

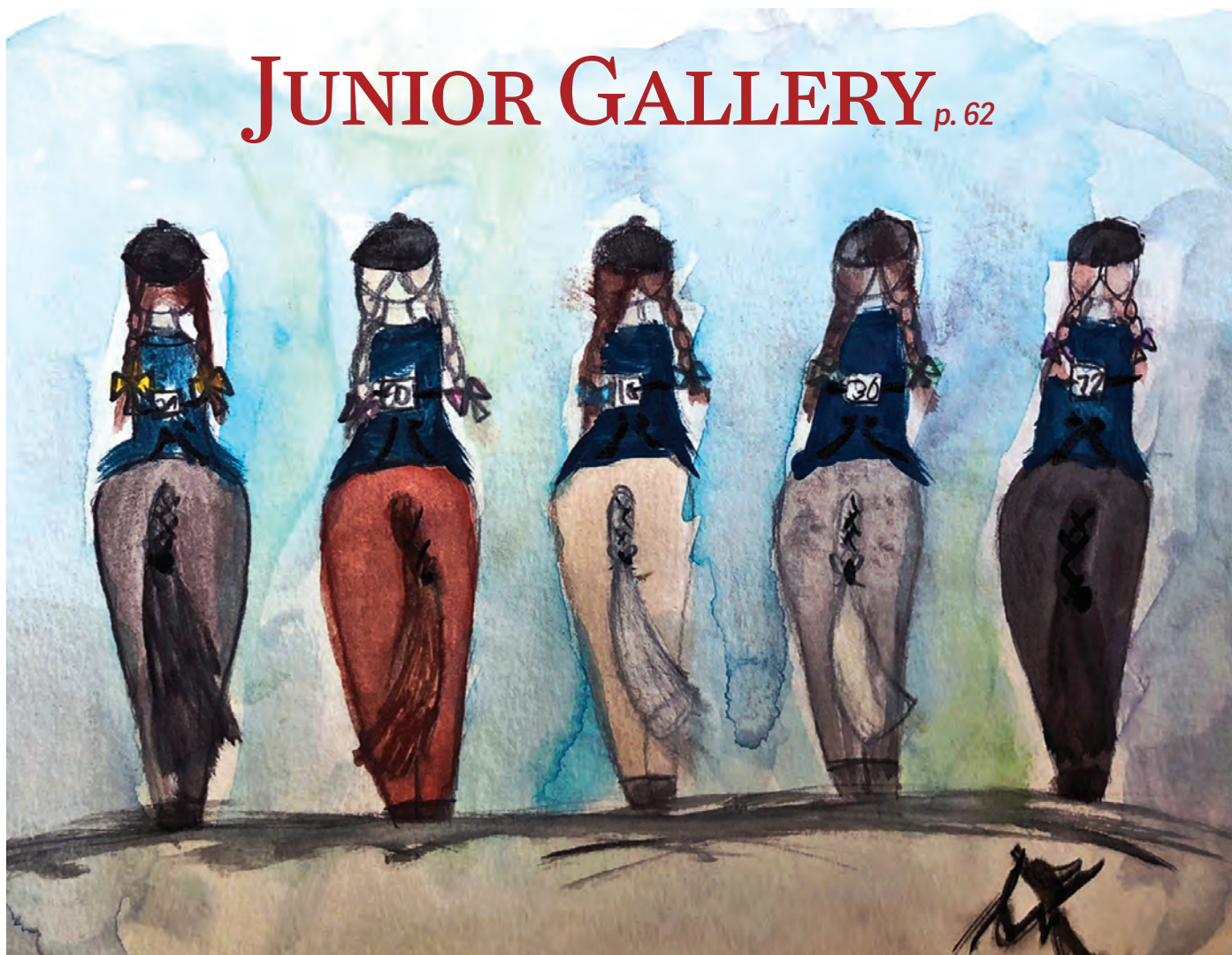
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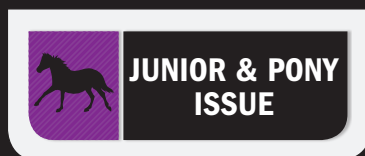
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BRINGING BILLY & BLAZE TO THE SILVER SCREEN

THE BELOVED CLASSIC IS COMING TO LIFE IN A NEW WAY, HIGHLIGHTING
THE SIMPLE LESSONS A PONY CAN TEACH A CHILD.

