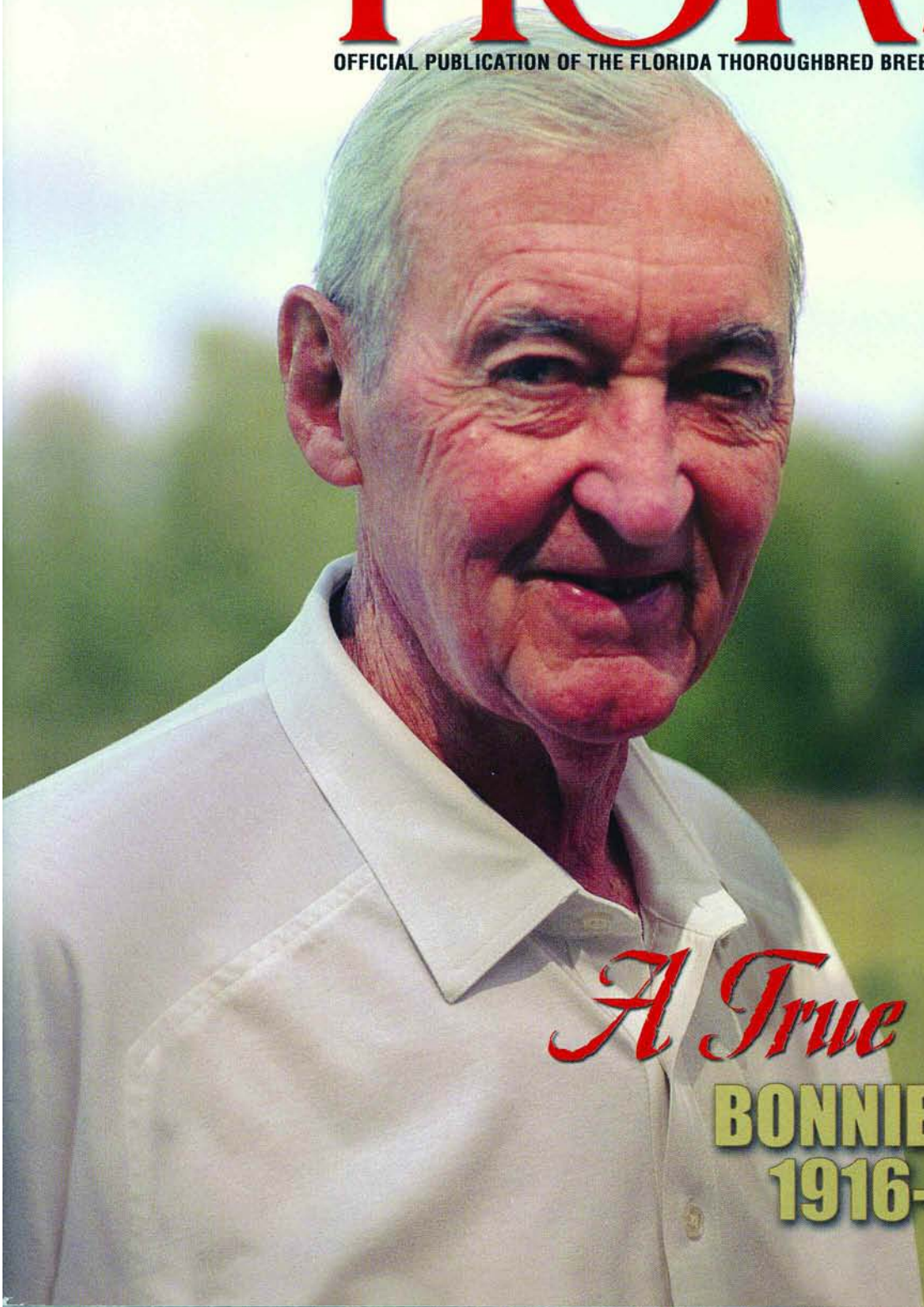


DECEMBER 2001 • \$3.50

THE Florida HORSE

OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE FLORIDA THOROUGHBRED BREEDERS' AND OWNERS' ASSOCIATION



A True Pioneer

BONNIE HEATH
1916-2001



PHOTO BY NANCY COMPTON

Remembering a *Florida Legend*



PHOTO BY LOUISE E. REINAGEL

Marion County's Thoroughbred and business communities gathered Nov. 16 at Steinbrenner's Yankee Ramada Inn in Ocala to say good-bye to legendary horseman Bonnie Heath who passed away Nov. 4 at the age of 85.

