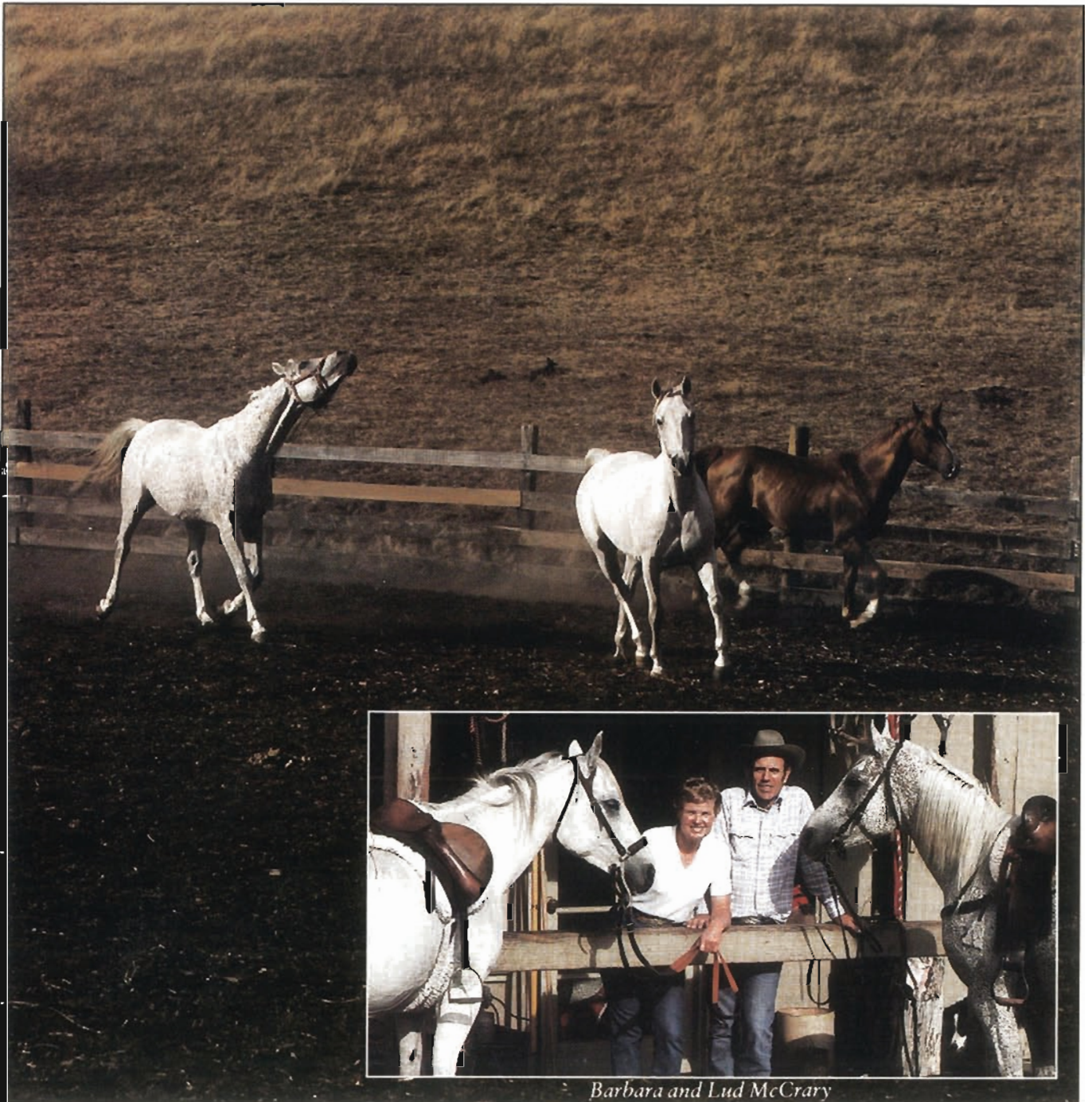


The McCrarys of Swanton

lifestyles

BY ERIC HOFFMAN



Barbara and Lud McCrary



PHOTOGRAPHY BY BATISTA MOON STUDIO

At the north end of Monterey Bay, just past the tiny town of Davenport, lies an area known as Swanton. To many of the locals it is also known as McCrary country.

