



## The Call Of The Equine

By [Michelle Bearden](#) of The Tampa Tribune

Published: December 13, 2007

**INVERNESS** It started out as a travel story.

When Greg and Danette Williams chucked their lives in South Tampa and moved to a 650-acre ranch in Inverness to raise and sell horses, it seemed like a natural. Who wouldn't want to escape the city's fast-paced rat race for some bucolic peace? My plan was to visit the couple, who also welcome visitors to their property for trail rides and lessons, and tell their "Green Acres" story.

But I broke the golden rule of journalism. I got too involved.

And now, I have a little piece of that country paradise and a horse. So much for staying objective.

But first, Greg and Danette's story.

Greg and Danette made a promise to each other before they married 30 years ago.

"We wanted nine children, and we were going to raise them on a farm," she says.

But life sometimes gets in the way.

Natives of Florida, they came back to the Tampa Bay area after college and law school in Utah, settling in South Tampa suburbia. Greg practiced law and served as bishop and stake president for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Danette was a busy at-home mom, juggling the demands of five children.

The country dream was always a heartbeat away. Growing up, Greg left Hillsborough County most weekends for his granddaddy's sprawling farm in Brooksville, where he broke horses and moved cows from pasture to pasture.

"I was programmed early on," he says. "It was in my blood."

Seven years ago, the defining moment that can dramatically alter the course of one's life came for the Williamses. Greg traveled to Kentucky and rode his first Rocky Mountain Horse, a breed with a smooth gait. He thought he had died and gone to horse heaven.

"The way they moved — so effortless," he recalls. "They have great temperaments, and

they're beautiful. I bought six that day."

They moved the horses to the Brooksville farm. Danette thought it was going to be a family hobby. Greg had other ideas.

He decided to start a "little breeding program" with a business partner, calling the business C&W Mountain Horse Farm. Six horses turned into a dozen, then 50 and, eventually, 200. The Williamses first moved to Brooksville, and a few years ago, found the land in Inverness. Greg parted ways with his partner, who left the Tampa area, and became a full-time horse breeder and hay farmer.

Goodbye, law. Hello, nirvana. He traded suits for jeans and Shady Bradys, and courtrooms for wide, open spaces. The workweeks are still long — seven days, early mornings to dusk — but it's at a pace he thoroughly loves and a setting that takes your breath away.

"There's a lot of visual stimulus out here," he says, pointing to an eagle soaring ahead. "I like being outside and out of the rat race."

Indeed, this part of Florida, perfectly named the Nature Coast, is a part most of us never see: On the Williamses' land, there are lakes, rolling hills, pastures, woods, breathtaking sunrises and sunsets, and cool nights studded with stars. And there's the constant smell and presence of some 80 horses, from weanlings on up. Their farm family also includes a half-dozen cows and two donkeys.

Their Citrus County property is alongside U.S. 41, next to the 46-mile "Rails to Trails" Withlacoochee State Trail, a scenic adventure for joggers, bicyclists and equestrians that takes you through forests and by lakes and historical downtown Inverness.

If someone offered him \$1 million, would he return to his old life — when his hands weren't calloused and he didn't have so many living things dependent on him?

"If someone said, 'For \$20 million, would you go back to your suit?' I'd say, 'No, not interested,'" Greg says. "You can't take the money with you."

Danette calls her new life the best of both worlds.

Their property is a stone's throw from the Lakeside Country Club, which includes a semi-private golf course, an excellent gourmet restaurant and a residential development of Van der Valk Inverness, a Dutch company. The community caters mainly to overseas snowbird owners and tourists, but with Danette's promotion, it's becoming a weekend getaway spot for her Bay area friends and clients interested in buying a horse, taking riding lessons or signing up for a trail ride.

Some couples come up and split ways for the day — one golfs, the other rides. They meet for dinner at the restaurant. Accommodations range from spacious apartments with a golf course view to fully furnished homes with swimming pools.

"How could you not love it up here?" she says.

From Tampa, it's an easy 90-minute drive, up the Suncoast Parkway, through downtown Brooksville, and then an 18-mile country road into Inverness, where you pass streets with names such as Golden Retriever Lane.

On my first trip, Danette told me to "just put on your country music and enjoy the ride. This is what you call leaving the city."

I lost cell phone reception on the hilly road — a good sign of things to come.

Like Greg, moving here was also a return to her roots. Her great-granddaddy was a traveling Baptist preacher out of Plant City, making his Sunday rounds by horse and buggy. Now it's Danette, 52, who hones her skills as a carriage driver, taking out the grandkids or friends and customers who come for a visit.

"It's amazing how this gets you to slow down and enjoy life. The buggy experience is a good one for teaching you to appreciate all your blessings," she says.

Danette has taken to recording her thoughts in a journal, something she never had much time for when raising children.

She says the serenity and security of having such a bountiful spread of land is worth any sacrifices made in trading city life for the country. The beauty of it all is that she still has those conveniences that make daily living a little bit easier.

