



Left: Shemson running
and playing freely in
his meadow.

Shemson

The Prime Minister's horse

The correspondence began with an email out of the blue. "Greetings from Ethiopia! We enjoy Arabian Horse World very much in this country. I share the magazine with foreigners and Ethiopians. We hope and envision one day that a small Arabian breeding program will be started here. At present, in this ancient land of around seven million horses, we have only one pure Arabian stallion by the name of Shemson ... Sincerely yours, Joseph Chu."

One Arabian stallion in all of Ethiopia? With that, Mr. Chu got our attention, and we asked him to tell us Shemson's story. We were curious, too, about Mr. Chu, a lifelong horse lover from Hong Kong who finally found the circumstances right for a horse of his own while working with an international Christian organization in the Horn of Africa.

From across two continents and an ocean came videos and photographs that told a sweet story about one stallion and the people who see him as the most beautiful of horses — the Arabian.

The force of Shemson's personality, his ability to draw people to his side and shine even in a darkened stable, speaks of the enduring magnetism of the Arabian. And Joseph, in turning this sullen and neglected horse into the happy soul he is today, reminds us of the most basic training tool ... the power of love.

Here's wishing all of you an abundance of love and happiness in this holiday season and throughout the New Year.

— Denise Hearst, Publisher

By Joseph Chu

Many young people long to have a horse yet not many can realize their dream. In my childhood years growing up in Hong Kong I always loved horses, admiring the handsome prince on his fiery stallion and the pretty princess galloping free and wild with flying hair and robes. However, in Hong Kong and other parts of the Far East, kids who owned horses or took lessons at a good riding academy mostly came from wealthy families; I definitely was not qualified.

My early knowledge about horses came from my late father, who liked to tell us kids tales of his formative years in Zhejiang province, where the big city of Shanghai was located. At the young age of 14 my father went to Shanghai to make a living. His childhood was spent in a scenic area close to the sea, where the well-respected family clan owned land and houses alongside a few horses. Father loved to catch fish and crab. Riding was another favorite activity. He described to us the character of horses, some being obviously problem horses. Sometimes after a cheerful, long riding trip, his mount became so excited when approaching home that no one could hold him. These were some of the awkward moments when he got thrown off!

My own more serious riding endeavor began when I grew old enough to earn some income. Some horse farms were operating in the New Territories of Hong Kong where one



Above: Joseph Chu, far left, with a class of students at a small Christian school at Soddo.

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Top: A Gootz war games player with his decorated mount on the Jan-Meda field.

Bottom: Shemson's half-Arabian daughter Maree in a jumping competition on Jan-Meda field.



could rent horses, mostly retired Thoroughbreds. Riding racehorses was tough. I learned basic riding through hard experiences and also through observing good riders and asking questions. Today, decades later, I still love riding when opportunities come. But owning a horse was the farthest thing from my mind until I was transferred to Ethiopia by my Christian Mission organization early in 1993.

My first assignment in this ancient land of Abyssinia was to teach for three months at a small Christian school in Soddo — the hub town of the Wolaita country in the south. Besides enjoying my work of teaching through an interpreter, I loved to visit the town and its people. Often I would take a *gaa-ree*, a crude carriage drawn by a single horse, from the town back to the elevated area of the school compound. One paid about five birrs, an equivalent of about 70 U.S. cents, for the long uphill trip. Once a driver was whipping the horse furiously because the poor animal was too exhausted to climb any more. I intervened by paying the fare and walking the rest of the way, thus allowing the horse to turn around for home. Some weekends I would rent horses from nearby farmers for a ride. One could never

forget the feeling of being upon a native saddle with lots of padding and the thin, crude iron stirrups — which were too narrow for my shoes to enter yet were perfect to be gripped by the large and the second toes of the feet as some of the native people did!

It was not until the middle of 1994, when I had finished my Amharic language school, that I purchased a five-year-old white gelding

from an Oromo country man. Owning a horse in Ethiopia was far less expensive than in most parts of the world, due to cheap labor and feed. The horse culture has been

prevalent in this land, having been used in past warfare, and being cherished by various ethnic groups such as the Oromo and the Wolaita. For centuries horses have been used for transportation, racing, and as valued personal mounts. At present it has been estimated that seven million horses are in this land. Country people use their mounts throughout the entire year, often riding the whole day for funerals or wedding gatherings. Once on a long bus trip to the northern provinces, our vehicle came upon a country funeral procession. We witnessed a beautifully decorated, fully saddled but riderless horse at the head of that gloomy procession. Of course, that was the beloved personal mount of the deceased. One distinct feature of the Oromo country funeral is this — the men, not women, line up on horseback in small groups before the grieving family. Each man would then take a turn telling short stories about the dead. Often, on the big national festival days the traditional war games, called *Gootz* in Oromo, will be performed. Here the crowd is treated to the spectacle of frenzied chasing on horseback with the pursuers throwing spears at the pursued.