BY LAURA LEMON

A young Edmund “Tad” Coffin and his first grade peers strolled down the hallway in single file on a trek to the school library. After learning how to check out a book, they were allowed to find one to take home.

At the time, Coffin was just starting to explore his equine obsession, so when the librarian asked him his interests, naturally he mentioned horses. She knew just where to lead him.

“She found the ‘Billy And Blaze’ corner, and I checked that book out,” says Coffin. “At that point I had my very beginnings in riding, so it was the appropriate book to have. I read almost the entire series.”

Growing up in Long Island, New York, Coffin experienced a childhood similar to that of Billy, who rides his beloved pony all over in C.W. Anderson’s stories and sketches. Whereas Billy had Blaze, Coffin’s well-loved first pony was a pinto named Skipjack.

“I can relate to exactly what Billy was doing because that was sort of my young experience with horses,” says Coffin.

“It was a lot of being outside and riding through the woods and through trails and jumping over logs, and that was a great beginning. It was a great beginning for Billy.

“I think the kind of horse shows that I went to and my approach to horse shows a couple of years later was very much the same thing,” he continues, “where you clean your pony the night before, and you ride through the woods to get to the horse show and ride in a class or two. And then if you won any ribbons, put them on your pony and ride all the way home. It was very removed from many of the opportunities that most kids have today.”

From those early journeys with Skipjack, who he claimed “wasn’t quite as nice as Blaze was, but he was one of the ones that started it all,” Coffin progressed all the way to the Olympics. He won team and individual gold in the 1976 Montreal Olympic Games on Bally Cor; he was the first American event rider to win an individual Olympic gold medal.

Today, in a study at his Ruckersville, Virginia, home, one of those medals hangs in a shadow box along with Coffin’s pinque coat. And on the table separating the kitchen from the sitting room, Coffin displays his copy of “Billy And Blaze,” eagerly awaiting its next reader.

A Little Boy Who Loved Horses

Born in Wahoo, Nebraska, in 1891, Clarence William “C.W.” Anderson worked first and foremost as an artist and illustrator, only later integrating his work with words and stories. After attending the Artist Institute of Chicago, he freelanced in New York City and became a member of the Society for American Etchers.

As an American Horse Shows Association judge in the hunter and jumper disciplines, Anderson allowed his hobby to trickle into his professional life. He wrote the first book of his “Billy And Blaze” series in 1936, eventually penning 45 titles.



He leaves the introductions simple for his elementary audience: “Billy was a little boy who loved horses more than anything else in the world.” With detailed sketches, he tells the story of a young boy who wishes and wishes for a pony until his parents surprise him on his birthday with his best friend, Blaze.

Billy grooms Blaze and feeds him treats, and in return Blaze comes barreling up when called. With Blaze, Billy also learns the thrill of galloping through the woods and jumping logs. Together they find a lost dog named Rex who joins their adventures throughout the series.

As a horse-crazed girl Cynthia “Cindy” Erkel grew up reading Anderson’s stories and illustrations. “The roots of this book in our culture and our little riding world, it’s really because at a young age [children] were daydreaming and turning to pictures,” she says. “The illustrations are what have made this stay in print 80-some years.”

Now a children’s author herself, Erkel and her husband Michael Erkel also operate a design and IT business, Erkel Associates, that involves working with film. About 15 years ago, after filming a furniture commercial that featured some Breyer horses, Cindy’s mind started to wander.

“My conversation on the way back from that was about horse movies and just what’s happening now with horse

film,” says Cindy, of Afton, Virginia. “We’ve got horses in our family, and we have children that just need natural [space]. So ‘Billy And Blaze’ was a curiosity. We wanted to find out has there ever been a movie of ‘Billy And Blaze’?”