Near the sea, gentle, rolling grasslands are dotted with cattle, and manicured Brussels sprout and artichoke fields fill in the flat coastal valleys. It is a place where hawks sit on fence posts and watch the traffic race by.

Further inland, the moist green valleys merge with steep uncompromising canyons cut by swift dark streams. This rugged land is covered with stands of redwood, madrone, tan oak, and Douglas fir. Here, on the steep slopes among the trees, the McCrarys have pruned out a livelihood as woodsmen and lumbermen for five generations.

There are no roads or geographic locations on a map proclaiming McCrary country, even though the family's 120-year tenure on this section of coast is seen by some as a chief reason for the land's present-day pristine appearance. From Annie Staub, who married Vin Trombo about the

time Mexico lost Alta California and thousands rushed to mine California's gold, to the present day brothers Frank "Lud" and Homer "Bud" McCrary and their adult children who run Big Creek Lumber Company, the McCrary line has flourished despite natural catastrophes, at times meager income, political adversity, and stingy land.

In the 1800s, Vin Trombo eked out a living by chopping tan oak into firewood and packing it by mule to the tiny town of Santa Cruz, where it provided heat for homes. Today the scale of operations is much larger and more sophisticated, but the pioneer heritage and love for the land has survived. To Lud McCrary's way of looking at it, "It's always been our lifestyle to work with the land. The relationship with the land should be an alliance, not a conquest."

The McCrarys live on large ranches inland from the coast, where their tightly knit family stays in constant touch with the values that will most likely guide it throughout the ages.

At 56, Lud McCrary is a man living

in two worlds. He is a lumberman, comfortably hunched over the Digital computer in his Big Creek Lumber Company office. The mill sits on a bluff midway between Davenport and Ano Nuevo with a breathtaking view of the Pacific. It's a busy place. Brightly painted, well maintained trucks with the company logo stenciled on the door roll in and out of the mill loaded with tons of freshly cut lumber. Twenty men stack lumber as it slides from the mill. Graders mark the wood for quality while men in gargantuan forklifts pick up stacks and wheel off to far corners of the yard or a waiting truck. Lud and Bud oversee these operations and the more than 150 people who work at the Big Creek Mill and the Watsonville retail yard.

Big Creek is a long-lasting, successful business in the northern Monterey Bay area, but Lud remembers the humble beginnings. Says Lud, "In 1945, my brother, father, uncle, and I got out of the service at about the same time. (Lud had entered the merchant marine at 15 by lying about his age.) Before the war my Dad had run a small



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mill with a '27 Studebaker engine. We liked the area so much we were mainly motivated at figuring a way to scratch out a living. We started a small mill with \$4,000 between us and two diesel engines from war surplus landing craft. Since most of the area had been logged out by the 1920s, most of the old loggers didn't see much future in our undertaking. At the time, second growth redwood had little value. We figured we'd last about four years if we kept things small, but as you can see things turned out differently."

This is the hint of the other Lud McCrary, who in the course of a casual conversation ends up with a twinkle in his eye talking about his reason for staying in the area—the natural beauty and family history that Lud can impart so vividly, it seems something that happened in 1850 was just yesterday. One gets the feeling Lud McCrary sees himself as just doing his part on the family continuum. His sense of personal history and reverence towards the land is rare among many Californians, who seem

'We figured we'd last about four years if we kept things small.'

to pitch through life barely in touch with their immediate families, let alone thinking about their great grandparents, and who labor in jobs that are often erased by a fickle economy. Lud McCrary's idea of existence combines business, a way of life, values and permanence.