Horses are revered animals in the ancient Orthodox Church, which considered, since saints and angels are depicted riding upon white steeds, that horses are clean and beloved companions of the holy ones. Being a fervent student of the Bible myself, let me quote from the Book of Job in the Old Testament: "Do you give the horse his strength or clothe his neck with a flowing mane? Do you make him leap like a locust, striking terror with his proud snorting? He paws fiercely, rejoicing in his strength, and charges into the fray. He laughs at fear, afraid of nothing; he does not shy away from the sword. The quiver rattles against his side, along with the flashing spear and lance. In frenzied excitement he eats up the ground, he cannot stand still when the trumpet sounds. At the blast of the trumpet he snorts, 'Aha!' He catches the scent of battle from afar, the shout of commanders and the battle cry." (Job 39:19-25) No horse but the Arabian stallion fits perfectly into these vivid descriptions of the ancient Scriptures. And this is no coincidence since

both the holy Scriptures and the Arabian horse were born out of the Middle Eastern civilization.

The traditional riding gear is handy and inexpensive. The national saddle, patterned much like the Arab saddle, is light and comfortable on long-distance travels. The Ethiopian bit has been known to be severe, designed to control even the hardest animal. The traditional horsemanship is amazing, with consistent contact with the saddle in whatever gaits, which means no rising trot. Sometimes foreigners will watch, with much admiration, the skill of traditional horsemanship — in dancing the horse at the cute and lively zigzag trot or at a thunderous gallop or simply in bareback riding with nothing but a rope across the animal's mouth.

Early in 1995 I moved my gelding into the government's Military Stable — a huge compound with stables, a nice riding arena, basketball and tennis courts, and other facilities. The complex was built by the Italians in the late 1930s. My country horse was put in the same stable with a group of about 14 horses said to have come from Djibouti a tiny country adjacent to Ethiopia on the Gulf of Aden. A riding group called the Syndicate, made up of mostly foreigners, were using these Djibouti horses for jumping, arena riding, and also for touring.

Before long my attention was drawn to a thin, silvery-white horse, said to be an Arabian, in our section of the stable. At first I didn't believe that a pure Arabian could exist in Ethiopia. However, closer examination of the horse's head and his tail convinced me that indeed he was an Arabian. The grooms told me that Shemson was the only stallion among all the Djibouti male horses. And most people were afraid of him. He was tied there, sullen and facing the wall most of the day. Grooms had to lay food into his trough across the wooden fence for fear of entering his box and being kicked. Grooming him was said to be impossible. Sometimes I would stand over the fence trying to befriend a lonely stallion only to be taken aback when Shemson would lash out with great speed baring his teeth!

A few months later word came out that Shemson was for sale. The main reason was that most of the women and children of the Syndicate were afraid to ride him. In June

1995, the stallion came under my custody. Truly, I hardly expected to own any horse in my life, but now with a pure Arabian — the prince among horses! From the first day of owning Shemson till now I have always been grateful before God for this wonderful gift.

Back in 1983 when a few of the foremost horsemen from the two leading government stables, namely the Defense and the Palace Stables, went to Djibouti for jumping competition, they witnessed a small, dark grey foal being flown into Djibouti — a dignitary gift from Yemen to the prime minister of that Red Sea state. Shemson was said to have been trained by a French horsewoman, Madame Camus, who played an important role in teaching equitation to the children of the prime minister. Moreover, we heard that a young French girl was especially attached to the young colt.

In the summer of 1988, during the rainy season in Ethiopia (while it was extraordinarily hot and dry in Djibouti), a train brought up a group of horses from the seaport Djibouti to Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia. Shemson was among them. Old-timers at the Military Stable recalled that the whole compound was stirred by the beauty and charm of the young stallion. The vet at the stable's clinic arranged a breeding during that three-month sojourn before the Djibouti horses returned home. One year later during September (the Ethiopian new year month in 1989), a lovely grey filly was born. They named her Maree, and she grew into almost the same image of her sire with swift-floating gaits and a great flag-like tail. At four years of age, Maree entered her first jumping competition and won!