As the mother of four sons and four daughters, with 16 grandchildren, Cindy observed that children were spending less time reading and exploring the outdoors and more time with technology. She believes “Billy And Blaze” not only provides sweet lessons about the human-animal bond, but it also encourages children to simply get outside. A movie, she thought, would rejuvenate the story for new generations.

“If there’s anything that makes me just tenaciously stick with this, it is the amount of time that children spend in the virtual world,” says Cindy. “I’m just really hoping to have as many opportunities as I can to feed the children that are coming up now with more things to think about.”

But the C.W. Anderson Estate, which held the rights for Anderson’s works after his death in 1971, had declined past offers to transform the book into film. Anderson’s niece Phyllis Anderson Wood, also a writer, worried Hollywood would muddle and destroy the essence of her uncle’s story. Initially, Wood declined Cindy’s request as well. But with persistence, Cindy convinced her to read the

screenplay.

“[Then she] began to realize that we both loved literature. This wasn’t really coming from a commercial perspective. It was really about something that was deeper than that,” says Cindy. “My father was very involved in maintaining classics and keeping them safe. And so she started getting the feeling that we would keep this safe. She wanted to read the script, and she did, as you can imagine being an award-winning novelist, she had some critiques.”

With Wood’s input and blessing, the journey for “Billy & Blaze: The Movie” began.

Growing Out Of A Classic

With Anderson’s “Billy And Blaze” spanning 50 pages and counting less than 800 words, Cindy had to take liberties to advance her script. With Wood’s approval, she added more characters and plot lines. While faithfully adhering to the Anderson’s illustrations with Billy, Blaze and Rex, she supplemented more relationships with characters such as Billy’s grandfather Greer, played by Coffin, handler Harris Gideon, played by real life horseman Alfred Carter “AC” Yates, and the story’s antagonist Gordon Hill, played by Cindy’s grandson Ivan Musser.

“I had to have my antagonist be what could really happen in real life,” says Cindy. “It’s within the realm of what every child has experienced. There’s a chance to look at this boy’s reasons for being that way, and I think, without being sugary, I was able to resolve it. I like the happy ending. I really do.”

Cindy also refused to shy away from the reality of racism during the 1930s. “This is difficult when you’re looking at this time period, the ‘30s. It’s a time in history where I really wanted to have black riders represented,” she says. “I wanted to represent the very talented people during that time—which wasn’t always a great time. There were some very ugly sentiments at that time that I felt like I really don’t want to just pretend did not exist.”

Unable to go into specifics—see the movie when it premieres to know the

A much beloved children’s book by C.W. Anderson, “Billy And Blaze” is being made into a film in order to reach and inspire a new generation of riders. PHOTO COURTESY OF BILLY & BLAZE



details—Cindy says she wanted to present the issues in a soft way but provide a resolution of tolerance and love.

“Even though I’m addressing bigotry, I’m doing it in the way where you see that even people that are prejudiced don’t always realize it,” she says. “They’re both good guys. These people that mended ways were always good guys. One of them wasn’t seeing his prejudice.

“You had to be true to history, and I feel that it was just not going to work for me to not have it be true to the times,” she continues. “I feel like I was able to do it in a way that works.”

Finding A Billy

As Cindy embarked on finding the cast, the animals and the setting, she kept in mind that “Billy & Blaze” was a horse movie and needed to speak to horse people. So many Hollywood horse movies make errors that are glaringly obvious to equestrians, so Cindy vowed to keep real riding and equestrian detail at the heart of “Billy & Blaze.”

The idyllic horse country in C.W. Anderson’s illustrations—with stone walls, rolling hills, woods and farms all around—was based on Anderson’s backyard in Massachusetts, but developments had changed that landscape, so Cindy chose Virginia. The C.W. Anderson Estate agreed to the location.

From there, Cindy began looking for her cast.

“I made lots and lots of calls to riding teachers. Went to lots and lots of horse shows,” says Cindy. “I did not do the typical casting call because I felt like I needed to see the child ride. I needed so much to happen—you’re not just finding an actor; you’re finding an actor who works well with a size horse. There are so many variables that a casting call would have been really complicated. I had to put the pieces together a little bit more organically—I had to find the components that I was thrilled with.”

