



## 2004 Maryland Horseman of the Year

# Henry Holloway

*Each year, the Maryland Horse Council recognizes a professional who has had an outstanding and influential career in the Maryland horse industry. Presented at the annual Maryland Horsemen's Party (a fundraiser for the Maryland 4-H Foundation and the Maryland Horse Council), the recognition is designed to inspire young people to wed their love of horses with their career. The 2004 Maryland Horsemen's Party will be held Saturday, March 6th, in the Carriage Room banquet facilities at Laurel Park. See the MHC Newsletter in this issue for more information.*

**If you asked him twenty-two years ago** what he thought he would be doing in 2004, Henry Holloway would not have said owning and operating a small chain of feed stores, complete with custom mill and tack shop. Twenty-two years ago, the Harford County born and bred Holloway was enjoying a flourishing career as a swine consultant in the midwest and assuming that some day he would operate a pig operation of his own. But that was before his maternal grandfather, who thought it was time the young Henry find a "real job," offered him a future in his small mill.

By 1983, Henry was back home working under the tutelage of his grandfather. The mill was a small, custom mix operation for livestock, was located across the street from a Southern States corporate owned feed store, and within easy reach of a handful of others. The winds of agriculture were changing, and young Henry could sense it, but his grandfather was not interested in pursuing new directions. So, in 1986, young Henry purchased the Mill of Bel Air from his grandfather, and that was the beginning.

Today, The Mill, or "current operation," as Henry says, is hardly small. It includes three locations: the original site in Bel Air, with 5,500 square feet for the mill and tack shop (having absorbed Churchville Tack several years back) and even more commodious warehouses, the Black Horse Store on Norrisville Road, and the Whiteford Store. On a recent snow day that had most of Maryland paralyzed, The Mill was up and humming, blending a custom mix for a Thoroughbred breeding farm, a cleared parking lot, and a bevy of employees taking care of business, and by midday they were sold out of de-icer.

But it is not the size of Henry's operation that qualifies him as Maryland Horseman of the Year—it is the story of how he got to where he is today.

### The Art of Listening

Henry credits "good people"—good employees, good suppliers, good clients. But if you listen to Henry, it is clear that Henry listens to people—to his clients (both current and potential), and to friends, family and staff. Listens, thinks about it, and then finds a way to meet their needs.

### "Plastics, Son, plastics."

Who can forget that scene in the movie *The Graduate*, when the adult was trying to give the young protagonist some advice for where the future lay. For young Henry, it was a friend with a feed operation in Lexington, Kentucky whispering into his ear: "horses, Henry, horses." The protagonist in the movie didn't listen, but young Henry did, and when he took over The Mill, he quickly put his friend's advice into play. Says Billy Boniface

of Bonita Farms: "At that time, there was no real feed company in the area that concentrated on providing services to the equine community. Henry had the foresight to recognize that there was huge potential."

While Henry was busy recognizing the potential of the marketplace, Southern States Corporate was recognizing the potential in Henry and approached him with an offer of becoming a Southern States dealer and the promise that they would shutter their store across the street. Henry accepted the deal, while maintaining his staunch independence and continuing to offer his own custom mixes as well as feed from other major manufacturers, including Purina, Buckeye, and Pennfield.

In addition to feed, his cousin Karen urged him to acquire a defunct tack store. He listened and did as she advised, reviving it in 1993 as Churchville Tack & Feed Store about five miles away from The Mill, and eventually merging the location with The Mill.

Many companies enjoy growth explosions, but few survive them because they are not internally equipped to handle the growth. But again, Henry listened—and not just to outside advisors, but to his own people, his own staff—and sometimes despite his gut reactions. When a young employee named Brenda recommended using a payroll company to handle the business' growing needs, Henry—not seeing the sense in paying someone else to do something he could do cheaper—looked for a way to politely put her off without squelching her enthusiasm for improving the business. He called his accountant, certain his accountant would back him, and then Henry could blame it on him. When the accountant con-

fessed to using a payroll service, Henry knew what he had to do. He married Brenda. No—that came later. First he had Brenda sign the company up with a payroll service, then he married her, and today they have four children.

### One Door Closes, Another Door Opens— And Sometimes A Light Bulb Needs To Be Changed

In the general media—and even in the ag press—much ink has been spent on the "demise" of the ag industry. Farms selling out to development, tractor supply and feed mills shutting their doors.

But there is an old axiom in business, "every time one door closes, another opens," and it is the savvy business man that sees that opportunity. For Henry, ag has not been dying, it has been shifting, away from the traditional food & fiber family farms (the traditional definition of ag) to new, alternative forms of agriculture, including turf farms, landscaping, horses, pick-your-owns.

Although Henry has been able to capitalize on the growth of both the equine and landscaping industries, he has also continued

**"Henry Holloway always has a plan—he never does anything without thinking it through all the way. That's why he doesn't make that many mistakes. Henry thinks like a retailer, as opposed to a just a feed dealer, or just a tack store owner; [in other words] he would be successful no matter what he was selling."**

—Chad Cash  
Purina Mills, Inc.

to grow and expand his products and services for the traditional ag community. As part of Southern States' reorganization, they were divesting themselves of corporate owned stores and coops throughout the mid-Atlantic area. Again, they approached Henry with an offer: two more stores—and Henry jumped. These stores represented new opportunities, a way to provide even more services to the ag industry. Through these locations, and with two partners who helped him acquire them, Henry is finally able to offer a full menu of crop services, from seed to fertilizer and much more, enabling him to better serve both the traditional farms and the new ag economies.

