



Arabian Horse Photographers In Focus

Scott Trees

by CHRISTY EGAN

Scott Trees has always been a great deal more than a noted Arabian horse photographer. An artist, teacher, philosopher, a very good horseman and a great photographer in general, he is also an incurable dreamer. Perhaps it is the very diversity of his activities and abilities that have made him the innovative and creative force behind a whole new chapter of equine photography. Certainly, it has been his ability to dream coupled with his vivid imagination that has given the Arabian horse some of its most lasting and defining images.

Born in St Louis and raised in Colorado, it was Trees' mother who provided both the creative and equine influences that defined his childhood and would eventually form the foundation of his life. A sculptor, painter and designer, Harriette Trees is now 89 and still active, lucid and very creative. Scott says that he still has difficulty keeping up with her!

“My mother owned and showed World Champion American Saddlebreds, and both my brother and I had show horses while we were growing up,” Scott says. “It was always a part of my life, and I guess I lost interest in it when I was 9 or 10. When I discovered girls in my early teens, I also discovered that there were lots of cute ones at the horse shows. This inspired me to show horses once again, and I competed with Arabians in western, English, and halter until I was about 20. At 17 I showed a gelding named Fadalan to 1967 U.S. National Champion Halter Gelding. For years I was the youngest person to have won an open halter national championship. That same day I rode a park horse in the open and took a top ten with him as well.”

Trees got started in photography when he borrowed his mother's 35 mm camera one weekend and didn't return it for three months. In college he created a business taking pictures at fraternities and sororities. No one was doing it at the time, and he was able to learn a lot about photography and finance much of his college education with the fledgling business. It is interesting to note that although Trees is considered one of the more technically knowledgeable equine photographers and video cameramen in the horse industry, he has never taken a still photography or video camera class. He has always been a “ ... jump in and learn how to swim kind-of-a-guy.”



Black And White

When I am shooting for me, I usually shoot black and white. It is a bit different in today's digital world, even though it is much better in many ways. I miss developing film, seeing a print come up in the "soup" as if by magic.



"Man With Rabbit,"
Janów Podlaski,
Poland
I could tell this man was kind, because his rabbits were not afraid of him; they followed him everywhere in his yard. This was especially noteworthy, because they were also a source of food for his family.



"Children In Doorway,"
Janów Podlaski, Poland

These kids were just playing in an abandoned building. I have found in my travels throughout the world that kids are kids no matter their nationality. I always enjoy photographing them.

"Face Of Experience," Tersk Stud, Russia

This man was 100 years old, and it struck me when taking this picture how all of the wrinkles in his face showed that he smiled a lot. I wished I spoke his language, as I wanted to know what made him so happy.



"Horse In Field," Janów Podlaski, Poland

Of all the years I have been photographing horses I don't think I have ever seen a Belgian buck! This one had a great time early one morning.

"End Of The Day"

I don't know how many pictures of horses I have taken, but it is a lot. This image is my personal favorite from those tens of thousands of images. It was taken one late afternoon in the courtyard of a small home in Janów. I had seen the horse pulling the wagon in the barn full of hay, and followed it back and watched as he was unbitched from his heavy load. I could see in his eyes it had been a long day.



I didn't speak Polish, but I tried to convey to the man that I wanted to take a picture of the horse. He thought I wanted him and the horse; he stood next to him with great pride, and I did take his picture. Then I walked up gently, took the reins, and pointed the horse towards the barn. As he walked to his stall, he stopped and took a bit of hay from the wagon, as though rewarding himself with a taste of grass at the end of the day.

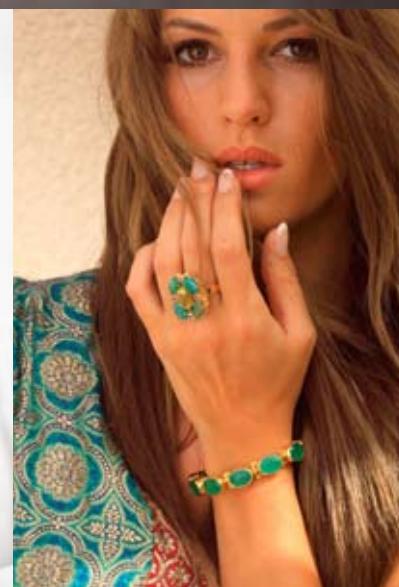
"After college I bought a small studio and started trying to make a living as a photographer," says Scott. "One day I got a call from Polly Knoll. There was a horse show she could not do and she offered it to me. It was the beginning of my life as an equine photographer. Later that same year I showed some shots to Johnny Johnston and he gave me great encouragement and a camera body. His wife, Karen, let me watch while she did some printing and that was *very* educational."