Through word of mouth and networking, she met young equestrians like Wyatt Morris, Chase Daniel, John Leannarda, Hugh Turner

Renowned for his sketches, C.W. Anderson created a story of a young boy and his first pony that has inspired generations of riders. “The illustrations are what have made this stay in print 80 some years,” says film producer Cynthia Erkel.

ILLUSTRATION BY C.W. ANDERSON; IMAGE COURTESY OF NATIONAL SPORTING LIBRARY & MUSEUM, MIDDLEBURG, VIRGINIA



and Henry Lesko. All of the boys competed on either a local or A-circuit level in the hunters, jumpers or equitation.

Since riding an unknown pony is part of the job of playing Billy, Cindy was expecting to cast an older boy. Besides Lesko, who was only 9, all the others were 13 or 14. Because of Lesko’s small frame and young age, Cindy didn’t really consider him for the part until one day at a farm outside of Richmond, Virginia. She’d just finished teaching them how to talk from horseback, and as she turned to leave, the boys started riding off with their ponies.

“[Lesko] had been watching. He got on his pony, and his pony started bucking. His pony was impatient and wanted to get with the crowd,” says Cindy. “So I’m saying goodbye to everybody as I’m watching this little

guy just truck across the field and stay with the big boys. I’m watching, and nobody that was standing around me even noticed. It was just like it was no big deal. And I’m going, ‘Hold on.’ And they see me just right there on the spot, say, ‘That’s Billy.’ They were not at all surprised. Apparently they knew for a long time.”

“At first they didn’t think he could ride because he’s smaller,” says Lesko’s mother Anne Lesko. “He’s a good little jockey. When the pony started bucking, he just giggled and sort of booted it in the side and said, ‘Get over yourself pony.’ He doesn’t care.”

Like Coffin decades before him, Henry’s day-to-day farm life in Scottsville, Virginia, has echoes of Billy’s life. Henry takes care of his ponies at home and shows in the intermediate hunter divisions with trainers Sally Armstrong and

“I’m convinced if you can raise children to be kind and thoughtful towards animals, they’re going to be better human beings.”

—ANNE LESKO

Chad Keenum.

“It’s not hard for me to relate to [Billy] because that’s how Henry is every day,” says Anne. “He really loves his ponies. He really loves all the animals around us. Right now we have a stray cat who has three kittens that live in his bedroom. It’s not a stretch for Henry to be identifying with this boy. He’s never acted before for sure, so that’s a stretch. But really understanding what it means to have a connection with an animal and to compete with one too, I think is a big part of the movie.

“It teaches them a whole lot more than a soccer ball does,” she continues. “I’m convinced if you can raise children to be kind and thoughtful towards animals, they’re going to be better human beings. And I think that’s a lot of what this story is telling children.”

Most of the other boys already knew one another through the horse shows, and their friendships came to life in front of the camera, making up for the collective lack of acting experience.

“It’s kind of hard but really fun,” says Henry. “It’s hard to memorize my lines and memorize what I have to do when, and say what I’m supposed to say. I like it because I get to see all of the people all the time.”

“They wanted it to be natural,” says Morris’ grandfather Mike Morris, a well-known Virginia farrier who also plays the part of Julian, a farrier and a farmer, in the movie. “It’s really, really neat how all the characters kind of

filter and feed off the boys [just] the way they are.”

Bringing Blaze To Life

Blaze stands tied to a tree, with a “Happy Birthday” note attached to his halter. Even through Anderson’s sketches, he gleams in the sun. Next to the image, Anderson writes, “And there stood a beautiful bay pony with four white feet and a white nose.”

Through their adventures, Blaze proves to be a loyal and confident companion, yet safe enough to teach Billy the ropes. And that personality was more important to Cindy than looks as she searched for the perfect pony.

“I didn’t know if Blaze existed,” says Cindy. “I was willing to put some cosmetic Blaze on a pony; I was willing to do that. I needed the charisma. I would see a lot of pretty ponies and even dark bays, but they didn’t hold themselves like in the book. In the book there was a feel that [Blaze was] just very alert and curious. When you look through the illustrations, there is a feeling that Blaze, just like Billy, is loving the world.”

