 2001. There is Morris the Horse, the fifth iteration of the tremendous wooden horse made by two young men from Tryon Toy Makers in 1928. Built as an advertisement for the Tryon Horse Show, Morris originally had legs made of tree trunks, and was constructed on wheels so that he could be rolled in a parade. Morris is Tryon's mascot, and images and smaller versions of him are all over town, from mailboxes to the weather vane atop the old stone clock tower.

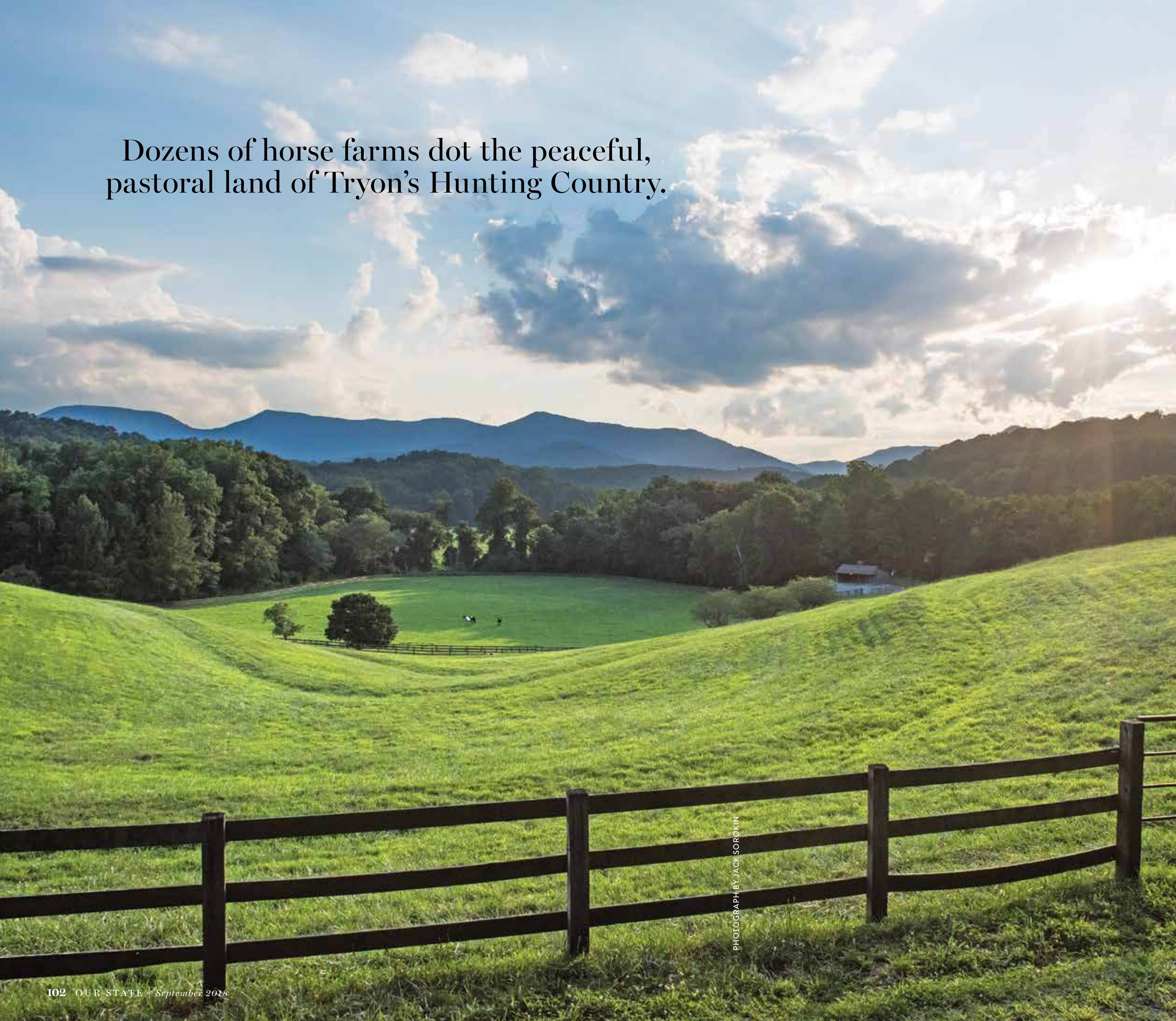
My mother was looking for the stores she recalled in historic buildings, now filled with quirky coffee shops and cafés, an old-school pharmacy, and the office of the *Tryon Daily Bulletin* — "the world's smallest daily newspaper" — still published five days a week, with its own equestrian reporter. No franchises or box stores, and only a single gas station exists in Tryon. ("We mostly go to South Carolina for gas," Johnson says. The South Carolina state line is "a spit away," and folks cross it several times daily.)