"Publix is just four miles away. We've got a Lowe's, a Wal-Mart and a movie theater," she says. "We've got a gourmet restaurant across the street and the quaintest downtown in Inverness just minutes away. What did I give up? I feel like we have it all here."

Greg says you either have the horse gene or you don't. I've had it bad my whole life. Other girls played with Barbies; I wanted to be Annie Oakley or the Lone Ranger. As a young girl, I spent several summers attending a girls' riding camp, where you learned how to ride, groom and care for a horse.

I always knew I'd get one someday. I even moved to Arizona for 11 years with the full intention of fulfilling my passion. What better place than the Southwest, where cowboys and open ranges are still a part of the landscape?

But someday never came. A career, a busy life and lots of excuses got in the way. I worked too much, didn't save enough. Where would I keep it, when would I ride?

The years melted away. I was getting older — and the prospect of ever owning a horse was growing dimmer and dimmer. When I decided to take the trip to C&W Mountain Horse Farm, I told Tribune photographer Chris Urso this could be dangerous.

"Don't let me buy a horse," I pleaded. "I don't have the time or money."

Chris laughed. He didn't take me seriously enough.

Turns out, I'm not alone.

"Baby boomers are driving the horse industry," Greg says. "They realize they're running out of time."

At 54, he's one of them. He put in his time as a lawyer and then, after the kids were raised, took a wide swing in another direction. He makes it look easy, even if it's not.

When he rides his world champion stallion and sire, Diamond Reo, a majestic creature he calls a "big motor horse," Greg is the personification of bliss and contentment. Corporate courtroom battles seem eons away.

He quotes Winston Churchill: "There's something about the outside of a horse that does good things to the inside of a man."

I had hoped Danette would be the sensible one. I had counted on her to give me advice that would put a stop to this childhood vision of spending weekends astride my Rocky Mountain Horse, drinking in the countryside and all its wonders.

"Buying a horse is an emotional decision. It doesn't make any sense," she says with a laugh. "It's like buying a boat. You're buying a dream."

I finally bought that dream this fall. My significant other, realizing he was about to lose his play partner on weekends, decided it was time to buy his passion as well. He purchased a condo next door to the ranch. The unit overlooks the 18th hole on the Lakeside golf course, where he can be found most Saturdays and Sundays improving his game. I ride, he golfs and life has never been sweeter.

This was supposed to be just a travel story about the pleasures and hidden treasures of a weekend country getaway in Inverness. But sometimes, we get a little too involved in our stories.

Yippee-eye-oh! It's about time.

***Keyword: Ranch, to take a video tour of the C&W Mountain Horse Farm and hear the Williamses' story.***

***Reporter Michelle Bearden can be reached at (813) 259-7612 or at [mbearden@tampatrib.com](mailto:mbearden@tampatrib.com)***

## **IF YOU GO**

**GETTING THERE:** C&W Mountain Horse Farm, 4554 Windmill Drive, Inverness, is off U.S. 41 next to the Withlacoochee State Trail. From the Veterans Expressway/Suncoast Parkway, exit at State Road 50 and go east (it will become State Road 50A/Jefferson Street) into Brooksville. At U.S. 41, the road splits for one-way traffic. Follow U.S. 41 east (Broad Street) as it curves north. About a mile north of Brooksville, there is a white sign that says "USF Chinesgut Conference Center." Turn left here (Snow Memorial Highway; County Road 481). Take this scenic road about 18 miles (it turns into Pleasant Grove Road) until it dead-ends at U.S. 44. Turn right. Proceed to the left lane, and turn left on U.S. 41. Go north about three miles to Windmill Drive (there's a large billboard that says "Van der Valk Bistro"), and turn right.

**SCHEDULE:** The ranch is open Monday through Saturday.

**OFFERINGS:** Take private and group horseback riding lessons, as well as scenic guided tours of the ranch property by horse, horse-drawn carriage or all-terrain vehicle. Lessons cost \$50 an hour; 90-minute trail rides are \$50. Each rider must have a one-time lesson before a trail ride. Carriage and ATV tours are \$70.

**OTHER ACTIVITIES:** The ranch can be booked for cowboy cookouts, family reunions and special occasions such as weddings. Options include hayrides, bass fishing and equine education.

**WHERE TO STAY:** The C&W ranch offers limited accommodations. Call (813) 340-2790. Also, Van der Valk Inverness, 4543 E. Windmill Drive, across the street from the ranch, has a selection of rentals on or near the Lakeside Golf & Country Club. These include furnished apartments and homes with swimming pools. All include greens fees for Lakeside and other nearby golf courses. Rates range from \$158 to \$289 from January to April to \$189 to \$247 from May through September. Call (352) 637-1140 for a listing of prices and properties.

**INFORMATION:**[www.cwmountainhorses.com](http://www.cwmountainhorses.com)

**Find this article at:**

<http://www2.tbo.com/content/2007/dec/13/call-equine>

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.

©2008 Media General Inc. All Rights Reserved.

[Member agreement](#) and [privacy statement](#)