The first pony Cindy fell in love with was a beautiful Connemara, but he was a stallion. And putting aside the spookiness of a film set, the pony still had to be rideable for a little boy. So Cindy kept looking. But Leannarda’s mother Leslie Deering, who operates Glendevon Stables in New Windsor, Maryland, had an idea.

“I said, ‘Well I have the perfect pony standing right beside me’—I was talking to her in my driveway. ‘He might be too small for you. But other than that, he is Blaze,’ ” says Deering.

The little bay Welsh pony, with the requisite four white socks and a blaze, named Banbury Cross Abu, stopped Cindy’s search.

“Abu” has taught 11-year-old Bella Mosko the ropes of the jumpers and taken her on hunter paces and foxhunts with the Carrollton Hounds (Maryland). They’ve qualified twice for the Junior North American Field Hunter Championships.

“I can’t verbalize to you how special he is. It’s just something about him,” says Mosko’s mother Elizabeth Mosko. “We just click with him. I think Bella especially, ever since she laid eyes on him.”

“I think that Abu is just like Blaze actually,” says Bella, who has owned Abu for 2 ½ years and trains with Deering. “He represents Blaze perfectly and—especially with the horse show scene and stuff, I think that represents him the most because that’s what we do. I go out and do trails, and we’ll just go out and have fun. In lessons, we’ll pop over jumps.”

On set, Deering takes charge of Abu and the other two horses in the film. Leannarda rides the scenes multiple times before Henry hops on to ensure that Abu feels comfortable and everyone is safe. Despite the hustle and bustle of the camera crew—and even the use of a drone—Abu



Tad Coffin found many similarities between his early childhood with his pony Skipjack (pictured) and Billy's adventures with Blaze, and he joins the "Billy & Blaze" movie as Billy's grandfather. BETSEY MELVIN PHOTO



Henry Lesko competes in the hunter ring aboard ponies like Jane Russell. SHAWN MCMILLEN PHOTOGRAPHY PHOTO

has not cared.

"I've been amazed. He's a very brave pony," says Deering. "He's kind of fearless. He's definitely very clever and smart. No matter how often you do it, it's so impressive to see how smart horses are and how much they take their cues from you and say, 'OK if you tell me this is normal, and I have to do this, then OK.' Abu will do anything for a peppermint, so we keep him

stocked well with peppermints."

Having found Henry, Abu and Xerxes, the German Shepherd who plays Rex, Cindy's vision pieced into place.

"The way [Wood and I] initially talked was very idealistic. I had to go through some rough times," says Cindy. "As it has turned out, I have what I dreamed I would have when we were first talking years ago, even

► Billy And Blaze A World Away

At the age of 6, Kelly Coffin knew exactly where to go. March up the library steps, head to the back of the children's section, and there it was, at the perfect munchkin height—the "Billy And Blaze" series.

Before Coffin left the States with her family for Yokosuka, Japan, her grandfather introduced her to her first horse. She still remembers petting the nose of that chestnut and falling in love. But as the daughter of a naval aviator, living half a world away, there were no horses except for "Billy And Blaze."

"[I remember] bringing those books home as I was learning to read and just falling in love with them," says Coffin. "I would check them out and check them out over again. It's funny; I don't think I ever owned a copy of it. I just always got it from the library."

Twice a year, a fair would travel to the base. Throughout the year, Coffin would save her money, until on that special day, she'd place 100 yen into the instructor's hands and blissfully ride a horse around in a circle.

"I have a picture of me riding in my first communion dress," recalls Coffin, "because I remember running straight from church after my first communion and not even going home."

though I had to go through a lot of wondering if it was at all possible. I do have what I hoped. I'm marveled that I have it."

Passing On To Younger Generations

Cindy met Coffin at his Tad Coffin Performance Saddle shop looking for vintage saddles for the movie. But as she learned more about Coffin's background, her wheels started turning in a different direction. When she asked him to be in the movie, he



Just like Blaze, Banbury Cross Abu enjoys the outdoors with owner Bella Mosko. When "Abu" is not starring in the movie, he and Mosko compete in hunter paces and the Junior North American Field Hunter Championships, as well as foxhunting and showing. LIZ

CALLAR PHOTO

expressed his great interest in playing Billy, but she made a role for him as Billy's grandfather, an Olympic horseman himself.