Horse shows did not have great appeal for Scott and soon he vowed to quit photographing horses and work harder on his commercial photography, which he did. Bill Stokes offered him work at his film studio in Dallas and Scott began shooting 16 mm videos. Stokes was contacted by Lancer Arabians about a sale catalog for their upcoming auction, and the job naturally fell to Scott Trees because of his background.

"Lancer wanted something different and I suggested motion shots," says Scott. "At that time no one was doing those shots. Everything was heads and stand ups. The catalog was a big hit at about the same time the Arabian horse industry "boomed." Suddenly, I had more work than I could possibly handle."

It was during this time that Scott Trees developed his reputation as the Arabian breed's "artistic" photographer. At the request of Baywood Park, Ltd., Scott photographed the noted Polish import *Gokart in a studio setting, in the pursuit of "something different."

"With this handsome grey stallion, we were looking for a 'white on white' sort of color theme. We tried some balloons and a couple of other ideas," Scott remembers. "Someone opened a door and *Gokart turned his head and arched that long, elegant neck to look over his



Eyes are the windows to the soul, and eyes have become a subject of interest for me photographically. If I can get behind the veil of the eyes, even briefly, I can tell you something about the person.

shoulder. I stepped up on a stool and took the picture. It was a great one.”

In that single image of *Gokart, Trees captured a completely new and radiant look, a pure, smooth line of neck and shoulder, and in the process an evocation of the Arabian horse. Perhaps more than any other Scott Trees’ photograph, this one image has been copied over and over by photographers and fine artists for decades.

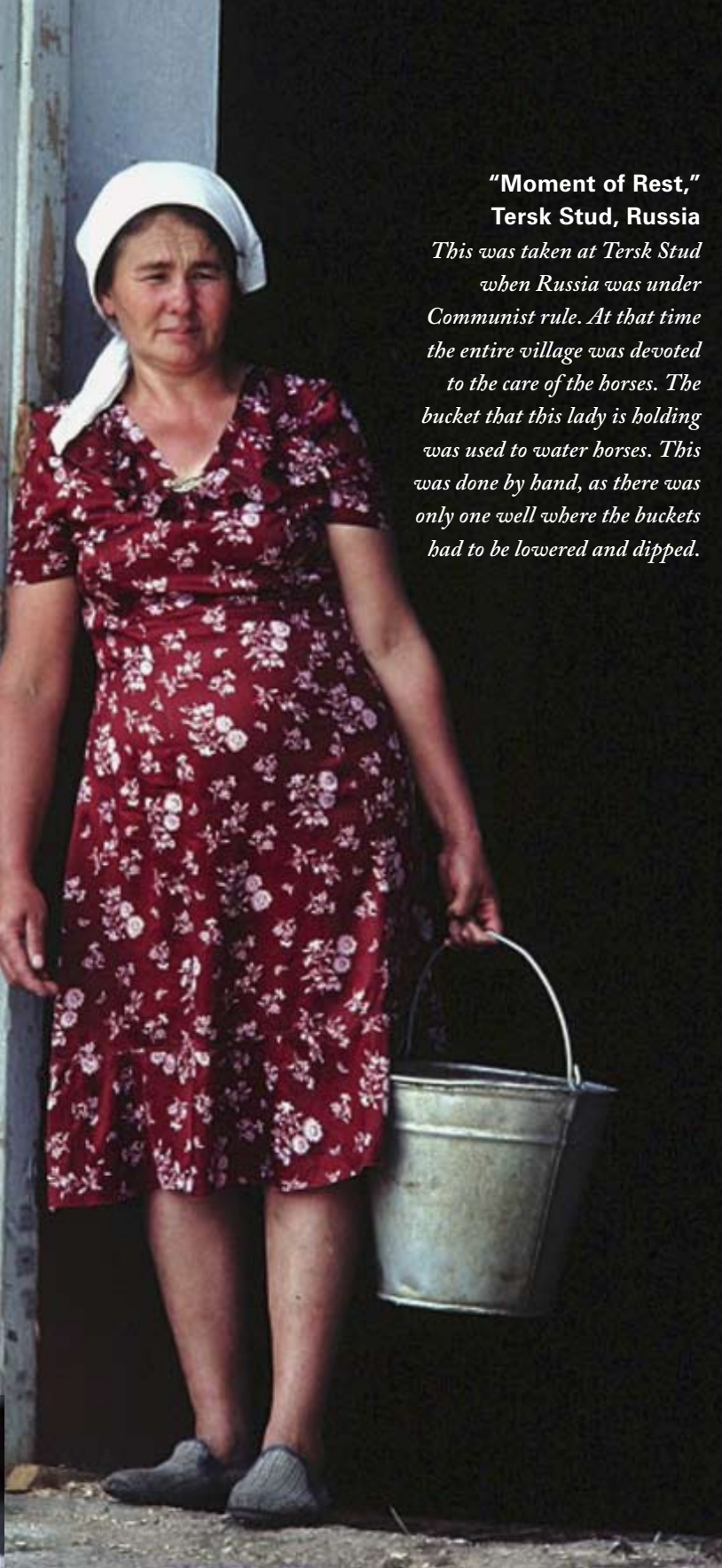
Another history-making equine photographic moment occurred when Scott was asked to go to Imperial Egyptian Stud in Maryland and shoot the four Sameh daughters owned by Imperial, including the magnificent U.S. National Champion Mare Serenity Sonbolah. Scott put the shoot together at night in an arena, adding the innovative use of dry ice and smoke for effect. The resulting Imperial photographs were years ahead of their time, caused a sensation among horsemen when they were published in the magazines, and spawned a host of photographic imitators.

