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**Stan Gralla always
had envisioned himself
as a big-city architect;
then he met and married
a girl from Oklahoma's
horse country.**

by Kathryn Jenson White



horse is a horse, of course, of course. And a barn's just a place to house the horse. That is, of course, unless the horse is lucky enough to live in a Stan Gralla-designed or -influenced equestrian facility.

Stan and Mary Ann Gralla live and work in what they call "a living laboratory," situated on a 320-acre farm outside Lexington, Oklahoma. From this home/office, they have gained international renown for their expertise in creating habitats for horses and quite a reputation for producing a mean bale of Bermuda hay.

Stan, who graduated from the OU College of Architec-

ture in 1964, is the creative force behind his very active architectural firm, Stan Gralla - Architects. Mary Ann, a 1961 OU graduate in home economics, is the driving force behind her very successful hay business, Gralla Farms. Firm supports farm; farm epitomizes all the firm is about. It seems the perfect marriage, both of individuals and of endeavors.

How the boy from Massachusetts who wanted to be a big-city architect and the girl from Lexington who swore they couldn't keep her down on the farm ended up living where they do and doing what they do makes for a life lesson, the moral of which is, "You just never know."

"In three more years, this farm will have been in my family for 100 years," Mary Ann says. "I was born on the original homestead, which my grandparents purchased right after the Land Run of 1889. I'm an only child, and when my mother died, we didn't know what else to do but to move here from Oklahoma City. What can you do when you have the 680 acres we had at the time? We either had to sell it or move back to take care of it."

Stan says: "She never wanted to come back to the farm. She didn't like it because of all the work she had to do as a kid. In the '50s, they had no electricity on this place. When I met her, I accused her of being one of the people I had read about in history."

History, at least of the literary sort, figured in the Grallas' assessment of the farm in 1975, as they were deciding whether they could become country folk.

"The place was in really bad shape," Stan says. "At one point, I decided it would be easier to just clean everything off and start all over again, but somehow we couldn't do that."

The reason behind the inability to raze the place seems to be a term that comes up often in conversation with the Grallas: sensitivity. Sitting in a charming, Southwest-influenced guest house that once was a chicken coop, the Grallas speak with conviction about their responsibility to the land on which they grow and build things, to the animals that roam on that land and live in those buildings and to the humans who own both the land and the animals.

"You almost have to be in the horse business to understand the problems before designing the buildings," Stan insists. Gralla Farms has had a thriving horse-breeding business for many years in addition to the haying operation.

Mary Ann agrees: "I don't think anyone could do what Stan does without the experience he has had working in detail with horses. Whether they're show horses or brood mares or racing horses, you need hands-on experience to understand their needs."

Stan interjects: "In school, my designs were sensitive to sites, kind of organic, and I credit people who taught at OU with bringing that out in me. But I never would have



"As we began fixing up the farm that first year, neighbors would stop by and say, 'What are you crazy people doing?' "

imagined my career would have gone this way."

The "way" is toward the master planning and design of racing facilities, breeding farms, arenas and show facilities for horses, with clients ranging from country music star Roy Clark to Remington Park owner Edward J. De Bartolo to Oklahoma City horseman Edward K. Gaylord II. The "going" has been facilitated by Stan's writing a column on equine architecture for *Speedhorse* magazine, publishing a book called *Horseman's Architect: A Guide to Planning Equine Facilities*, and taking the role of principal instructor on a 1989 Oklahoma State University video called "Facility Considerations for Horse Farms."

What *really* got the Grallas going, though, was the farm.

"When we moved in 1975, my fairly new firm was working just on what we would call 'normal' buildings, no horse stuff," Stan says. "As we began fixing up the farm that first year, neighbors would stop by and say, 'What are you crazy people doing?'"

"People out here weren't fixing things up and planting trees as we were. They were cutting trees down. They weren't

planting grass; they were planting wheat. We were undertaking a long, slow process of conservation of buildings, land and the whole system out here. It was a rundown farm, badly eroded. It was a conservation disaster. We owed a lot of inheritance taxes on the farm land. I had my neck stuck out trying to start a new practice.

