

# Mim Eicher Rivas and the EDUCATED HORSE: Beautiful Jim Key (1889 – 1912) – Part 1

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on September 12, 2006)

The story you are about to read is about two things, first it is a story of a lost history and second it is a success story of an Oak Ridger. Because of its length I have broken it into two sections. The first half of the story will introduce Beautiful Jim Key, a most amazing educated horse that won all audiences around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but will focus more on the author of the book about that horse, Mim Eichler Rivas, an Oak Ridger and a most successful author who now lives in California.

The second portion of the story will focus on the specifics of the career of Beautiful Jim Key and his owner and trainer – “Dr.” William Key, a former slave, self-trained veterinarian, promoter of kindness to animals and ultimate showman. I hope you enjoy this story as much as I have enjoyed the research and especially the opportunity to get to personally know Mim Eichler Rivas and her family.

One century ago, a most unusual American hero, Beautiful Jim Key, was the most well known horse in the world. Yet his true story was almost lost. Very few people knew anything at all about this educated horse and if someone who did know the details tried to explain what happened around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with this amazing animal, hardly anyone would believe what was being said. Mim Eichler Rivas, an Oak Ridge native, changed all that with her book, *Beautiful Jim Key: The Lost History of A Horse & A Man who Changed the World*.

Beautiful Jim Key has a monument. However, few people living near the monument and the horse's grave even know of its existence. Located three miles south of the Shelbyville, Tennessee Courthouse just south of Himesville Road where it intersects with the Old Tullahoma Highway the monument to Beautiful Jim Key and “Jim's Dear Friends” Albert R. Rogers (Promoter), Monk (Pal – the dog) and “Dr.” William Key (owner and trainer) sits on a low grassy rise.

The monument was erected by the family of “Dr.” William Key, his sister-in-law Essie Davis, and mainly her nieces, Essie Mott Lee and Annie Mott Whitman. It is located on the farm once owned by “Dr. William Key.

Beautiful Jim Key had died in 1912 at age 23 after nine years of the most extraordinary travels, exhibitions and demonstrations of his unexplained abilities to read, write, spell, do mathematics, tell time, sort mail, cite biblical passages and debate politics. He was first buried where he died in the front yard of “Dr.” Key's widow and then looked after by his brother-in-law, “Dr.” Stanley Davis, who had taken over the veterinarian duties after “Dr.” William Key's death in 1909.

When “Dr.” Davis died, his brother's widow, Essie Davis, moved Beautiful Jim Key to a new burial place on Jim Key Farm. She turned the duties of tending to his grave over to her nieces, along with the scrapbooks and other memorabilia that had belonged to the “World's Smartest Horse,” his trainer and promoter.

Those scrapbooks held the information that enabled this wonderful history of a man who through kindness and patience educated a horse and taught a nation about the care of animals. After Essie Mott Lee self-published a book about “Dr.” Key, in 2005 Mim Eichler Rivas produced a sweeping history that recaptures the “lost” history of Beautiful Jim Key – a most wonderful horse and the man who helped change the way animals are treated forever.

Oak Ridge's own, Mim Eichler Rivas, was raised Miriam Eichler. She is now an author, coauthor and ghostwriter on more than a dozen nonfiction books - *Finding Fish*, the *New York Times* bestseller among them.

Her parents, Dr. Eugene (Gene) and Sonya Eichler, lived in Oak Ridge during most of her early life. Dr. Eichler was a scientist working at the Oak Ridge National Laboratory and active in Oak Ridge community life. He wrote a film review column for The Oak Ridger. Her mother, Sonya Eichler, is an accomplished water color artist who has won several awards for her art and who is also a very good musician.

During her childhood years Miriam spent a year in Israel with her parents while Gene was on assignment and also a couple of years in Denmark again with her parents on yet another special assignment for Gene. The Denmark sojourn began late in her 12<sup>th</sup> year and she was allowed special permission to have her Bat Mitzvah a few weeks

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early before leaving Oak Ridge. She was most upset to have to leave her friends at the new Jefferson Junior High School who gathered at the airport to give her a special send off.

