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Historic farm hosts open house

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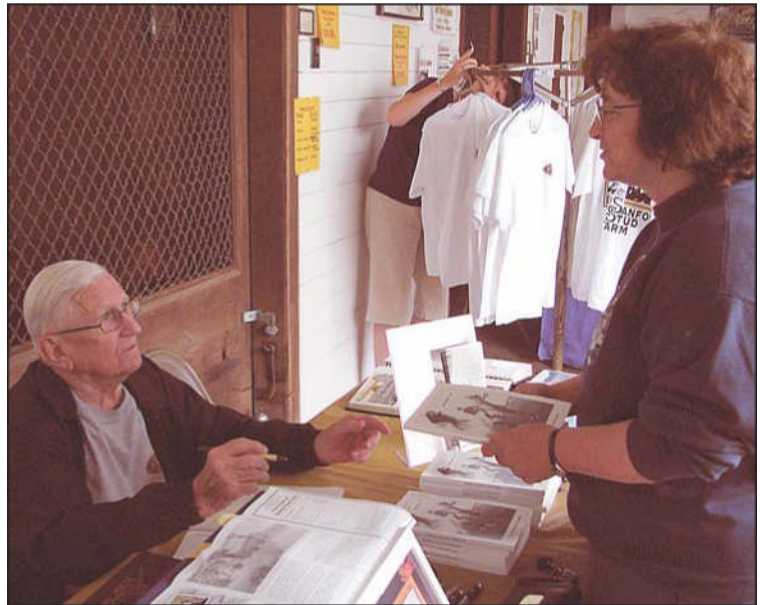
TOWN OF AMSTERDAM — Claudia Helner's family tree is firmly rooted in the Sanford Stud Farm.

For more than a half-century, her family lived and worked on the farm. Many family members, including her mother, were born on the farm.

"I grew up with all the stories," she said.

And now, decades after the last Sanford thoroughbred left the farm, Helner is trying to keep it and its legacy alive.

"I just feel like my ancestors are looking down on me, telling me to carry on," said Helner, one of the leaders of the Friends of the Sanford Stud Farm, a group dedicated to preserving what remains of the farm. "Patrick [Boles, another of the group's leaders] and I are down here all the time. Sometimes, I think we live here." The group hosted its second



Mark Robarge/Recorder staff

Louis Hildebrandt, left, a former jockey who worked and lived on the Sanford Stud Farm for many years, signs a copy of his book, "Riders Up," for Angela Pelneau, whose great uncle, Frank Francisco, also worked on the farm, during Saturday's open house and car show hosted by the Friends of the Sanford Stud Farm.

annual open house and car show Saturday, filling the two remaining barns with both those with ties to the farm and those simply

curious about the aging buildings that sit among the retail and commercial development along Route 30.

“The turnout today is phenomenal,” said Louis “Sam” Hildebrandt Jr., president of the Friends of the Sanford Stud Farm. Like Helner, Hildebrandt’s ties to the farm run through his family. His father, Sam Hildebrandt Sr., became a jockey for the farm after graduating high school in 1936 and rode until 1947. The elder Hildebrandt, now 90, wrote a book in 2003 about his experiences as a jockey, “Riders Up,” and was signing copies Saturday, including one for Angela Pelneau, whose great uncle, Frank Francisco, worked on the farm with Hildebrandt.

In addition to getting the autographed book, Pelneau found plenty of opportunities to talk to people who either personally worked on the farm or who had family or friends who worked there in its heyday.

“It only seems like everybody worked there,” she joked. The younger Hildebrandt recently completed his own book, “Hurricana: Thoroughbred Dynasty, Amsterdam Landmark,” a thorough look at the 140-year history of the farm. He only had about 50 copies available Saturday, and they

were quickly snapped up, he said.

The farm had its origins in the 1870s, when rugmaking magnet Stephen Sanford was advised by his doctor to find a hobby. At its height, the farm initially known as Hurricana housed more than 50 broodmares and stallions on more than 11,000 acres and was the home of many champion thoroughbreds, including George Smith, winner of the 1916 Kentucky Derby.

The remaining buildings are owned by the town, donated in 1998 by Carnegie Development as it began building what is now the Sanford Farm Shopping Plaza. Town officials have estimated it would cost about \$500,000 to completely restore the remaining buildings, money the town simply doesn’t have.

The Friends of the Sanford Stud Farm estimated recently that they and the town have spent about \$100,000 on the restoration effort so far, with about \$75,000 currently available, including a \$42,000 grant from the Alfred Z. Solomon Charitable Trust to fund repairs to a training ring in the farm’s broodmare barn.

The group hopes to have the barn open as a visitors center in time for the 100th running of the

Sanford Stakes at Saratoga Race Course in 2013.

Kathleen Smith of Fort Johnson brought her grandson, Jacob Borst, 4, of Schoharie and helped him to feed one of the horses from Broadalbin’s Trinity Farm that filled stalls in the barn Saturday.

“He loves horses,” Smith said as Jacob fed handfuls of hay to Oz and Suzy. “He loves to see horses.”

That’s a feeling Helner can identify with. Even though she was not born and raised on the farm like her ancestors, Helner said the love of horses found its way to her.

“I think it must have been the smell or something because I am a horsewoman,” she said. For more information on the farm, visit the Friends of the Sanford Stud Farm Web site at www.stanfordstudfarm.org.