"What saved us was that, because we had gone to college, we knew how little we knew."

Making daily pilgrimages to Soil Conservation Services, the library and the agricultural experts at Oklahoma State University and the Noble Foundation in Ardmore, the Grallas learned all they could about what they should do to make Gralla Farms a shining example of ecologically sensitive and profitable farming practices.

"I think from having grown up on the farm, I learned that you can't take things out unless you put things back, or you deplete whatever it is you began with," Mary Ann says. "If you don't put back, eventually there's nothing there. We didn't want just to sustain the land; we wanted to improve it."

Solving the problems he encountered in the design and construction of his own horse and hay operation's structures, Stan began to learn what to tell others. He continued to maintain his architectural firm in Oklahoma City, commuting for 13 years and spending most of his office time on such projects as churches, office buildings, schools and banks. The people he was meeting in the course of his and Mary Ann's farm business, though, began slowly to change the focus of his firm's business.



The Southwest influence is dominant in the miraculously transformed Gralla home and offices. Here the Grallas are shown in Stan's sun-drenched architectural office overlooking the fields where Mary Ann supervises the raising of high-quality hay for Oklahoma's thriving horse industry.

"We began to realize that Lexington, Purcell and Oklahoma City made up a tremendous horse industry," he says. "That's what got us really interested in grass that could be used for hay and grazing. We decided to go for very high-quality hay because there is such a great market for it. We were marketing hay for horse people, and they found out I was an architect. They saw what we were doing fixing things up. They'd say, 'Hey, could you help us fix our barn? We've got a problem with drainage.' It started out small like that. I'd go over on Saturday and do it for nothing because they were friends or neighbors."

When Connie Golden, publisher of *Speedhorse* magazine, learned of Stan's growing expertise, she asked him to write a regular column on the subject. Readers began calling and writing to ask advice on everything from what styles of roofs they should put on their horse facilities to what made the best fencing materials. Stan says he honestly didn't know how to answer all the questions, so he went into a heavy research mode.

He began to haunt libraries, only to find that not much

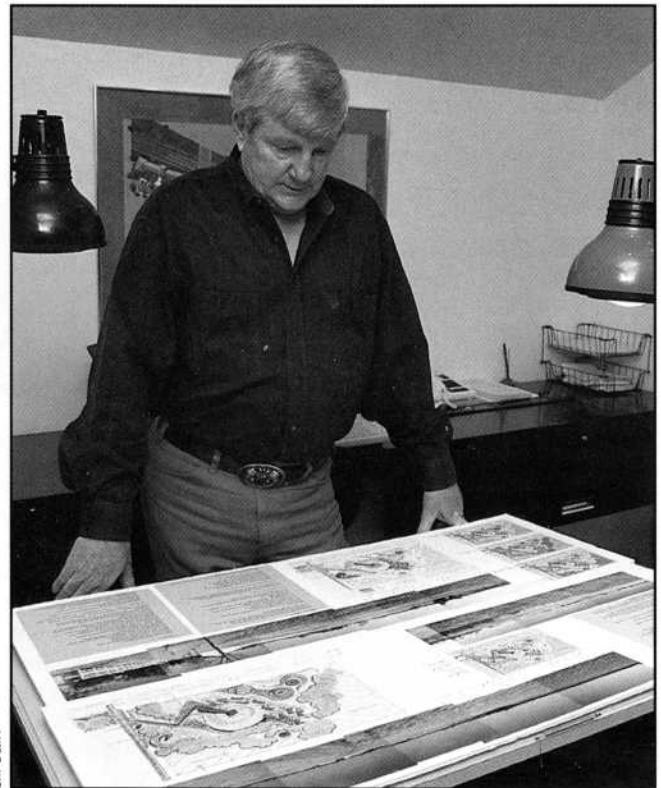


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The work of Stan Gralla-Architects is not confined to equestrian facility design, such as the Choctaw Ranch Headquarters in Frogville, Oklahoma, above, but Gralla knows of no other architectural firm in the country with this specialization.

information was available in book form. As Plan B, he started asking veterinarians about what was good, bad, wrong, needed in animal structures. He wanted to know whether they thought poor building design played a role in high vet bills. They did and had recommendations to reverse the situation. When big ranches began to call Stan with many and various problems, Golden persuaded her architectural columnist to pull his knowledge together into book form.