Over the next 10 years, Scott became as well known for his video work as for his still photography. Most of the major Arabian farm and stallion videos of the 1980s were created by a company formed by Scott Trees. Scott was living in North Carolina and starting a family when his life as a horse photographer took an unexpected turn.

“I had always had a sort of love-hate relationship with horses,” Trees explains. “When I was a kid, there wasn’t any choice. I lived in a horse-oriented family. Later, as an adult

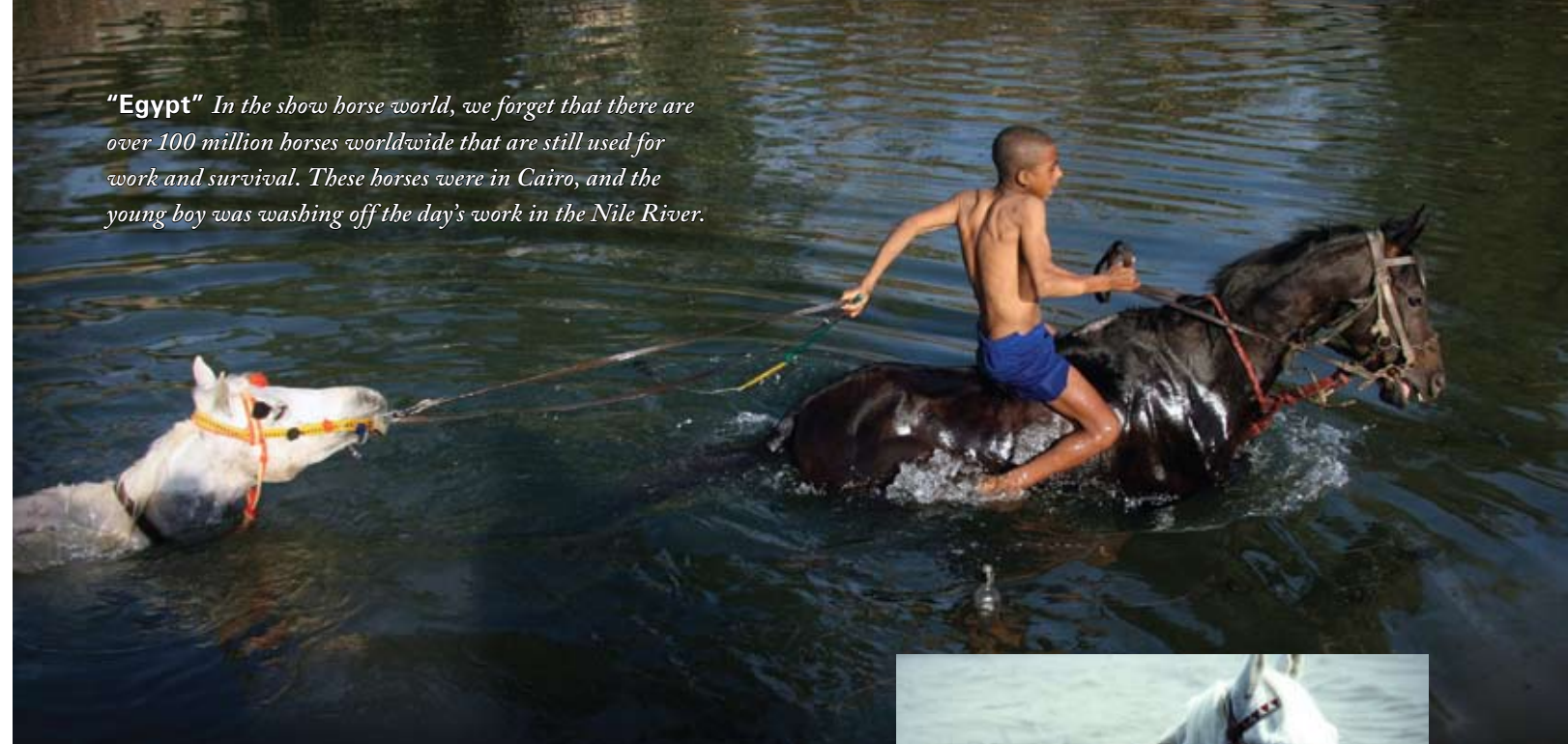


**“Morning Chores,”
Tersk Stud, Russia**
This young lady was watering horses in the early morning light at the only well in Tersk. Each bucket is carried by hand to the stalls in the barn which were large. The lighting was quite magical that morning giving the shot a Vermeer-type of look.



