

Reading, Riding & 'Rithmetic

By KYLE PARTAIN



Students of the Orme School's horsemanship class pose on campus, located next to the Prescott National Forest in Arizona.

KURT MICHAEL

Arizona's Orme School is the perfect setting for horse-crazy teens in search of a different educational experience.





Did you catch a glimpse of the new guy on campus?

As students returned from spring break last April, there was a buzz around Orme School. Word of the new arrival had spread, and everyone was anxious to meet the new classmate. He was younger than the usual Orme student at just 8 years old, but rumor had it he would be the fastest in his class if given the chance to run. And he was big.

He didn't join the students for dinner that night, preferring to take his meal alone as he adjusted to his new surroundings. Probably for the best, since the school doesn't usually serve hay in the dining room at dinner. Jimbo was the newest of 40 head of horses that join Orme's 100 or so students on campus each year. Add in the faculty and staff—90 percent of whom live on the grounds—and you've got the makings of a small town.

Jimbo is a barrel racing prospect who has the girls of Orme thinking about hitting the rodeo trail this fall. Senior Leone Mayer of Germany will be his main jockey because she's starting her second year of competing in the Arizona High School Rodeo Association. Like many of the school's students, she had



TOP: Brian Bausch is co-director of horsemanship at Orme School. Jimbo is the school's newest barrel racing prospect. ABOVE: The Quarter Circle V Bar Ranch brand is seen on the school's Old Adobe classroom building.

absolutely no experience with horses when she arrived at the school. Now, she's running barrels and poles, and has even tried her hand at goat tying.

That's the beauty of Orme, located just an hour north of suburban Phoenix. It's a school where classrooms come in all shapes and sizes, where arena panels take the place of traditional walls and a blue sky replaces white ceiling tiles. Some

students begin their school day with colt starting and wrap it up with roping, while sandwiching the essentials of junior high or high school in the middle.

Orme students have been doing this for decades as they regularly leave the books behind for the type of real-world education that only 26,000 acres of the Prescott National Forest can provide. In most traditional schools, the three "R's" of education—reading, 'riting and 'rithmetic—have long since given way to the common core and "teaching to the test." As a private institution, Orme doesn't subscribe to such theories and instead opts for a different style that takes traditional educational values and adds a fourth "R,"—riding, as in horse-back riding.

Orme doesn't seem quite as far from civilization as it did when the school first opened in 1929, but you still have to drive three miles of dirt road to reach the 300-acre campus.

CHANGING LIVES

"I will beg, borrow or steal to provide the best horses I can for these kids," says Brian Bausch, who is starting his third

year as co-director of horsemanship with his wife, Paula. “Some of the horses are leased. We have some alumni that send horses to us, as well as some that are 100 percent donated. In all, we’ve got 26 school horses. My wife and I have 10 on [the] grounds, and we have a few other faculty and staff that keep horses here. Some students bring their own horses. We usually have around 40 head total.

“We certainly look for horses from the cow horse lines, ones that have ancestry in cutting and reined cow horse. They’re bred to do it all. I tend to look at each horse and go to the papers last. We

bought Jimbo from a barrel horse futurity rider just eight miles from here.”

A seemingly simple question brought Brian and Paula to Orme in 2012, Bausch recalls.

“We were training horses and doing a lot of different things, and a roping buddy of mine came to me one day and asked, ‘What are you doing?’ I told him I was headed out to rope, and he said, ‘No, not today, what are you doing in life? What are you doing for the next few years?’”

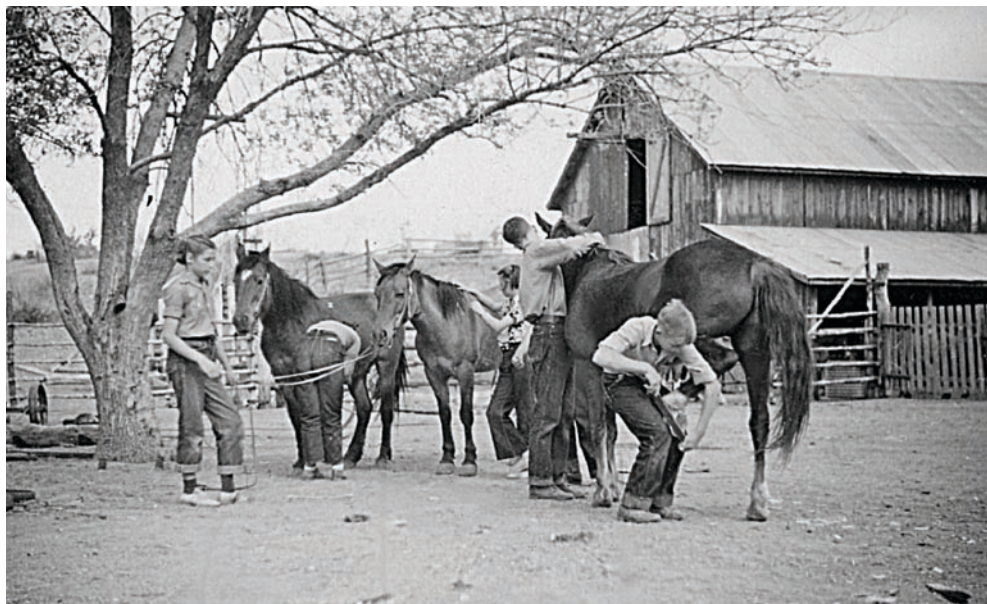
The relatively new parents weren’t planning to hit the rodeo trail full-time,