I was looking for The Tack Shop. With its tartan carpet, paneled interior, and library hush of a hunt club, The Tack Shop was an encapsulated world of horses to me as a child, filled with antique bugles, horse-head bookends, sepia-toned hunting maps, and hoof-shaped jiggers. These horse-related wares tangibly defined the world of *Black Beauty* and encouraged my budding Anglophilia, instilled by the books I bought at another personal paradise in Tryon: The Book Shelf. That shop is still there. "Since 1952," its sign reads.

We stayed at the 1906 Pine Crest Inn, where, like Brown's guests, as well as F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway, my parents' out-of-town friends stayed when they came for weekend house parties in Rutherfordton. Cabins surround the central house, with its gracious, wide-planked lobby. The porch was built with stones left over from the

PHOTOGRAPH BY JACK SOROKIN

Keeping watch from his shady corner, Morris the Horse has been charming locals since 1928, when craftsmen from Tryon Toy Makers made the first version to be rolled out at parades as an advertising gimmick. Today, he's a permanent fixture — and smaller versions are available for sale in downtown shops.



construction of Biltmore House. Shin-high to head-high stone walls are everywhere in Tryon. "My first two years here," Johnson says wryly, "I backed my car into every single one of them."

Cross the tracks and turn onto Melrose Avenue, and you'll discover an intimate, enchanted forest of a hillside neighborhood. Melrose Lane's winding one-lane road is lined with stone walls and architecture of every variety, brought to Tryon by Brown's far-flung friends: A tiny Hansel-and-Gretel cottage. A stucco home. Gingerbread and gables. A tin roof, with a Model T in the driveway. And, Johnson says, "We don't lock anything here. That would be insulting."

Johnson herself lives in "Hunting Country," the area where Tryon's historic horse farms are located — named not for fox hunts, but because the land was the hunting ground of the Cherokee. Lichen-covered split-rail fences delineate farms, and "Share the road" signs feature silhouettes of horses and carriages rather than bicycles. River Road is deliberately unpaved, a kinder surface for horses' hooves. A graveyard for horses killed in a barn fire is marked by a rusting iron horse bust. Randomly, a practice ring appears through the trees. "She saved her pennies for that," Johnson says of the owner. You might save your pennies for a new car, or a vacation. In Tryon, they save up for the accoutrements of the horsing life.

The lush fields of Cotton Patch Farm have been traversed by champion horses and riders since 1956, when the U.S. Olympic Equestrian Team chose Tryon as their training ground for the Stockholm Olympics.

"Like spaghetti," Johnson says of the 150 miles of trails that wind through the farms. Because the trails traverse private property, riders must be members of the Foothills Equestrian Trails Association (FETA), which not only maintains the trails, but also ensures that riders understand their responsibilities to property owners who look up from their kitchen sinks to see horses ambling across their land. You don't use their hoses to water your horse; you don't bring your dog, who might not take to a landowner's dog; if you open a gate, you close the gate.

Tucked away in the bucolic setting are six surviving "Carter Brown houses." Brown made model homes of clay, took photographs of them, and mailed the pictures to his horse-loving friends in Chicago and Indianapolis, who bought the houses,

My first experience with tailgating had nothing to do with football and everything to do with the Tryon Steeplechase.

sight unseen. Brown purchased old log cabins in the hills of Tennessee, took them apart, moved them to Tryon, and "repurposed" them before the term had been coined. One home is made of pieces from 17 cabins. Elsewhere, farm structures bear the distinctive "Carolina siding," wide slices of timber cut horizontally down the trunk so that the rough-hewn boards are knotted and uneven.