**“Moment of Rest,”
Tersk Stud, Russia**
This was taken at Tersk Stud when Russia was under Communist rule. At that time the entire village was devoted to the care of the horses. The bucket that this lady is holding was used to water horses. This was done by hand, as there was only one well where the buckets had to be lowered and dipped.

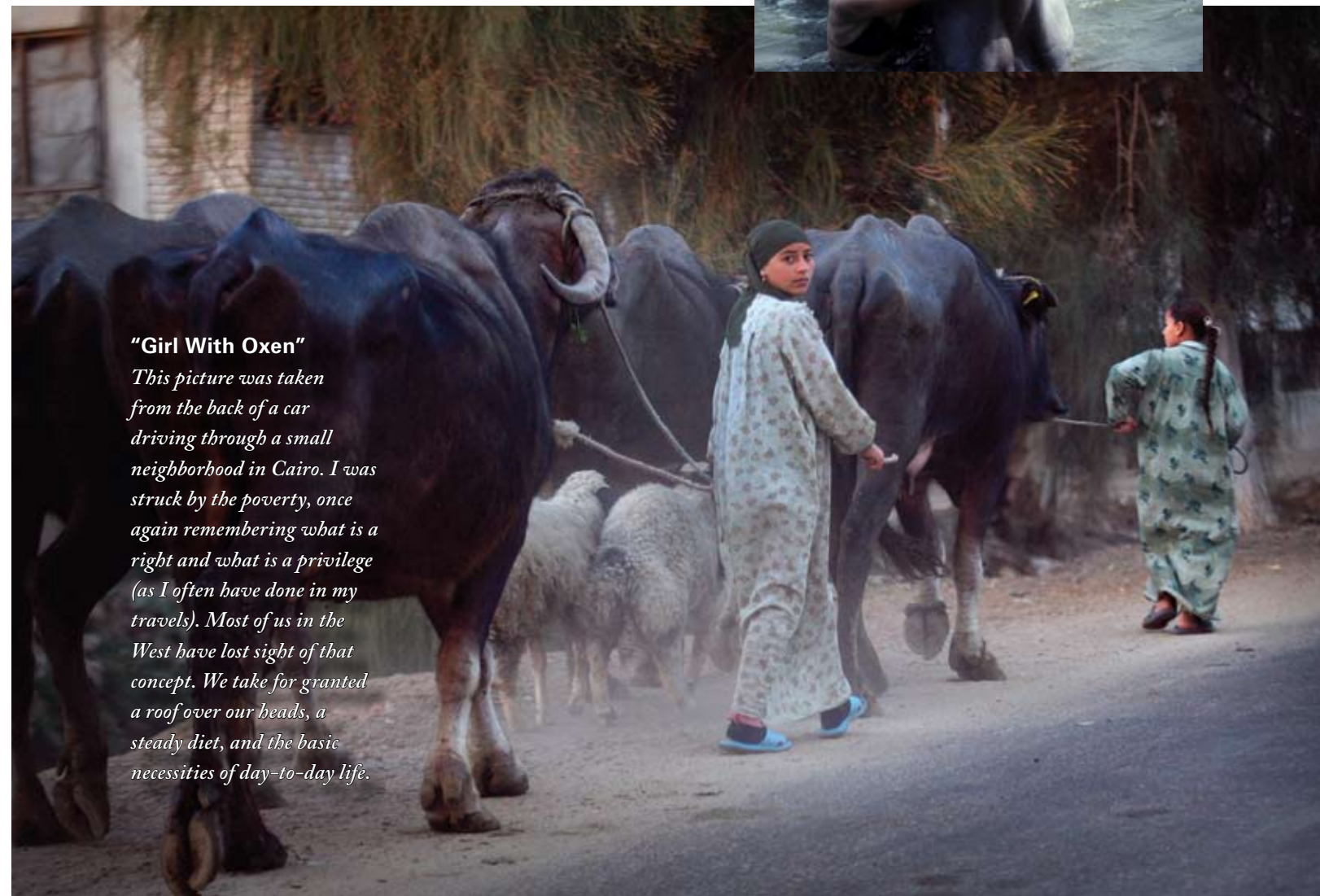
“The Sound Of Music,” Tersk Stud, Russia
The same lady is listening to my Sony Walkman®. She had never heard Western music before, and I had the soundtrack from the movie, “Flash Dance.” It is her daughter listening next to her. I gave them my Walkman®.