Heath has long been credited with jump-starting Florida's Thoroughbred industry when, in the 1950s, he and partner Jack Dudley, elected to keep Needles in the state to stand stud duty. Despite lucrative offers to sell Needles to Kentucky connections, Heath and Dudley, sacrificing personal wealth, stuck to their guns and kept Needles in the Sunshine State. Today, Florida's Thoroughbred community is likely much better off because of the decision.

The memorial service, attended by civic leaders from near and far, and friends and family celebrated the life and works of the founding father of Marion County's Thoroughbred industry.

"Bonnie Heath was a true American gentleman," stated Ocala Mayor E.L. Foster. "It is an honor to represent the city in paying tribute to Bonnie Heath."

Randy Harris, on behalf of the Marion County Commissioners, proclaimed that a stretch of highway along Highway 27 through 14th Street in Ocala, will be re-named Bonnie Heath Boulevard in honor of Heath's countless and valuable contributions to the area.

Harris closed by saying "Marion County is a better place because of Heath."

Heath's son, Bonnie III, took to the podium and fighting back tears shared lessons he learned from his father and reflected back on growing up with a self-made man.

"This is a special day for a special person," Bonnie III said. "Looking around the room you can see he was a great man."

Dave Erb, who piloted Heath and Jack Dudley's famed Florida-bred Needles to historic wins in the Kentucky Derby (G1) and Belmont Stakes (G1) and later trained for the partners, also spoke to the gathering.

"I think I am one of the luckiest men in the world to have been associated with such special people," he said, referring to Heath and Dudley. "All I want to say is next time around we'll win the Preakness."

Others spoke of Heath's tireless charitable efforts and contributions, his many business accomplishments and his passion for the horse business.

Guiding the crowd through the memorial ceremony was Ket Barber, a longtime friend of Heath's.

We have more on Bonnie Heath's life and accomplishments in the Thoroughbred industry and beyond, in Ryan Conley's article on page 16.

—Michael Compton

Bonnie Heath

A True Pioneer



BY RYAN CONLEY

To call Bonnie M. Heath simply a horseman would be shortchanging his life. And Heath was never shortchanged by life.

Heath, whose career included successful stints first as a businessman and horse farm owner, and later as a political and community activist in Marion County, died November 4 at his home. He was 85.

The owner of Bonnie Heath Farm, which he bought for \$200,000 as a pioneering horseman in 1956, Heath succeeded also as an oil-drilling wildcatter in the Midwest, as a Florida-based owner of a Florida-bred Kentucky Derby winner, as a fierce campaigner for politics, and as a founder of the Marion County United Way.

"He was a great man, a great Floridian and a

great American," said George M. Steinbrenner III, owner of the New York Yankees, who became involved in the Ocala business and horse communities after meeting Heath in 1972. "I have met some pretty big men in my life, a lot of big, big people here in New York and elsewhere, but Bonnie would hold his own with any of them."

After suffering a stroke at home Oct. 20, Heath was admitted to Munroe Regional Medical Center in Ocala. He was released Oct. 22 but was re-admitted



(Top) Bonnie Heath and stakes winner PIO.

(Below) Bonnie and Opal Heath



the next day when he developed pneumonia. Heath returned home under the care of Hospice of Marion County where he passed away.

“We watched the Breeders’ Cup (Oct. 27) at the hospital, but he was really sleepy, fading in and out,” said his son, Bonnie Heath III. “But he was at peace with himself and with everybody else.”

Heath and the late Jackson C. Dudley, who first met and formed an Illinois oil-drilling company in the 1940s, were among a small group of pioneers credited with kick-starting the Thoroughbred breeding industry in Marion County. The longtime partners owned the legendary race horse Needles, who while wearing the orange and blue silks of their D & H Racing Stale, became the first Florida-bred to win the Kentucky Derby (G1) on May 3, 1956.

“I have met some pretty big men in my life, a lot of big, big people here in New York and elsewhere, but Bonnie would hold his own with any of them.”

George Steinbrenner III

“Mr. Heath is a first-class guy,” said Needles’ jockey David Erb, a 77-year-old who later trained for Heath and now lives in Saratoga Springs, N.Y. “Whatever he said, you could take it to the bank. He wasn’t just a good guy to work for, he was a good friend.”



