

The Annual Horse Breeders and Owners Conference is proudly celebrating its 30th anniversary this year. Here's a look at the evolution of the conference over the past 30 years.

The Horse Breeders and Owners Conference was first run by The University of Calgary. The U of C was an early leader in equine education courses throughout the late 1960's through the 1970's. The courses were in the areas of horse care, riding, reproduction, and behaviour. In 1978, Ron Cole, the coordinator of the continuing education department organized the first University of Calgary Equine Reproduction Symposium. The feature speaker at this inaugural symposium was Dr. Peter Rosedale from England. After the success of the first symposium, a decision was made to run the symposium annually. Following symposiums featured notable speakers such as Wolf Krober, founder of Equitana in Germany; the great horse photographer Robert Vavra from Spain; Dorian Williams of the British Horse Society; and the famous equine geneticist Dr. Ann Bowling from the University of California, Davis. In 1983, the first Alberta Horse Breeders and Owners Conference was held in conjunction with the U of C with notable speakers on the program such as Dr. Thomas Tobin from the University of Kentucky and horse behaviourist Linda Tellington-Jones.

When Ron Cole retired from the University Of Calgary Department Of Continuing Education, Doug Milligan, Les Burwash and Bob Coleman were on staff at the Horse Industry Branch with Alberta Agriculture conducting extension programs for the horse industry. They had been closely involved with the horse activities offered at the University of Calgary. Ron Cole's retirement meant the horse courses and the conference that had been initiated would cease to run. The Horse Industry Branch saw the conference as a significant extension program that could be grown.

The first conference not conducted through the U of C was held in 1982. This conference was held at the University but hosted by Alberta Agriculture and an ad hoc group of horse people under the name of the Alberta Horse Breeders Conference. The Horse Industry Association of Alberta was informally established in 1982 to act as an organizing body for the conference.

In 1983, the conference was moved to the Capri Centre in Red Deer, Alberta where it has remained. The physical layout of the hotel allowed the organizers to change the format of the program and to bring in more speakers on a variety of topics. It was now possible to have two or three speakers present at the same time, which allowed participants to choose a session based on their interests. The conference has been held at the Capri Centre for 29 years, always during the month of January.

By 1991, the growth of the conference necessitated the incorporation of the Horse Industry Association of Alberta under the Alberta Society's Act as a non-profit organization.

In the 1990's the Capri Centre added a conference hall to the hotel. This allowed the organizing committee to increase the sponsorships of the conference and add to the education experience. In the initial years, the conference had three sponsors, besides Alberta Agriculture. Sponsorship has grown over the years to the point where now 65 sponsors fill the trade show area of the conference.

The Alberta Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals partnered with the Horse Industry Association to have the Fred Pearce Memorial Speakers Series presented on an annual basis. Fred Pearce had a small farm near Huxley, Alberta. When he passed away, he bequeathed his estate to the Alberta SPCA. Fred's wishes were that an education program be established to enhance the wellbeing of animals. The Alberta SPCA felt the Alberta Horse Breeders and Owners Conference was a venue that could help in honouring Mr. Pearce's wishes. Each year a feature speaker is brought to the conference to deliver a message that will assist in educating horse owners on topics that will enhance the horse's welfare.

Alberta has many people in the horse industry that contribute significantly to the betterment of the horse industry beyond their own personal gain. The Horse Industry Association of Alberta initiated a Distinguished Service Award in 2000 to honour these individuals. The criteria for selection are 40% significant accomplishments, 30% public benefit, 20% individual credibility, and 10% continued contributions. The inaugural recipient was cutting horse legend, Bill Collins who was the first Canadian to be inducted into the AQHA Hall of Fame. He has since been followed by Ron and Marg Southern, Hans Hansma, Joe Selinger, Bruce Roy, Dave Robson, David Reid, John Scott, Doug Milligan, and Peggy McDonald and Eldon Bienert. Recently Dr. Wayne Burwash was the latest recipient of this award in 2015. These individuals have had the greatest impact on the growth and development of Alberta's horse industry.

As time moved forward the program organizers continued to increase the scope of the topics and speakers. Currently the conference brings in 17 internationally recognized speakers. Topics tend to fall into three main categories: health and care of the horse, use and training of horses, and thirdly the business of horses. Through the support of its sponsors and delegates, internationally renowned speakers from throughout North America and Europe have addressed the conference. Some notable examples include Dr. Marvin Beeman, Dr. R. M. Miller, Dr. Bill Pickett, Cherry Hill, Bill Collins, Patti Colbert, Doug Householder, Janice Swanson, Julie Thorson, Wayne McIlwraith and Greg Darnall. Recently since this article was published: Dan James, Lauren Barwick, Kurt and Tammy Pate, Stephen Peters, Martin Black, and Temple Grandin,

The conference begins with an "Open Barn" reception in the Exhibit Hall at 7:00 on Friday evening and the first session starts at 8:40 am Saturday morning. Saturday evening provides a chance to network and socialize with wine, dessert, awards and live entertainment.

The Alberta Horse Breeders and Owners Conference has evolved into the premiere horse conference in North America and it's right in your backyard.

Les Burwash: Les grew up on a mixed dairy farm in the Balzac area. He attended Montana State University receiving a BSc in Animal Science, which was followed by obtaining a MSc in Reproductive Physiology from Colorado State University. Les was hired as horse specialist with the newly formed Horse Industry Branch of the Alberta Department of Agriculture in 1974. He has been involved with doing equine research and extension activities with the department since. Les is recognized for his knowledge in the areas of reproduction, genetics, horse care, nutrition, conformation evaluation and practical approach to horse production.