so the stability of teaching at Orme—where the roping buddy’s daughters attended school—sounded like a good match. The pair made the quick trip north from Cave Creek to visit the school in May of that year. By August 2012, they were moved in and ready to start teaching.

“We went from a two-and-a-half-acre training facility to a 26,000-acre ranch with a 300-acre school, four arenas, a couple of round pens and several barns,” says Bausch, a three-time world champion mounted shooter who grew up on a Kansas ranch before spending



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Gunner Tillemans works with a young horse in the school's colt-starting class last spring. • The sign identifying the school's entrance is adorned with the Quarter Circle V Bar Ranch brand. • The Old Adobe classroom building was built in 1937 and is still used every day.



Since the 1930s, Orme School has made horses a big part of the curriculum. Students learn to care for them from the ground up.

10 years at a dude ranch in Michigan. “When we looked at the school, we knew that it was a facility where we could do just about anything.”

The possibilities are endless for both teachers and students. Eighth-grader Gunner Tillemans was the sole student in Bausch’s colt-starting class last spring.

“At first, I was a little scared because anything can happen with a colt,” says Gunner, who came to the school with minimal previous horse experience.

With his colt, Gunner also participated in the Arizona Horseman’s Challenge Youth Mentorship Program last spring.

“Brian did a great job of preparing me for the whole thing,” he says. “It’s been a great experience for me.”

DAILY LIFE

Mounted atop a steel frame that was most likely crafted by the school’s blacksmithing class, a simple bell rings in the start of each day at Orme. Half-asleep teenagers from eight states and nine countries follow the ringing to Founders Hall, where meals are served three times daily for students, faculty and staff.

Unlike lunch and dinner, there’s no rowdy crowd waiting just outside the doors. The students tend to be a late-arriving group when it comes to breakfast, preferring instead to extract every ounce of sleep available before the day begins. By 7:30 a.m., however, the long wooden tables are filled with food and chatter as students enjoy their meals before classes begin promptly at 8 a.m.

As they file out of Founders, some head to English or Latin classes, while others make their way toward various math and science offerings. Some take the walk “Up Top,” where the school’s horsemanship facilities are located. They include a full-size rodeo arena, two multi-purpose arenas, a variety of round pens, horse pastures, a tack barn and two horse barns—one of which is a student-run barn that caters to only the most serious of horsemanship students.

“It’s the talk of the horsemanship program right now,” Bausch says. “We just wrote the curriculum, which allows the students to see all of the additional care that goes into a performance horse and the results that it can produce. The responsibility level for those students is greatly increased, since they maintain the entirety of that barn. Some students take on that responsibility very easily, while others have to really give it some thought before taking on the job.”

Ranch jobs have long been a part of daily life at Orme. But the retirement of longtime headmaster Charles “Charlie” Orme Jr. in 1987 led to gradual changes at the school, and students and staff drifted away from the school’s roots.

“We’ve always been known as a school with great academics, but the alumni talk about the memories and the things they learned from getting up early in the morning, riding horses, going out on round-ups and doing the labor that comes with living in on a ranch,” says Jessica Calmes, development associate for the school, and one of the staff



Students from an earlier time period study in an Orme classroom. Academics have remained the school's top priority for decades.

members who keeps horses on grounds. "There's no other school in the country that is like this in a ranch setting. All schools go through growing pains, and I think that's what happened with Orme. But the school is coming back to its ranching roots."

A farm-to-table program has been re-established, leading to an ever-growing garden, as well as raising cattle that will eventually find their way to the tables in Founders Hall. The school's chore program was being revamped for this fall and horsemanship will once again be required for all students.

"We want to continue to attract international students and keep the student body diverse, but we're also interested in bringing those kids who have a horse or ranch background," says Calmes. "We think we have a lot to offer those kids by providing them with a great college-preparatory program in addition to the opportunity to ride horses and compete in high school rodeos, horse shows and other equestrian events."