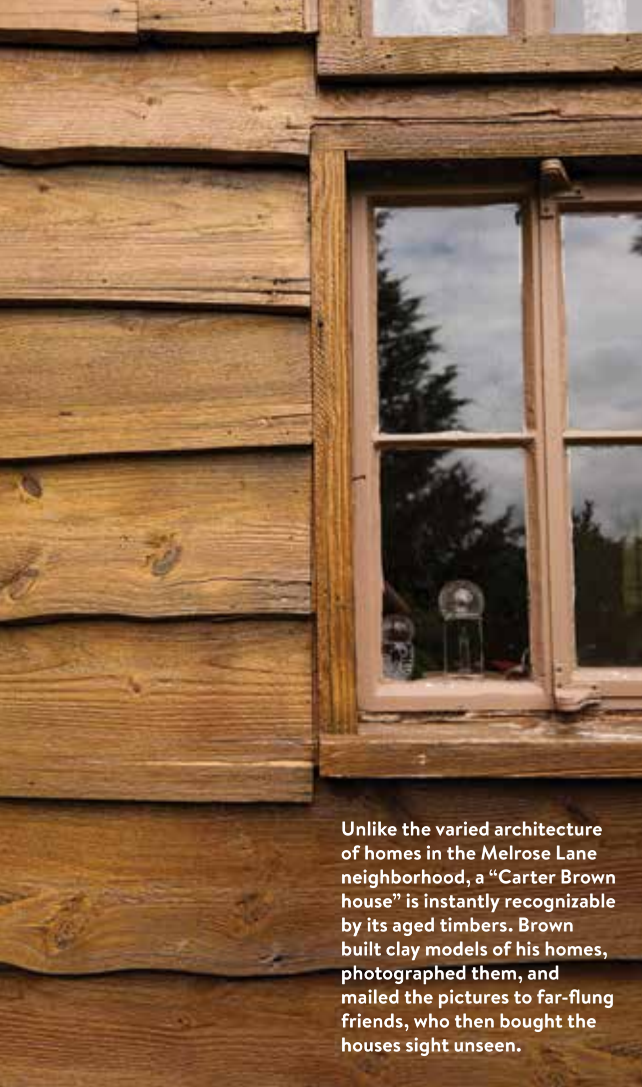
A grassy, bowl-like arena in Hunting Country represents one of Tryon's proudest horse-history moments. After World War II, the U.S. Cavalry School was deactivated, and the United States lost its source for its Olympic Equestrian Team; a farm adjoining the former Cavalry School in Kansas was used for training the 1952 team. Then, a group of Tryon people pooled their funds to buy horses, and they searched for coaches and riders. In the winter of 1956, a Tryon family farm became the training ground for the civilian-based U.S. Olympic Equestrian Team.

What my mother and I most looked forward to finding was the site of the Block House Races, which Brown began in 1947. The Block House itself — built in the 1700s and named for its shape — had served as a North-South trading station, a Civil War jail, and a brothel before Brown persuaded an industrialist to move there. The property — and the race — covered two states and three counties. My first experience with tailgating had nothing to do with football and everything to do with the Tryon Steeplechase. Whole families loaded cars with blankets and Skotch Koolers, deviled eggs and Bloody Marys, fried chicken and pimento cheese-stuffed celery sticks for a day at the races.

I still have photographs of a chilly spring Saturday — women wearing Bermuda shorts and knee socks, men in madras trousers, perched on sedan hoods on a rise overlooking grassy fields interspersed with broad hedges and timbered jumps, water challenges, and "Heartbreak Hill," a nearly vertical rise on the rugged course. We

PHOTOGRAPH BY DON WEST PHOTOGRAPHY

The historic Tryon Block House Steeplechase, founded by the Tryon Riding and Hunt Club, has been a springtime tradition since Carter Brown launched the race in 1947. Festive spectators arrive at the Green Creek Race Course ready to tailgate and cheer on favorites. Judges select winners for the best hat, best pants, and, of course, best tailgating spread.



Unlike the varied architecture of homes in the Melrose Lane neighborhood, a "Carter Brown house" is instantly recognizable by its aged timbers. Brown built clay models of his homes, photographed them, and mailed the pictures to far-flung friends, who then bought the houses sight unseen.