As unprecedented as that historic racing victory was, it was the partners’ decision in 1958 to stand Needles as a stallion at Heath’s Marion County farm that forced Ocala upon an industry heavily steeped in Central Kentucky tradition.

“He and Jack forfeited a tremendous amount of money standing Needles here,” said Bryan Howlett, general manager of Tartan Farm. “They simply were not able to get the (prominent) mares that they would have been able to get there. It was a sacrifice, but somebody had to do something.”

Speaking in Charlene Johnson’s 1993 book “Florida Thoroughbred,” Heath said: “There’s no question that he would have been more successful at

Heath had a decades-long involvement with the United Way of Marion County.

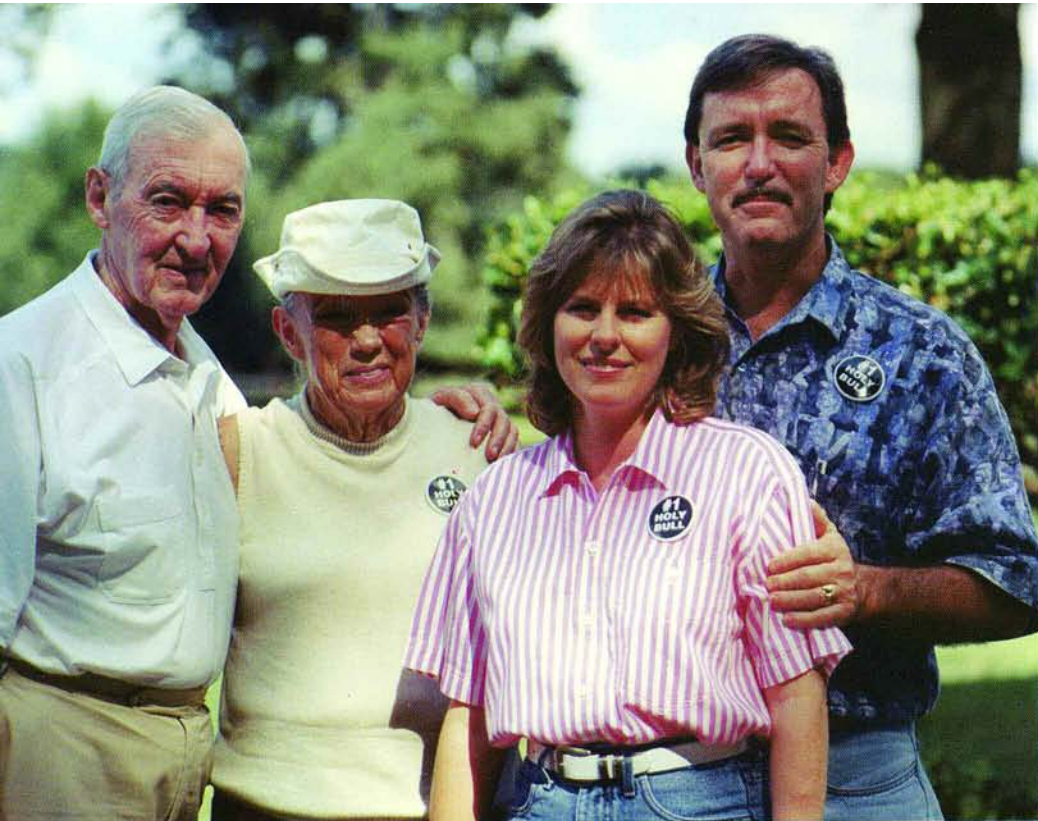


PHOTO BY LOUISE REINAGEL

**Bonnie, Opal,
Bonnie III and
Kim Heath**

stud if he'd gone to Kentucky. But we accelerated the Florida breeding program. People from all over the world realized for the first time that we could produce good horses in Florida, and that was worth it to us."

INDUSTRY LEADER

Heath was also a shrewd businessman and investor. An early member of the Ocala/Marion County Economic Development Council, Heath, acting as lead partner for a partnership, opened four Ramada Inns in Florida and Georgia in 1966, including one on Blitchton Road in August of that year.

“He wasn’t just a good guy to work for, he was a good friend.”

