

Mim Eicher Rivas and the EDUCATED HORSE: Beautiful Jim Key (1889 – 1912) – Part 2

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In the last column we introduced Beautiful Jim Key, the educated horse and told the story of Mim Eichler Rivas, Oak Ridger, who now lives in California and who researched and wrote the lost history of Beautiful Jim Key. Now we will continue the story by telling in some detail the history of this most amazing horse that through kindness was able to achieve a very high level of education and was able to entertain audiences across the nation. Beautiful Jim Key's story is a true one, but certainly a most unusual one.

Beautiful Jim Key- the educated horse, was a mixed-breed Hambletonian and Arabian horse that lived from 1889 to 1912. His sire was Tennessee Volunteer (Hambletonian) and his mare was Laretta (Arabian). He was uncommonly skilled in many ways.

"Dr." William Key intended to breed the fastest racehorse possible when he chose the two breeds. The resulting colt was a huge disappointment when at birth and for weeks thereafter the "spindle-legged" colt could not even stand. However, the colt soon demonstrated an aptitude that pleasantly surprised the Key family.

Jim started by stealing apples and hiding the fact by closing the desk drawer. He soon was letting himself out of the gate and even insisting on staying in the house with William Key. Through kindness and patience, William was able to teach Jim a number of tricks and used him to help drum up an audience for his medicine show. When Albert Rogers saw the horse perform, he realized there was significant potential for a nationwide tour showing off the educated horse and the former slave who was training him.

"Dr." Williams Key, Albert Rogers, Monk (the dog) and Beautiful Jim Key formed a team that for nine years was the hottest attraction in the United States. Beautiful Jim Key exhibited inexplicable abilities to read, write, spell, do mathematics, tell time, sort mail, cite biblical passages and debate politics. He even predicted the future when he identified Alice Roosevelt and added the name Longworth to her name two years before her marriage to Nicholas Longworth. Beautiful Jim Key was a most unusual horse!

"Dr." William Key (Bill) was born a slave in 1833 in Murfreesboro, Tennessee. Captain John Key was his master. Upon the Captain's death when Bill was five years old, he willed a certain family of slaves including William to his cousin, John W. Key of Shelbyville, Tennessee. Bill demonstrated a special way with animals as early as six years of age. He also was a great help to the John W. Key family when it was observed that the disabled father of John W. Key was much calmer when Bill was around. However, the place where he really shined was around horses. He was so effective with horses that he was soon being sent to the pasture alone to train the horses.

Additionally, he was given special attention because of his work keeping his master's father company. His master was taught reading, writing, mathematics and science. Martha, his master's wife, really appreciated the effect Bill had on John's father as it saved her from having to deal with the recalcitrant old man. She taught Bill such gentlemanly skills as presentation, elocution and etiquette. These skills would all come to be most valuable to him later when he became an adult and found himself in need of them to succeed as a free man after the Civil War.

The relationship between the John W. Key family and Bill continued to grow stronger and even after the Civil War when the Key family lost everything, Bill, who by then had accumulated quite a sum of money, stepped in and helped send John W. Key's two sons to Harvard. These are the same two young boys that Bill had followed into the Civil War fighting to protect them from harm. When asked about his unusual generosity toward his master's family over the years, he is said to have responded, "I was one of those fortunate men who had a kind master."

Upon returning to Shelbyville after the war, "Dr." William Key opened a hospital for horses on a lot he purchased on North Main Street. His reputation of being able to do wonders for horses caused him to be considered a veterinarian even though he had no formal training as such. In five years he was among the most prominent and

prosperous individuals in Shelbyville. This was but the first of many such entrepreneur steps that brought “Dr.” Key increased wealth and standing in the community.

After several successful years in Shelbyville, “Dr.” Key began to take interest in racehorses and determined to breed the fastest horse in the world. The result of his experiment was a spindle legged foal that was unable to stand for weeks after birth. Yet this pitiful little colt came to be Beautiful Jim Key – the educated horse. The rest is history as the horse and the man who taught him through kindness and patience produced a highly successful partnership that entertained audiences and forever changed the way the world looked at animals.

Beautiful Jim Key and “Dr.” William Key, promoted by Albert Rogers, toured the nation for nine years setting record attendance records wherever they went. Beautiful Jim Key could read, write, spell, do mathematics, tell time, sort mail, cite biblical passages, and debate politics. He even predicted the future when asked to identify Alice Roosevelt, the president’s daughter. Jim Key spelled out Alice Roosevelt and when an audience member shouted out the name of Nicholas Longworth, he quickly added Longworth to Alice Roosevelt a full two years before they were married.