Upon returning nearly two years later, she picked up right where she had left off and continued her full and creative learning in Oak Ridge High School. She played the lead role of Anne Frank in the play *The Diary of Anne Frank* put on by the Masquer's Club in Oak Ridge High School. It was a most memorable performance.

Another special memory is of the Oak Ridge Playhouse where Miriam played the lead role of Juliet in Romeo and Juliet. In this special event in the Eicher's lives, almost the entire family joined the cast of this special play. Miriam's parents played the roles of Lord and Lady Capulet. Her brother Daniel was a Page. Her younger sister, Margrit was a bit too young, only being two years old at the time.

However, Margrit is performing in a big way now as a singer/songwriter. Her band is named "True Margrit." Mim's memories of her creative experiences at the Oak Ridge Playhouse as well as the feeling that she was encouraged in Oak Ridge schools to develop her creativity and individual talents to the maximum established a firm foundation for her to build upon.

Her mother, Sonya Eichler, now living in Knoxville, also has most fond memories of the family's years in Oak Ridge. One of the special moments she recalled for me was when Miriam made her final decision about where to attend college. It seems that Miriam had spent countless hours in the Oak Ridge High School's principal's office checking out various colleges and learning all she could about what opportunities were there for various colleges.

Late one evening she jumped up from her bed in her room and ran into her mother's room exclaiming, "I have found it, this is the college I plan to attend – they don't even give grades!" It was Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville, New York, a small private college renowned for its strong writing and performing arts departments – it has *two* drama departments. Miriam was excited about the possibilities posed by so much emphasis on drama.

She often returned to Oak Ridge during her college years and held improvisational drama workshops for young kids and teenagers. These were all hits with the local youngsters. Having already spent three years abroad, she decided she should spend her junior year of college living near her parents and attending the University of Tennessee rather than the normal option for Sarah Lawrence students of spending their junior year studying abroad.

This proved to be a good decision for her personally as she was able to spend a great deal of time with her father before he died at age 46 late in the year she was at UT. She also used that time to round out her writing education by studying journalism under June Adamson, a renowned writer and educator with strong Oak Ridge ties for years, and whom Mim gives great credit for her success as a writer today.

Mim visited here in 2005 and several months ago in 2006 signing her book *Beautiful Jim Key - A Horse & A Man who Changed the World*. Fanny and I met her in 2005 and thoroughly enjoyed what time we had to talk to her and to exchange ideas. Since we both grew up near Shelbyville we were interested in learning about Beautiful Jim Key.

Mim has just completed a book she co-authored with Chris Gardner titled, *Pursuit of Happyness*, the intriguing true story of Chris Gardner and his two year old son whom he refused to abandon even though he was homeless and broke. Gardner is now the owner and CEO of a large minority owned financial company – Gardner Rich and Associates.

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The book tells the story of Gardner's rise from the depths of homelessness to where he is today as a successful executive. The movie will be out in December starring Will Smith – look for it at local theaters and note Mim's magic coauthor's touch! However, she is not directly involved in the screenplay or the making of the movie.

Her husband, Victor Rivas, has published a book, *A Private Family Matter*, about domestic violence and he actively works to combat that scourge on our society. Victor and Mim have a 12 year old son who is also an activist in his own right.

She is working on a couple of projects including research on a story based in 1841 and featuring “women in mill cities.” She is also scheduled to be in Nashville in November speaking at the Opryland Hotel for the Society of Animal Welfare Administrators Conference and she is also scheduled to be in Knoxville for the Smoky Mountain Writer's Workshop in March 2007.

When I met Mim Eichler Rivas, I determined on the spot to create a web page on her work and to go find the Beautiful Jim Key monument and photograph it. It has been a wonderful adventure to read the book, find and photograph the monument and to create the web site. <http://www.smithdray1.net/bjk/index.htm> . I hope you enjoy this unique piece of history brought back from the past.

In the next *Historically Speaking* column we will continue the story of Beautiful Jim Key, the educated horse and will tell about how the attempt to breed the fastest race horse in the world led to an unexpected windfall for a former slave.



Mim Eichler Rivas – author, coauthor and ghostwriter originally from Oak Ridge



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Beautiful Jim Key and Friends Monument near Shelbyville, TN



Mim Eichler Rivas, husband Victor and their son