“Egypt” *In the show horse world, we forget that there are over 100 million horses worldwide that are still used for work and survival. These horses were in Cairo, and the young boy was washing off the day’s work in the Nile River.*



“Water Exercise,” Tersk Stud, Russia
I was drunk as a skunk when I took this shot! We had a luncheon earlier that afternoon at Tersk and Stud Manager Sasha Panamotov kept toasting me with cups of vodka. I didn’t want to be rude; so, I kept taking them! After I took this picture, I jumped into the water to sober up. I couldn’t drink vodka for years.



“Girl With Oxen”
This picture was taken from the back of a car driving through a small neighborhood in Cairo. I was struck by the poverty, once again remembering what is a right and what is a privilege (as I often have done in my travels). Most of us in the West have lost sight of that concept. We take for granted a roof over our heads, a steady diet, and the basic necessities of day-to-day life.



We actually turned this mare loose in the desert with the models—only one of which had any horse experience. I took this shot, thinking the next step would be even better. No sooner had I thought that when the girl in the turquoise took off running!



“Man On A Camel”
I actually took this from a moving car, but was struck by the silhouette of this racing camel in the early morning light.

in the Carolinas, I had a wonderful horse in my life. His name was ‘Lucky,’ and he was part Belgium and part ‘traveling salesman.’ I rode him around without a bridle or a saddle. I don’t think I realized how much he meant to me until he was gone. I lost him in a freak automobile accident by my farm. I sat down on the ground and cried my heart out. I lost a part of myself in the dark on the road that night. I couldn’t own another horse after that. It changed everything. Two weeks to the day after the accident I was out photographing mares and foals and I noticed that I was looking at horses very differently. The emotion that I had felt for ‘Lucky’ was now an integral part of the way I saw all horses. It’s been there in my shooting style ever since.”

Scott Trees is a self-described “reactive shooter” not a “planned shooter.” His photo sessions build their own

momentum based on the actions and attitudes of the horses.

“Horses are unpredictable but are at their best when they are comfortable,” says Trees. “I try to intuit their comfort zone, understand their body language and be adaptable, and follow along, to get the really great shots.”

By the early 1990s Trees had his own successful Scott Trees Gallery in Los Olivos, Calif., and had developed a worldwide following for his photography in the horse industry, traveling frequently to Poland, Russia and the Middle East.

“Life was good in the 1980s, and I was in high gear,” Scott reflects, “and then I went through a difficult divorce and was diagnosed with prostate cancer, which in young men is usually fatal. Wow! The sky began to



fall. I had an important six-week trip to Europe planned, and I asked my doctor if I could postpone the cancer surgery until after the trip. He said, ‘Just how important is the trip? You have a choice ... six weeks of work or 40 years of life.’ Well, obviously the trip was not *that* important, and I realized that I had to change my life. I felt that my cancer was stress induced. I had tremendous success in my life at that point, and I didn’t really appreciate any of it. I always wanted more. Cancer changed all of that. I had surgery on August 11, 1994, and the years of life that I’ve had since then have all been on precious, and much appreciated, bonus time. I had this epiphany at the time. I thought, ‘It really isn’t a dress rehearsal. This is it. Am I doing what I wanted to do with my life?’”