A new headmaster, Bruce Sanborn, was selected by the school's board of directors in April and took the reins this summer.

"As we've recreated ourselves, one of the main points of the strategic plan is to make Orme the school that it once was, while still teaching kids what they need to know to be successful in today's world," Calmes says. "If you're a rancher out in the middle of nowhere—like we sort of are—it can be difficult to

find a place where your kids can be exposed to a great academic situation. We're sending graduates to top-notch colleges every year. We strive for excellence in everything we do here, whether it is the classroom or the rodeo arena."

One person who can vouch for that is alum Robin Alden, a member of the class of 1981, who oversees the American Quarter Horse Youth Association and all AQHA youth programs. She followed two older sisters to Orme, and then sent a daughter and son to the school. Phillip graduated in May and has qualified for the AQHYA World Championship Show while attending the school.

"For me, the chance to go to a horse school was phenomenal," recalls Alden. "My father believed in a prep-school education, so I went to Orme starting with my sophomore year. I got my start in high school rodeo there. The school was good for me in so many ways.

"Orme just offers so many great things that no other school can give you. The academics are just incredible. You can write your own ticket to just about any college. But the horses and all that the school offers were a lifesaver for me and my son."

In an effort to attract such students, Orme is offering a full-tuition scholarship for the 2015-16 school year to one National High School Rodeo Association member. Details on the application process are still in the works, but applications will be due by December 31.

A RANCH AND A SCHOOL

For 85 years, horses have been a part of the curriculum at Orme. That's because there was a ranch before there was a school. An Arizona farmer by birth, Charles Orme Sr. had been living in California selling real estate and securities when a client asked him to sell his ranch north of Phoenix in 1929.

"My father decided he should look at the place before trying to sell it," wrote his son, Charlie, in *The Building of a School: The History of the Orme School*. "When he did, he decided to buy it. He did this without first consulting Mother, and traded some of his farmland west of Phoenix as a down payment. Father did not like life in California, and thought the climate at 4,000 feet would provide the family with cool nights and be just right for them."

The elder Orme—known to most as Uncle Chick—brought in a ranch hand, Juan Almanza, from his place in the Salt River Valley to oversee the new place. Almanza's 13 children joined Uncle Chick's two sons and daughter as the school's first students.

"Neighboring ranchers had solved the schooling problem by renting or buying a house in Mayer, miles away. Their wives and children lived there during the week," Charlie wrote before his death in 2007. "My parents did not think this was a good solution, so they hired an excellent teacher to come to the Orme Ranch. The county supplied the books and a \$10 per-student stipend that made up the small salary for the teacher."

The southwest corner of the old ranch house served as the school's first classroom, but was replaced in 1937 with the Old Adobe. The classroom remains in use today as the center of the school's campus, which is surrounded by the 1,200-acre Quarter Circle V Bar Ranch and the Prescott National Forest, both of which are open to Orme students for trail riding and other outdoor activities.

It wasn't long before the school was taking in students from surrounding areas, and by the mid-1930s Uncle Chick and his wife, Aunt Minna, were making trips back East to recruit students. The ranch and the school

worked hand-in-hand in the early years. School students performed daily ranch chores, while ranch horses provided plenty of opportunities for students to get horseback for everything from trail rides to gathering, moving and branding cattle.

As the economy improved and the ranch became profitable once again after World War II, Uncle Chick considered shuttering the school. Charlie, however, wouldn't hear of it. He'd followed in his father's footsteps by attending Stanford University and was ready to take the reins in order for the school to continue. He served as the school's headmaster for the next 42 years, overseeing the addition of a high school program to what had once been just an elementary and middle school.

MORE THAN JUST HORSES

While the ranching/horse culture of the school draws plenty of students, Orme offers a handful of other opportunities, as well. The school captured a state championship in football last fall and has won state titles in basketball in recent years.

A week-long fine arts festival puts classes on hold and gives students the opportunity to experience art in its numerous forms, from painting to blacksmithing. Orme also hosts summer camps ranging from traditional summer camp to horsemanship and football.

"You'll find things here that you won't in most schools," says Calmes. "From Latin to blacksmithing, we have subjects that allow our students to be more of a free thinker instead of just memorizing a bunch of random facts for a test. We teach in a way that makes kids really think about their answers and how they came to that conclusion."

Truth be told, it's easier to think outside the box when you aren't spending your days trapped inside one, and that's the advantage that Orme offers every student. 🐾

KYLE PARTAIN is a freelance writer and media coordinator for the National High School Rodeo Association. Send comments on this story to edit@westernhorseman.com.