Around June of 1992 the Djibouti horses arrived in Addis again, settling as before at the Defense Stable. For three months they were well provided for. However, after that time due to some internal problems in Djibouti, the horses were abandoned and the person in charge of



Top: A countrywoman on horseback heading for a funeral. The oval basket on the man's head contains the circular national bread called injera, which the funeral goers consume afterwards.

Bottom: A unique tradition in the Oromo country funeral — the men on horseback take turns telling stories about the dead before the grieving family members.

them returned home. Thus began a long period of deprivation and starvation for those 15 or so Djibouti horses, Shemson among them. Workers at Defense Stable recalled how, out of mercy, they would scoop a handful of barley to feed those miserable animals. Shemson was remembered as being so weak that he couldn't



Top: Two children sitting happily on Shemson with friends visiting the new stable site.

even walk properly. Then came a most memorable day, when Madame Camus and her family, together with that young French girl, came to Addis Ababa from Djibouti. When the group walked into the Defense Stable compound, they called and the entire Djibouti herd responded by coming forward. However, only Shemson distinguished himself from all the others by burying his head into the bosom of that French girl who, seeing her first love in such a pitiful condition, burst forth into tears! The group bought some food for the horses and departed shortly afterwards. Yet that most moving sight of a young foreign girl in tearful reunion with her Arabian remains in the memory of many today.

The abandoned Djibouti horses, after some nine months, were claimed by the Syndicate, which, after about a year and a half, passed Shemson over to me. When we first started riding the stallion, we were particularly impressed by his gaits, which distinguish the Arabian from all the other breeds. Shemson seemed to have a natural spring under all four feet. When other horses galloped, their hoofs pounded on the ground. When Shemson ran, he didn't pound but skimmed over the land effortlessly. This economical way of moving surely contributes to the amazing stamina of the Arabians. Shemson exhibits great freedom in every gait, yet he seems to be happiest when being ridden at a canter or gallop. Sometimes one almost gets a feeling of flying over the ground upon a horse who never tires, that great banner of a tail also flying behind you!

The Ethiopians do not know much about Arabian type and other Arabian characteristics. Yet, with Shemson among them, often we hear these sayings: "He is a pure Arabian..." or "tail-up

very beautiful..." or "tenn-kaa-raa choo-hee," which literally means in Amharic "powerful shouting." Shemson is small, no more than 14.1h, but his whinnying has always been so spirited and loud that it can be heard far beyond the Defense Stable's big compound. Sometimes his flaring nostrils, blowing out hot air like fire, can be truly threatening to new visitors.

What is our hope and plan for Shemson in the future? We would like to upgrade and enrich the quality of horses in Ethiopia. We have made some solid progress by acquiring three young indigenous mares. Last summer, after we moved Shemson and others to a scenic area where a small Abyssinian stable was constructed, breeding was started. Now one mare is heavily pregnant and we can't wait to see the product of crossing the Arabian upon the very enduring and intelligent indigenous Ethiopian horse. A free breeding program in which we will share the foals has also been opened to high-quality mares. We are hoping that through the breeding program the stable will become self-supporting. Every other profit that comes out of it we will donate to a diligently planned project called Abyssinia Centre — a nonprofit Christian ministry to the young people in Addis Ababa.

We also dream about bringing in two Arabian mares in foal to Ethiopia. The former Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie was given Arabian stallions 40 or 50 years ago by neighboring countries. However, there has never been a pure Arabian breeding program in this great land, nor have the local villagers had the privilege of owning or riding an Arabian horse. Again, if that dream becomes reality, it will be a blessing to the equine world here.

In closing, what is the greatest lesson in my experiences with an Arabian? I would say it is a spiritual one. We have been witnessing the wonderful transformation of Shemson, from an angry and sullen horse into a warm creature upon whom children can sit joyfully. The key is not a larger stall or better food and medical care. The key is love. If a horse responds to love, how much more will human beings respond? We are living in a high-tech age where everything is fast-moving. We know that with a big budget, funds, credentials, and personnel our plans might be achieved. But in the absence of love, our superficial success would be futile and meaningless. So it is stated in the Scriptures: "And now these three remain: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love."