What Scott wanted was to travel more and create a broader body of photographic work. His trips to Russia and Poland had whet his appetite, and the people and horses he had met and photographed over the years had made him hungry for more.

“There was a man in Poland,” Scott remembers. “I tried to ask him about photographing his horse. He didn’t speak any English, and I couldn’t speak Polish. Still, it was obvious that about all he had in the world were this horse and a cart. He was so very proud of that horse, and it didn’t take words to tell me that. It was early evening, the horse had been at work all day, and he walked into his stall and grabbed a mouthful of hay. I took the picture. I will never forget the extreme poverty, the overwhelming pride and the beauty of that simple Polish man, his family and that cart horse. Those are the moments that keep me out there with my camera searching.”

An opportunity in the Middle East location of Sharjah (in the United Arab Emirates) to photograph the royal palace of H.H. Dr. Sheikh Sultan bin Mohamed Al-Qassimi turned into a coffee-table book that is now at the publishers in London. The book then led to jobs photographing seven different Middle Eastern resorts for EDSA, a large, international architectural firm. In turn, those jobs brought Trees a high-fashion shoot for a company called Shalimar and another called ME. Of course, there were the obligatory shoots for numerous major Middle Eastern stud farms along the way and advertising and publicity photography for projects created in Dubai by longtime friend and associate, Eileen Verdieck. Scott now spends roughly half of his time in America and the rest overseas, currently in the Middle East. A trip to Spain is planned for June, and there are rumors of a project in China as well.

In addition to his success in the Middle East and photo shoots for longtime customers in the United States, Scott does an annual seminar for horse photographers in southern Colorado in late spring via the Equine Photographers Network. The seminar offers an opportunity for photographers to shoot a large, horse roundup. Scott also teaches an online class entitled the Business of Equine Photography.

From March 13 through June 14, 2009, the International Museum of the Horse at the Kentucky Horse Park in Lexington, Ky., is showcasing the work of Scott



Trees. Entitled *Because Of Horses*, the show is an exciting and unique compilation of the best of Trees’ images created by him in his travels throughout the world. A special Artist’s Reception will be held on June 4, 2009, in the Main Gallery of the Museum to coincide with the 40th anniversary of The Pyramid Society’s Egyptian Event.

“Everything in life has its ‘ebb and flow,’” Scott muses. “I’ve been ‘discovered’ about four times in the Arabian horse industry. Then things move on and change, and I grow and change as well. I try to accept new challenges, become a better photographer and, hopefully, a better human being. I don’t see myself ever retiring. You’ll know I’m dead when you put a camera under my nose and I don’t quiver.



The Horses

There are a few images that really set the stage for my career. Bear in mind that in the early 1980s when this was taken, the vast majority of magazine shots were body shots, head shots, and win shots. There wasn't a lot of different imagery.

My entire approach as a photographer is to try and take something you see every day and show it to you in a way you haven't seen it before. It is critical in advertising to have an image that gets attention. This is why I am hired 95% of the time. So, I started to do some different sorts of shots that certainly boosted my career, and they also had an impact on how horses are photographed today.



"Mares In Fog"
This image was another of those shots that was a career-maker. I was shooting for Imperial Egyptian Stud and Eileen Verdick. She has great ideas and wanted something in the fog with these great mares, Serenity Sombolab, Serenity Sabra, and Falkia. It took a lot of time but we got it done.



Barbary

How do you capture a legendary performance stallion, with a great rider and come up with something different? That was my challenge when commissioned to photograph Barbary and Don Delongprè. I set up lighting in the hay barn, used fog machines, and Don would ride to the end of the barn and ride through the fog. This shot was his first burst through the fog. I would like to point out that this was shot in the days of film, and the image was lit for the red fog effect and not done afterwards. The picture is not enhanced in any way, and it has become another of those "key" shots of my career.





“At the end of the day, I think that I would like to be remembered as an artist, as well as a good photographer,” continues Scott. “I hope that my best photography is yet to come. The finest images I’ve created so far are diverse; they reflect my interest in people and places worldwide, but I can never forget that I got where I was going in life because of horses.”

The Arabian horse industry has been riding on the magic carpet of Scott Trees’ colorful photographic dreams of horses for three decades. Worldwide perception of the Arabian horse as a breed of elegance and beauty exists in large part because of Scott Trees. It’s a clear case of mutual admiration. ■