"After being mildly insulted because I didn't really think I was that old, seeing that I'm not a grandfather," says Tad with a laugh, "my wife [Kelly Coffin] and Cindy conspired a little bit more."

Tad had a small cameo in "International Velvet"—showing his ride on Bally Cor at the 1977 Ledyard Farm International Three-Day Event (Massachusetts)—but he'd never attempted acting. Still, he was drawn to the chance to encourage young riders to take a step away from the regimented show mentality and just enjoy horses.

"The relationship between Billy and the pony and the natural setting in which he learned to ride and some of the illustrations where he's just riding through the woods totally unaffected and just being out in nature with rabbits and birds and dogs and ponies and riding with shorts—it's just such a

missed opportunity for so many children who grew up riding," says Tad. "So I thought this would be a great way to get involved in a story that I have a connection to from a long time ago. I think that has a lot of appeal to kids today, particularly young boys who might be interested in riding and get talked out of it at a very early age because it's not football, baseball or soccer.

"There's such a focus on safety now that if you're riding, and you're not in the ring, and everything isn't prepared perfectly, then it's a liability," he continues. "The reality is that that's how most kids learned to ride for centuries. That's only been in the last 30-40 years, or less, maybe the last 20 years, where the interest on safety has also excluded the opportunity for many children to do what little Billy is doing. I think that some things are gained from that, and some things are lost. There's definitely a tradeoff. That's just a little bit the way it is. So if the film could bring some people back to that, then I think that's a good

thing."

Mike Morris, who grew up checking out Anderson's books from the library, felt the same, offering to help on the production in any way he could.

"One of the things my wife Patty has always expressed to my daughter and my grandchildren, when you've been blessed and something's been good to you, you give back to it," says Mike. "So that's why I thought it was such an important project. It gives these other young kids hopefully the inspiration of something to go and do. To inspire them.

"What I think is so good about the horses and the ponies for the kids, it teaches them that there's something besides themselves in life and also teaches them about responsibility," he continues. "You may not think it now, but long term, it teaches work ethic."

Two of his grandkids, Wyatt and Chloe Keplinger, are featured in the film, and Mike enjoys seeing them learn and live the "Billy And Blaze" lifestyle.

"Sometimes in the show world, it's



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all controlled. You can't do this. You can't do that," says Mike. "What [the film] does, it brings out this innocent freedom in these kids. It's so neat the way it does that. So then to me, it just brings out to where it's more natural."

In addition to longtime horseman Yates playing the part of Harris, hunter legends Olin and Sally Armstrong make an appearance at the fall horse show. Mike persuaded them to don the 1930s apparel at the historic Warrenton Show Grounds in Warrenton, Virginia, the site of the movie's climax.

Although he was only there for the day, Olin hopes the movie will pass on a love for horses. "I think maybe it will get some kids interested in riding and get started," he says.

Tad and Mike enjoyed seeing the children in their natural setting with ponies. "[The kids are] just delightful to work with. I think that's the fun part about it is that it's really—there's really very little acting involved. You're just doing what you would normally do," Tad says. "So for

► Honoring History Yet Staying Safe

In C.W. Anderson's "Billy And Blaze," Billy wears the apparel of the 1930s: knee-high socks, shorts, a white collared shirt with a tie, and no helmet.

In the 1930s, few riders wore protective helmets or knew much about concussions and head injuries. They also didn't use saddle pads. So in the movie "Billy & Blaze" director Cynthia "Cindy" Erkel wanted to adhere not only to Anderson's drawings, but also to the period style.

For Anne Lesko, this gave her and her husband Richard a chance to talk about safety to their 9-year-old Henry, who plays Billy.

"When Henry got on the pony the first day at the movie, the big conversation—Richard was the one having this one with him, but it's one that we've kept as a theme throughout the whole thing—when you get on the pony at the movie, you're a rider and a horseman first," says Anne. "So if you see something that you know is questionable, or if you feel something that makes you think the pony's not comfortable, you speak up. We're not trying to raise a movie star; we're trying to raise a kid who can respect the animal. He's in the best position being around the pony and being on the pony to tell when Abu gets nervous or gets up. A constant conversation with Henry has always been you're riding first. Because that's the safety part of it first. Ride first, act second."