"The book is written in very simple language, so anyone can read it and get the common sense stuff out of it," he says. "A lot of these horse people were great when it came to business but were treating the farm and horses as a hobby and losing money they shouldn't have. The death of an animal or a fire could cost incredible money.

"That book did it. We sent copies to libraries and horse magazines, which reviewed it. The next thing, people were calling us saying, 'We need a really good, efficient barn that won't cost a ton to maintain.' It grew from barns to race tracks to master planning for projects like huge equestrian parks. We're working now on a racetrack in Memphis. We're the only



architects in the country that I know of with this specialization."

The Grallas now have taken their hard-earned wisdom and desire to make things better on the road, both nationally and internationally. Stan Gralla - Architects has current or past involvement in master planning and design projects all over the United States, as well as in Canada, Singapore and Mexico.

"Mexico will become our firm's biggest market area, bigger than the United States in the next few years, based on what's happening now," Stan says. "They want our expertise very badly. They want to build things the way we build things, not the way they've been doing it. They want good equine facilities and good houses for their people. They can't build them fast enough."

The Grallas became active in Mexico about eight years ago when their oldest son, Shawn, was studying Spanish at OU. (Their younger son, Todd, is an OU advertising graduate.) To improve his language proficiency, Shawn went to stay with a Mexican host family, who happened to own a racetrack. When Shawn gave the family a copy of Stan's book on equine architecture, his hosts asked Stan to fly down immediately.



The charming Gralla Farms guest house in the top photo was once the chicken coop on an 1889 Land Run homestead, now nearly 100 years old. The complete renovation of the old farm into his home and offices led Stan Gralla to a career in equestrian design that has included projects such as a 160-acre broodmare facility, bottom photo, at Welch, Oklahoma, for country music star Roy Clark.

He did and spent several days touring horse farms and giving advice. That encounter has blossomed into a fast friendship, and now Stan spends a significant amount of time in Mexico working on all sorts of architectural projects. One undertaking in particular could have great significance in Mexico, the United States and worldwide.

"We're trying to develop a housing unit that is affordable," he says. "That's a challenge we're spending our free time trying to meet. We've connected with a Mexican

architect who is doing the same thing, and we're working in both places with the same goal.

"Because of new laws and the state of the world, we're trying to make all our buildings cost less both initially and in maintenance and utilities. I have people working for me who are college graduates who can't afford to buy a house. There's something screwy here. They make decent salaries, but they've never been able to scrape up that 20 percent everyone wants paid down. We want to develop a house a young couple could buy."

The Grallas' concern for the future of the young has its roots in education. Mary Ann taught school for many years before moving to Lexington and taking up the farm chores, and Stan has long been active in the OU College of Architecture. He taught on campus for several years as a visiting assistant professor, and he is on the college's board of visitors. He is so busy now that he doesn't have time for a campus commitment, but he's working on a plan to become involved in teaching again.

"I want to return to the classroom in a different way," he says. "I love it, but it takes too much time away from my practice. I'm trying to figure out a way to teach here at the farm. We're talking now about expanding our preceptorship program where kids can move out to a place like this to study. It would be a wonderful experience for all of us."

The Grallas have been instrumental, too, in activating a new OU Club of Cleveland County. In 1992 they offered Gralla Farms as the location for a "Fall Round-Up," at which more than 600 current and potential OU supporters ate, fished, took tethered hot air balloon rides and had an all-around swell time enjoying the fruits of the Grallas' labors.

"Moving out here was the best thing that could have happened to us," Stan says. "Our clients love it here. We've redesigned the way we live and work.

It's become a way of life. I think other people don't understand how we do it, because we appear to work all the time—the office, the farm, the house. But it's all one deal to us, and it's really fun."

After approximately 18 years of horsing around, the city boy and the reluctant farm girl clearly have become seasoned professionals in two lucrative concerns, one of which is moving into international prominence—and that ain't hay.

You just never know. 