**David Erb
Needles’ jockey**

“If you shook his hand, you didn’t need it in writing,” said Tom Alvey, who managed the local hotel, now owned by Steinbrenner, from its opening until 1993. “He was as honest a man as will ever be. But you didn’t want him on the wrong side, because he

was tough.”

Steinbrenner credits Heath with his introduction to the Marion County area. While traveling to Tampa in 1972 to look at a shipyard which he eventually purchased, Steinbrenner happened to stop at Heath’s Ramada Inn off I-75.

“He was one of the first men I met in Ocala and he had a definite impact,” said Steinbrenner, who now owns four Marion County hotels as well as the 750-acre Kinsman Farm west of Ocala. “I was a midwestern boy. I had no intention of finding a farm or racing horses, but he, along with two or three others, shepherded me and are responsible, in part, for any success I might have had in horse racing.

“The Thoroughbred industry owes him a lot,” continued Steinbrenner, who remembered attending University of Florida football games with Heath. “I’m just lucky to have met the family.”

LATER YEARS

Heath drifted away from the Thoroughbred industry as the years passed, turning over the reins of his farm to his son, Bonnie III, and daughter-in-law, Kim, in 1991. In 1997, the historic Heath property, along with Dudley and Tartan Farms, were put under contract with South Florida developer Richard Siemens, who announced plans for his Heathbrook development along State Road 200.

Heath and Dudley remained friends up until the latter’s death in 1998 at the age of 87.

“You don’t see too many partnerships that last that long,” said Diane Dudley, Dudley’s daughter-in-law. “But even when Mr. Dudley was sick at the end, Bonnie called constantly, and still kept in contact with Mrs. Dudley. They all loved each other tremendously.”

Included among Heath’s survivors is his wife of 66 years, Opal; his son; and two daughters, Heather O’Neill of Sarasota, and Hilary Wellborn of High Springs. Another daughter, Marcia Kendall, preceded him in death in 1981. ■

Editor’s Note: Ryan Conley is a staff writer for The Ocala Star Banner. This article originally appeared in the Star Banner in the Nov. 6 edition. Portions of the original article have been edited for space.

BONNIE HEATH *Timeline*

Aug. 12, 1916 • Born in Marie, Okla.

Feb. 28, 1935 • Marries Opal Wells while attending Oklahoma A & M University.

1944-46 • Heath and Jackson Dudley begin working together, eventually forming Dudley-Heath Drilling Company in Carmi, Ill.

April, 1950 • Heaths move from Evansville, Ind. to Ft. Lauderdale; Dudleys visit Heaths regularly, where the two families often went deep-sea fishing.

Dec. 1952 • Heath and Dudley form D & H Stable, and along with trainer Hugh Fontaine, begin to buy race horses.

March, 1955 • Heath, Dudley and Fontaine buy Needles for \$20,000 from Dickey Stables at Hialeah Race Course.

Jan. 1956 • Needles becomes first Florida-bred national champion naed co-Champion 2-year-old male).

Feb. 8, 1956 • Heath and Dudley purchase the 572-acre CY Cattle Ranch on Highway 200 for \$200,000 from Mr & Mrs. Richard Salsbury.

May 3, 1956 • Needles becomes first Florida-bred to win the Kentucky Derby.

May 17, 1956 • Needles loses the Preakness, finishing second to Fabius.

June 7, 1956 • Needles becomes first Florida-bred to win the Belmont Stakes.

Oct. 1956 • Heath, Dudley form separate farms.

Jan. 1957 • Counting Heath's farm, there are seven thoroughbred farms in Marion County; 21 by the end of year; 52 by 1961; more than 500 by 1980.

Jan. 1957 • Needles named national Champion 3-year-old colt.

March 23, 1957 • Needles runs last race, finishing third in the Gulfstream Park Handicap and is retired from racing; stands stud at Bonnie Heath Farm beginning in 1958.

Nov. 1957 • Heath helps organize Florida Breeders' Sales Association; named vice-president.

June, 1958 • First edition of Florida Horse Magazine, which Heath helped organize and was named vice-president of its board, is published.

Nov. 1960 • Heath sells 320 acres of his farm land to William McKnight, who forms Tartan Farm.

1960 • Elected Florida Thoroughbred Breeders' Association president.

1961 • FTBA president again, helps coordinate move of Florida Thoroughbred Breeders Association headquarters from Miami to Ocala.