"We get on the pony very strategically. We get off the pony very strategically. It's not like he's hanging out on the pony without a helmet on. It's something that we're really deliberate about," she continues. "We want to be respectful of the time period in which the movie is made. We're so fortunate to ride in the time where we have so much technology around our safety."



Above from left to right: Henry Lesko plays the part of Billy in the film adaption of C.W. Anderson's classic story, with Banbury Cross Abu acting as Blaze. *REBEKAH MUSSEY PHOTO*

Tad Coffin plays the role of Billy's grandfather, an Olympic rider, in "Billy & Blaze." *PHOTO COURTESY OF BILLY & BLAZE*

Writer and director Cynthia Erkel's vision brought "Billy & Blaze" to life on screen. *REBEKAH MUSSEY PHOTO*

Farrier Mike Morris (left) plays Julian, with Henry Lesko as Billy. "What [the film] does, it brings out this innocent freedom in these kids," says Morris. *PHOTO COURTESY OF BILLY & BLAZE*

me to be conversing with some kids on ponies, all out there having a ball in great outfits doing things in an old-fashioned way, it's totally delightful. It doesn't feel like acting. It just feels like

► Reach Out And Help

The movie of "Billy & Blaze" has finished the first phase of filming, with Phases 2 and 3 getting underway this summer. While they've had some funding, there is still much needed in order to bring this film to life in the movie theaters. For information on how to support this project, email Elizabeth Vagnoni at elizabeth@billyandblazemovie.com.

being completely normal."

"They're all just an inspiration to be around, those kids," says Mike. "I think it's what keeps me young. I'm getting old, but it keeps me younger, I can tell you that. Not that I'm not tired at the end of the day, but it's just so much inspiration in the whole situation. Some things you see them do totally different from the time we were kids, and some of the things still come out. And I think it's a love for the animal and a respect even though I don't know if they know they have it. But they do. And that's what's inspiring."

Not Just A Children's Story

Cindy, who had her initial conversation with Wood 15 years ago, has now finished the first segment of shooting, with Phases 2 and 3 starting this summer. She refuses to cut corners and vows to not finish unless she feels that the cinematography, sound and feel all align.

"They say films are not released, they escape. And I think everybody knows how serious I am about the

quality of the film, of the sound and the follow of the music," says Cindy. "I don't want to have a deadline that I have to settle. That I have to go, 'Well this has taken too long for there to be a piece of music that isn't right for it.' We're just so, so thankful for what we have. And we want to make sure that it is polished."

But to Tad, Cindy already has captured the heart and essence of the story that shaped so much of his early childhood, and the childhood of his wife Kelly.

"If it comes out in the end as well as some of the early clips have, I think it will just be a delightful film, not only for people interested in horses but for people who are not sure they are interested in horses but might pick up riding after they see it," says Tad. "The quality of the story and the authenticity of it is something that we could use a little bit more of when we go to the movies."

Even beyond telling the story of the bond between a horse and a rider, Cindy wants to inspire dreams. Anderson did that for a generation,

"I think these books and this movie are the kind of things that keep children's dreams alive."

—KELLY COFFIN



and now Cindy hopes to take his work and bring that innocent wonder to the next generation.

"I think these books and this movie are the kind of things that keep children's dreams alive, you know, bring them possibilities," says Kelly. "Even if you don't live near a big woods or have a pony or whatever, there are little

spaces of nature that are calling to children, even in their backyard. And there's a lot of discovery in just getting outside."

"I want that feeling of, 'I want to feel a horse's mane.' I want kids who have never thought about it, to think, 'I want to ride a horse,'" says Cindy. "That's what happened with the book.

People that never thought about it, children that were in neighborhoods with little backyards had a feeling, 'I want to ride a horse.' And I want the movie to have children up in the city have that desire.

"It's not just having the horse," she continues. "It's actually having the dreams." 🐾



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