“Dr.” William Key and Jim Key (before he was dubbed “Beautiful” by two New York newspapers) began their public appearances using Jim Key, the educated horse, to help sell liniment. At one show, someone called out, “How much you take for the horse?” This was a new twist, but being the consummate showman, “Dr.” Key played along and asked Jim Key what a fair price might be.

Obvious displeasure showed in Jim Key’s countenance and stance. Yet, the good “Dr.” continued to push the point even asking Jim Key to parade in front of the potential buyer and audience members began bidding. When the price reached \$500, “Dr.” Key said, “Sold” and immediately Jim Key fell to the ground and was unable to get up even though he tried mightily.

So “Dr.” Key put his back to the horse and facing the audience stage-whispered “The sale is off.” Immediately Jim Key jumped up and pranced around the stage. This innovation by showman and educated horse became a standard part of future shows.

The key to success came at the 1897 Nashville Centennial Exhibition where “Dr.” William Key and his educated horse, Jim Key, entertained thousands of visitors. Even President William McKinley insisted on seeing the educated horse. At this performance, Jim Key again demonstrated keen insight by identifying the names of President McKinley’s cabinet and even the President himself by bowing to him directly after selecting his name from a group of cards with names on them.

However, he refused to admit voting for the President even though “Dr.” William Key said he voted Republican for the President. Jim Key shook his head negatively when President McKinley asked him if he were a “good Republican.” “Dr.” Key implored him to admit voting for the President, but it seems Jim Key was a Democrat even to the point of being a “Silver Democrat” in that he supported William Jennings Bryan’s platform to replace the gold standard with a silver one. When this was mentioned, he nickered outright and snorted causing President McKinley and the whole audience to laugh loudly at the educated horse’s understanding of politics.

It was at this point in the soon to become illustrious career of “Dr.” William Key and his educated horse, Jim Key, that promoter Albert Rogers became aware of them. He knew the potential of such an act and immediately worked to gain “Dr.” Key’s agreement to promote the act. It was a perfect match. From Nashville, they were soon in New York where two newspaper reporters simultaneously printed the word “BEAUTIFUL” with Jim Key’s name.

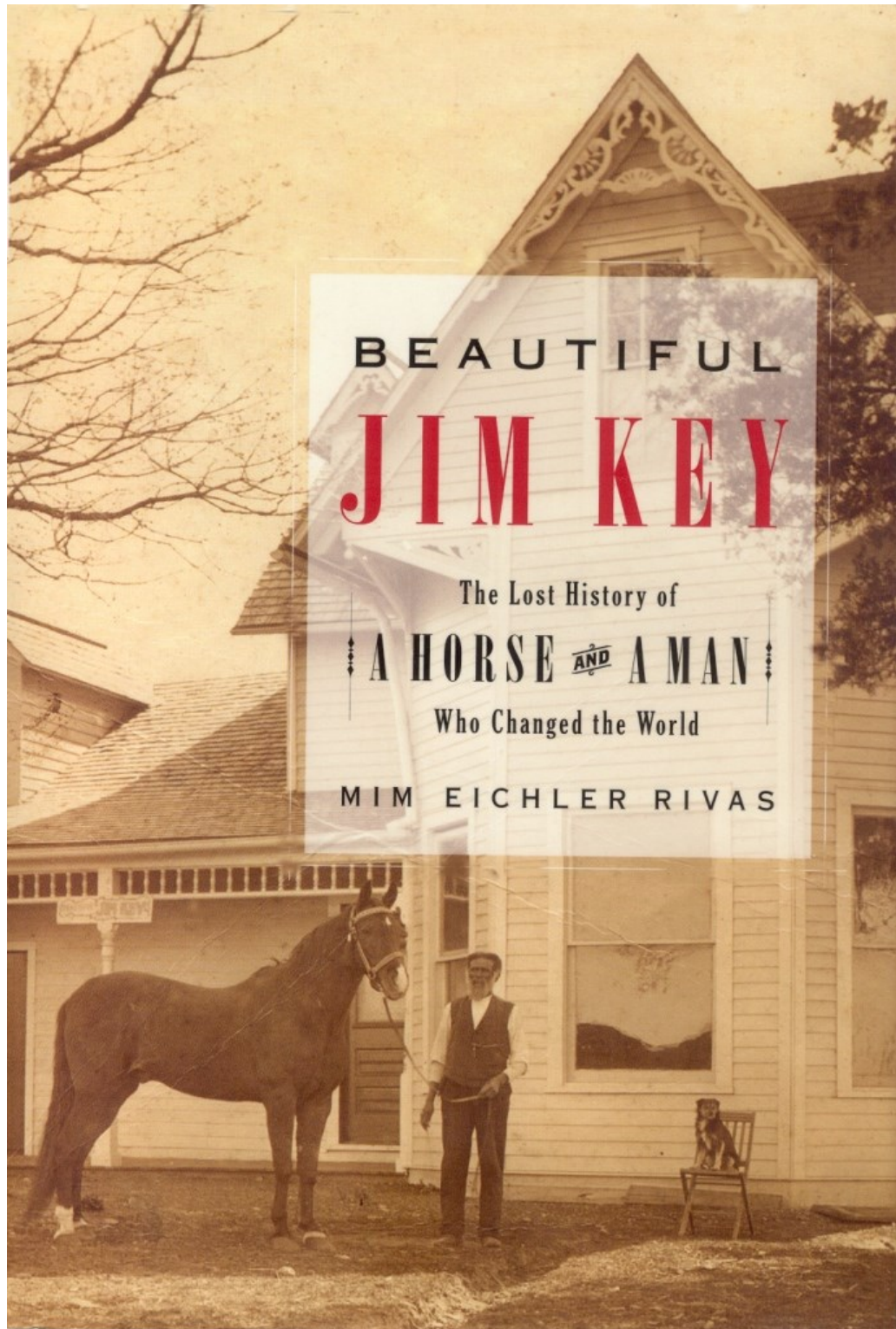
This was an addition to Jim Key’s name that undoubtedly “Dr.” William Key planted for them to print. From then on Jim Key, was Beautiful Jim Key, and his fame grew by leaps and bounds. He was literally the most famous performer in the United States for the next nine years at the turn of the last century. There was no horse like the educated horse, Beautiful Jim Key, before nor has there been any horse to come even near the sensationally educated horse since. The horse and veterinarian literally changed the world’s relationship with animals in that kindness to animals grew into a cornerstone of modern civilization and the animal rights movement can be said to have originated with Beautiful Jim Key.

