

FARM INDIANA

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Hernandia Establo

Home of the "Fine Step" Horse

By Shawndra Miller | Photos by Josh Marshall

Herb Brown murmurs endearments in Spanish to Papi Lupi, the bay horse nosing him. As three geldings and two stud colts make their way past him into the barn on this snowy afternoon, he gestures toward the overhead heaters in each stall. "You can stand under there, and it's just as warm as can be."

Brown is no fan of winter weather, having been born and raised in Puerto Rico, but his horses don't seem to mind the snow and cold when he turns them out each morning. Here at Hernandia Stable, the 140-acre Brown County farm he owns with his wife, Nancy, the semi-retired attorney dotes on his small herd. In addition to these five, he has three mares housed in a restored 1860s-era barn just up the road. All are Paso Fino horses, a rare breed lauded for endurance, toughness and above all, their "fine step" — which is the English translation of "paso fino."

Each horse has a Spanish name, from the gentle gray mare Pretenciosa de Marquesita (Pretenses of the Marquesa) to the frisky yearling Aviso de Huracan (Hurricane Warning).

The name Hernandia's meaning is twofold: It's both a conjoining of Herb and Nancy, and a flower that grows wild in Puerto Rico.



It seems a fitting moniker since it was on Puerto Rican soil that Brown first clapped eyes on the breed he came to love. As the grandson of a Nebraskan who moved to the island to be a grapefruit farmer, he lived in the country and was around horses all the time. Paso Finos are more common in that part of the world, and he always admired their elegant way of stepping. But it would be years before he actually owned one.

In the meantime he came to the States for his undergraduate education, returning to Puerto Rico to earn a law degree. There he met and married the Indiana-born Nancy. She was a flight attendant whose work took her through the San Juan airport where he was working during law school. They settled in San Juan, and he began to practice maritime law.

Soon after their marriage in 1971, they fell in love with a Brown County log cabin while visiting her sister and brother-in-law in the area. The 40-acre property was for sale, so they bought it and restored the cabin while maintaining a residence in San Juan. (The



Herb and Nancy Brown

cabin has since burned down; their current house was designed by a San Juan architect.)

The horses are a more recent addition. In 2000, the adjoining property came up for sale. When they bought it, the couple realized that they had two Civil War-era buildings on their hands. The old farmhouse, covered in tar paper and siding, was actually a double log cabin, and a hand-hewn barn stood nearby.

The log cabin was the first project, and as soon as it was restored, Brown turned to the barn. Several contractors told him they'd be happy to demolish it and put a new one up, but he finally found an Amish team from Odon that was willing to tackle the job. Where there was dirt floor is now concrete foundation. The crew saved as many of the old frame logs as they could, even using pegs instead of nails to reflect the integrity of the time period.

"They even put back the old hay fork, and it still works," Brown says. **SEE HERNANDIA STABLE ON A4**

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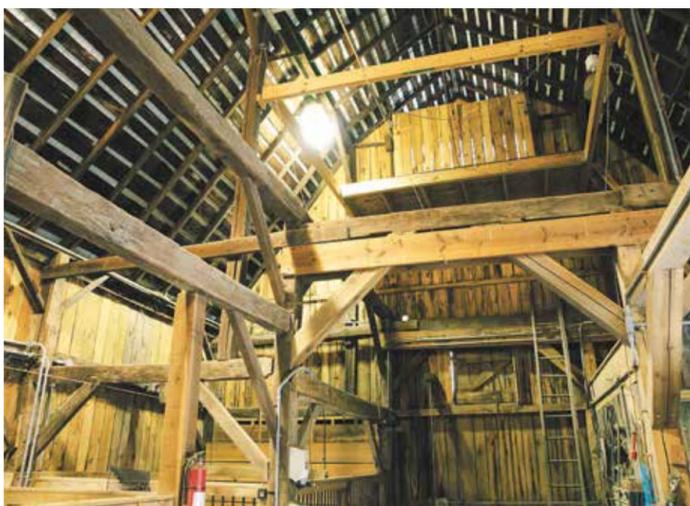


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Wood beams filled with soil cover the foundation of the old Mount Liberty post office that used to be located on the property many years ago.



“They even put back the old hay fork, and it still works.”

—HERB BROWN

HERNANDIA STABLE // CONT. FROM A1

In the meantime he was constructing a new barn with the intention of using it for foaling mares, because he'd decided he wanted to raise Paso Finos. He'd considered quarter horses, appaloosas and other breeds. But Paso Finos quickly came to the top of the list for a trait that was bred into the horse centuries ago.

Not only are the compact Paso Finos beautiful and spunky, they don't trot. “They were bred for use on the old sugar plantations,” he explains. A man could ride one all day and not suffer discomfort.

The breed can actually trace its heritage even further back, to Columbus' second voyage to the New World. In 1493, Columbus brought the ancestors of today's Paso Fi-

nos to Santo Domingo. Paso Finos are said to be a mix of Andalusians, Barbs and the Spanish Jennet, now extinct.

These horses' proud history, according to Brown's associate Kay Chiappetta, includes carrying the conquistadors of old through unexplored South and Central America. Chiappetta breeds Paso Finos at Quinta Chiappetta, her horse farm in Shelbyville, Ky., and has known the Browns for years. She has bred his mares and overseen the training of several of his 3-year-olds.

She says the easy ride, endurance and ruggedness of these horses made them the perfect mount for the explorers to traverse the mountains and dense jungles of the region. “They have very tough feet, which is important because there weren't horseshoes then,” she explains.

The horses were bred from rough-and-ready stock: Early expeditions from Spain would bring a few mares and several stallions by ship, and when they got close to their destination, the horses would be tossed overboard to swim to shore. After the herd reproduced, the Spaniards would return to round them up and break them to saddle.

As a result, today there are far more Paso Finos in countries like the Dominican Republic and Venezuela than here, says Chiappetta. She estimates their U.S. numbers to be around 54,000.

Unlike Tennessee Walkers, whose high step is forced through dubious practices like blistering, Paso Fino horses' four-beat gait comes naturally, in part because they have fewer ribs than other breeds. The smooth ride that was such a boon for plantation owners and explorers is now finding favor with aging baby boomers in search of a pleasure horse.

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