1961 • Helps organize United Appeal (later United Way) in Marion County; was first board president in 1961.

1962 • FTBA president.

1962 • United Appeal president.

1964 • FTBA president.

Aug. 1966 • As lead partner, opens Ramada Inn on Blichton Road; opens Ramadas in Lake City, Valdosta, Ga. and Atlanta that same year. **1984** • Needles dies, buried at OBS.

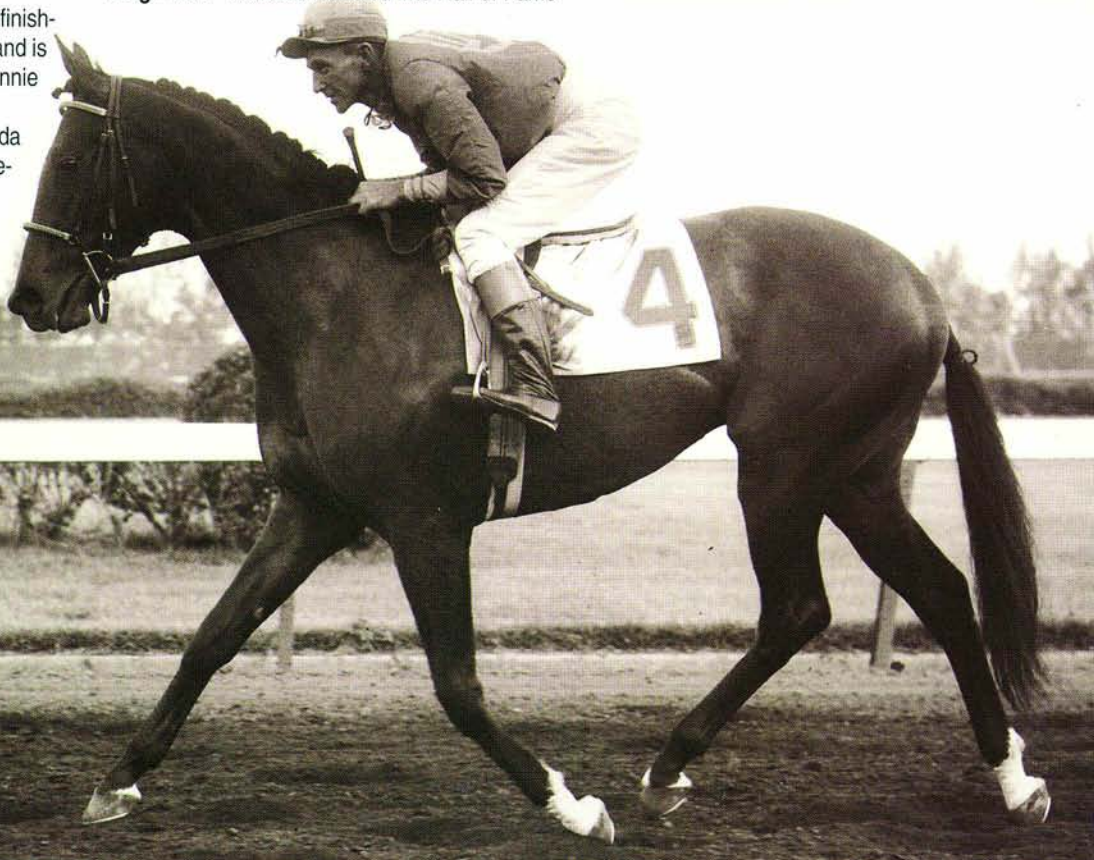
1982 • United Way's Bonnie Heath Award of Excellence established.

Feb. 1989 • Sells Ramada Inn to George Steinbrenner III for \$2.1 million.

Jan. 1991 • Heath leases his farm to son and daughter-in-law Bonnie III and Kim; Heath chairs state-created Heath Commission to reincorporate Hialeah Race Course into racing.

Feb. 1998 • Sale of Heath, Dudley and Tartan farms to South Florida developer Richard Siemens for proposed Heathbrook development on State Road 200 is announced

Aug. 2000 • Needles inducted into Hall of Fame



**Partners Jack Dudley
and Bonnie Heath**

**Right-1956 Kentucky
Derby Winner
and National
Champion Needles**

Timeline courtesy of
Ocala Star Banner