Thumbing through the glimpses of a world long gone in the family photo album, Lud carefully identifies the key personalities in each photo and the significance of various defunct contraptions: the first thrasher brought to the Pajaro Valley; steam powered donkey engines that powered turn-of-the-century lumber mills; a powerful logging locomotive chugging up a steep grade. Reaching way back, Lud explains that there are no pictures of the area's first lumber mill in Corralitos because cameras weren't invented in 1820. Nevertheless he has a rough idea of what it looked like based on a description passed down through the generations. From 1860 to the



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present, however, there are plenty of photographs: the lumber flume connecting Boulder Creek to Felton; teams of oxen skidding huge redwood logs to a mill; a number of portraits of historical personalities. There are pictures of the 1906 earthquake that was no kinder to the mountains than it was to San Francisco. Lud points to people in pictures of logging crews who were killed when the quake buried a logging camp in a huge slide.

A diary left by great grandfather Vin Trombo tells of the risks involved in turn-of-the-century mountain life. Catastrophes were measured in degree, not frequency. Trombo writes:

July 28, 1908 "Helped load tanbark. The R.R. engine jumped the track three times going up the grade."

February 12, 1910 "Pat Giblin was killed this P.M. on Little Creek R.R. (near Bonny Doon) by log rolling from car onto him."

June 15, 1910 "Logging locomotive was wrecked over in Little Creek near high peak."

December 7, 1910 "Mr. Lou Spangler was killed up logging road by logs rolling on him."

The memorabilia are just a part of McCrary's tie to the past.

Horsemanship is the other part. Astride his favorite endurance horse, an Arabian named Freckles, with his wife Barbara riding Old Grey and daughter Janet on Grey, a sort of homage begins that reconnects the McCrarys with their roots.

All the McCrarys are expert riders. Lud and Barbara and daughters Ellen and Janet are among the best known endurance race riding families in the United States. Every year, Lud and Barbara, and usually both daughters, enter the "Kentucky Derby" of endurance rides, the Tevis Cup, which starts in Squaw Valley and winds, nonstop, 100 miles with climbs and descents of 2,000 feet or more before ending in Auburn. But without knowing it, Lud and Bud were endurance riding long before it became glamorized. Says Lud, "My brother and I explored the coast by horseback since we were little kids. It wasn't uncommon to ride thirty or forty miles just out of curiosity."

On a typical home turf ride starting on the McCrary ranch, Lud usually

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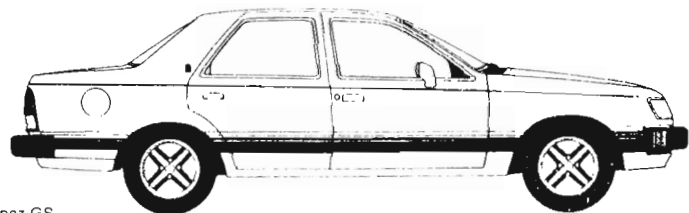
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leads. The group races across open grasslands, through a herd of eighty Hereford cross cattle, along ridges with views of the coast ten miles away. The riders plunge into a thick tan oak forest and break out into a clearing where Annie Trombo's grave is marked under an oak and where lies buried E.S. Harris's leg, which was severed by a Grizzly bear when the woodsman tried to scare the bear away from his children in 1880. The story goes that the children were saved, and Harris avoided the fate of his leg because the family dog attacked the bear.

The trail winds down onto Swanton Road, past the one-room Seaside School, where Lud, his brother, mother and grandmother went to school. Today, the school is home to a Big Creek employee.

The riders swing up Big Creek past redwood stumps with huge second- and third-growth redwoods that have

regenerated from the old stumps. In the 1920s the whole area was clear cut, but, unlike some other trees, redwoods regenerate. Lud says, "The old loggers called it 'cut out and get out' and there was no looking back. It was before the days of responsible forestry."

For decades, the McCrarys have persistently stood against any form of clear cutting, advocating instead selective harvesting, which thins about 40 percent of the forest in twenty-year intervals, creating, Lud says, a more disease free forest for the remaining trees and an environment that supports a broader spectrum of animal life. When "over-cutting" has been proposed by companies and government officials, the McCrarys have publicly opposed such policies and the influence of the "cut out and get out" entrepreneur.

So far the McCrarys have always gotten their way. "In this day and age