The book, *Beautiful Jim Key* was written by bestselling author Mim Eichler Rivas and published by William Morrow/HarperCollins. An independent documentary is planned by award-winning filmmaker David Hoffman of Varied Directions International. Oak Ridge's own Mim Eichler Rivas has been a key element in making the history of Beautiful Jim Key widely known and is a promoter of kindness, who now lives with her family in Hermosa Beach, California.

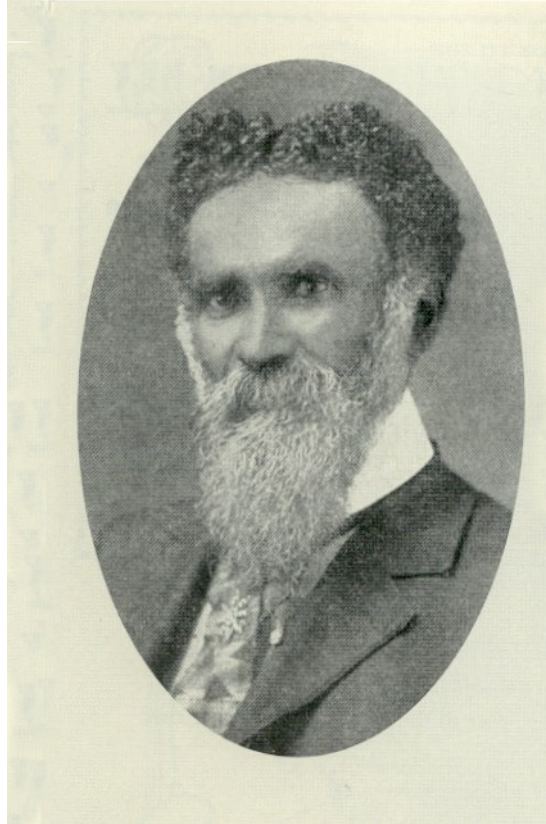
Mim says of Oak Ridge, "What I found growing up in Oak Ridge - the individualized education, the theatrical experience, the wonderful opportunities to grow and pursue my dreams even at a very early age – this is all unique to Oak Ridge, it just does not exist anywhere else in the world!"



Beautiful Jim Key on stage with his letters and numbers



Mim Eichler Rivas' book *Beautiful Jim Key*



“Dr.” William Key, former slave who taught Beautiful Jim Key