Brown purchased old log cabins in the hills of Tennessee, took them apart, moved them to Tryon, and "repurposed" them long before the term was coined.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JACK SOROKIN

Best in show isn't just for horses: Eastern Polk County is also home to some award-winning wines, with 20 vineyards operating in the area. At Overmountain Vineyards in the Tryon foothills, father-and-daughter team Frank and Sofia Lilly make French-style wines from the five grape varieties they grow on 17 acres. The vineyard's Tasting Room is open all year, as is the nearby Overmountain Victory Historic Trail, which stretches 330 miles through four states.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY STACEY VAN BERKEL

The entrance to a Hunting Country farm is marked by a chimney column twined with ivy — the vine was supposedly brought by Sir Walter Raleigh. Down the road, hometown horses can compete against international champions at the Tryon International Equestrian Center (right), which will host the FEI World Equestrian Games in September.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JACK SOROKIN (LEFT); ERIKOLSENPICTURES (RIGHT)

In September, some 500,000 people, from sheiks to tradespeople, will descend upon Tryon.

children played behind the rows of cars, hanging out at the warm-up ring and clustering beneath the high wooden structure, like a fire tower, where the announcer called, "He's leaving Polk County; he's going into Greenville County," as rapidly as a tobacco auctioneer. Today, the steeplechase is held at Green Creek Race Course, but Converse College's equestrian team still practices at the original site; the old-fashioned stables have been restored and are still in use.

IN TRYON, THERE'S APPROXIMATELY ONE HORSE for every 2½ people. For every horse, a farm needs two acres, so in Tryon and nearby, as Johnson says, "The equine industry is hidden down gravel roads." Farriers. Fence builders. Horse-blanket launderers. Saddle fitters. Mobile vets and animal acupuncturists. Feed producers. Stall-shaving packers. Tryon's hospital has no maternity ward, but its ER and trauma staff are horse people, too, knowledgeable about injuries common to riders.

During those childhood riding lessons, if I'd had the knobbed pommel of a Western saddle to clutch, perhaps I wouldn't have fallen, wouldn't have needed a doctor at all. But this was Tryon, where English saddles are the norm. While learning to canter, I fell, and I spent three weeks in the Tryon hospital. Among my get-well gifts were a 10-foot gum wrapper from my sixth-grade classmates and six Pokeys — as in, Gumby's orange horse. I left Tryon minus a kidney, but with a seven-inch scar that has given me a lifelong connection to Tryon.

In 2017, Tryon celebrated a century of its horse heritage by commemorating Carter Brown's arrival in 1917. In September of 2018, some 500,000 people, from sheiks and celebrities to tradespeople and locals, will descend upon the Tryon International Equestrian Center (TIEC), 13 miles up the road from Morris the Horse, for the FEI World Equestrian Games. TIEC (pronounced "Ty-Eck") encompasses 1,600 acres, 12 arenas, nine

A young rider waits under the lights at the Tryon International Equestrian Center (right), where extensive facilities draw riders from all over the world to compete in disciplines such as reining, dressage, show jumping, eventing, endurance, and vaulting.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY STACEY VAN BERKEL

With 12 days of competitions, the FEI World Equestrian Games are held every four years in cities as cosmopolitan as Rome and Stockholm. And now, in Tryon.

restaurants, lodging, and 1,300 stalls. With 12 days of competitions in eight disciplines, including reining, jumping, vaulting, and dressage, the Games are held every four years, between Olympic Game years, in cities as cosmopolitan as Rome and Stockholm. And now, in Tryon.

When Brown put Tryon on the map with his horses, his shows, his hunting and equine organizations, could he have envisioned a time when Tryon would become a world stage for the beautiful, graceful, intelligent animals he adored? Probably not.

Will Tryon itself remain the same casual, quaint, horse-centric town that has been dubbed "the friendliest town in the South"? Where gingerbread homes mingle with estates, where Priuses park alongside pickups with horse trailer hitches, where skintight breeches stroll side by side with blue jeans? Bet the horse farm, and the horse race, and the horse on it. **OS**

Susan Stafford Kelly is a novelist and frequent contributor to Our State.