"Henry is always one step ahead of the times," explains Karen Engle, a regional tech rep with Southern States, "For instance, he has one of the most sophisticated delivery routes systems [in the mid-Atlantic]; he offers a multitude of services, which is so rare, so unusual in an independent dealer. There is not any aspect of today's farm that Henry can't service. You just have to appreciate his vision."

There is an old joke: how many Marylanders does it take to change a light bulb? 10, one to change it, and nine to gripe about how much better the old one was. Henry comes from a long line of light bulb changers, as the Holloway family has a long history of adapting to fit the times. While other farmers became disheartened about the changes in Maryland's ag economies, selling out their farms to developers, Henry's father (also Henry) and uncle Richard, predominantly livestock farmers, tried to figure out how they could adapt—and they did. The brothers moved a significant portion of their farmland into a state ag land preservation program, and then used the monies they received to invest in state-of-the-art haying equipment and hay sheds, and converted land over to hay. Today, the Holloway Brothers are one of the larger producers of high quality hay in the State, with exclusive contracts to some of the region's premiere Thoroughbred breeding facilities, where high quality hay is not a luxury but a necessity.

Perhaps ironically, as Henry used modern technology to improve his services to his clients, and as he uses big business theories of consolidation and critical mass to grow his business, his main location in Bel Air has the air of an old fashioned general store. With Henry, everything is intentional, and so it is no coincidence that the shop has that small town feel. In a cold storage case not far from the register is locally grown beef, a tie not only to Henry's traditional ag background but also to his belief that the more society changes, becomes fractured and disconnected through commuting and the internet, the more they will yearn for the community connection and personal touch. Not to mention, it is just plain better beef.

### **The Future: Service**

Henry doesn't plan to sit back and rest on his laurels. Right now, he is excited about the full line of ag services, but he knows that ag will continue to change, and he plans to continue to adapt. He sees a future of fewer full time farmers with large scale, 1,000 plus acre operations and more part time farmers, two career couples, with 50 acres and maybe with an orchard, maybe with horses, or maybe with some other product. He foresees that these two career couples will not be able to take the time to study farming the way the old farming families did, and they will rely on outside providers not only to provide the product (the fertilizer, the seed, etc.), and the application services, but also the expertise—how much, when and where.

But Henry is not waiting for the future to start meeting those expertise needs. Cousin Karen is a certified nutrient management specialist, able to write those plans now required by law. Another employee, Marcie Eppler, is a certified nutritionist and travels to breeding farms to weigh and measure foals, from suckling on up, tracking their growth. Client Jim Steele, manager of Shamrock Farm in Woodbine, one of Maryland's largest breeding operations, is thoroughly impressed with the Holloway family: "These

are people [the Holloways] who are...proactive in solving problems. The quality of the [entire] family comes out in their service to the industry."

Like his father, Henry is civic minded and involved in community organizations. Whereas his father (still) serves on the more traditional ag boards, including the State Fair, and the Maryland 4-H Foundation, Henry serves on the Bel Air Downtown Revitalization Effort, the board of the local bank and his church, and on the Deer Creek Watershed Project.

This is typical in the new generation of ag, as young farmers have come to realize that—in order for today's society to connect with ag, ag has to connect with today's society, and that means getting involved with activities not strictly ag. "People engaged in agriculture," explains Henry, "both equine and other types, have to be more proactive in political circles, [in order to help] to maintain the landowner's equity in their farms. [We need] open space near the existing suburbs.

This is one of the reasons why people want to live in Maryland after all. We have to curtail the spread of development onto the best of our agricultural lands."

It is also evident that Henry has one of those key characteristics that makes a person successful in business: a mind that never stops thinking. In addition to continually looking for ways to grow The Mill, such as adding on-line ordering for feed (to make life easier for the horse owner that maintains another job before coming home to the horses), he is toying with new ventures for the present and future, including a way to generate electricity from yet another mill on his and Brenda's farm (and participating in the electric companies power-share program).

Has life changed for Henry? He used to spend hours in the truck or at the feed mill. With the expansion of the business, Henry has moved into the position of chief officer in charge of finances and communication. Those hours once spent on the road are now spent on the phone in his utilitarian office cluttered with 3 computers, dozens of community recognition plaques, and pig art (he is still a swine man at heart). One consolation is he does rate the "corner office," with windows over looking the parking lot and the warehouses. With over 60 employees, he is constantly challenged to streamline internal operations and to utilize modern technology to build a better mousetrap, all while he continues to ponder new possibilities for the future.

*Thank you to Hope Holland for her contributions to this article.*

### **"It's Fun"**

*Q: In the past 20 years, what has been your greatest challenge?*

Henry: "The people. Making sure we attract—and keep—good people. Making sure they have a work environment that they enjoy, that is it productive and that they feel appreciated. We have been blessed with some really great people who work here, and it is my job to make sure that they have what they need to do their jobs."

*Q: What is the most rewarding aspect of the last 20 years?*

Henry: "The people. My fantastic staff, my clients."

*Q: What do you enjoy most about this business?*

Henry: "It is always changing, always something new. Now it is foaling time and getting ready for the crops, helping our clients get ready for the spring. Today, it is finding enough de-icer for my clients. It's exciting, the different phases of the year. For me, in business, we just started a new year financially, another year to start all over, to make the business even better."

*Q: How would you describe your experience of the last 20 years?*

Henry, trademark Holloway grin spreading across his face: "It's been fun."