

Rocky Mountain News, June 18, 1995

Leap of faith: her money rides on the horse business

By Victoria Cooper, Staff Writer

Parker, CO – A lone woman with a fistful of red flags stands before 470 acres of fancy show rings, derby fields and pasture bordered by 15 miles of white fencing. She stoops to mark a spot for tree planting on this rainy day in May.

A groundskeeper she is not. She's Helen Fusscas, entrepreneur and owner of High Prairie Farms Equestrian Center, host of this summer's U.S. Olympic Festival horse events.

At 52, the Connecticut woman doesn't waste a minute. She's dressed for both tasks at hand: a flame-red silk ensemble for an interview and photographs, and rubber boots for slogging through mud and manure on the way to her sleek, newly roofed pavilion.

Fusscas, a recreational rider, has owned and stabled horses behind her Connecticut home for years. But that was a gentleman's farm. This is big business.

She's sparing no expense to make High Prairie Farms one of the great horse venues in the country. She won't reveal the cost of building 200 permanent horse stalls, outfitting her show fields with graded pads for tents to shade the horses, and creating grassy tiers to seat thousands – not to mention enclosing the pavilion that has two catering kitchens and seating for 400.

You can figure that more than \$8 million has been invested in this equestrian operation. Fusscas paid Senior Corp., \$1.7 million for the 82-acre farm after the developer sank \$5 million into fencing, barns, a pavilion and indoor arena for the centerpiece of its pricey new community. Fusscas bought an adjacent 88 acres for an undisclosed sum, then 300 more last month for \$1.25 million.

Fusscas is as comfortable working big numbers as she is big ideas. She's president of her Connecticut family's Vernon K. Kriebel Foundation, founded by her grandfather for the preservation of freedom and entrepreneurship in the United States. And she's a principal in two venture capital funds, Management I and Management II, focusing on domestic and international businesses.

"My father is a famous entrepreneur," she says of the founder and inventor behind Loctite Corp., a chemical specialty-products firm. "And my brother and my uncle are business people who helped teach me that you either win or you lose when you're an entrepreneur. But it's the most exciting game in town.

"By the time I was a young adult, I already had five failed businesses," she says, quick to laugh at herself.

Fusscas earned a bachelor's in art history at Radcliffe and a master's in art history at the University of Pennsylvania before becoming education director at the prestigious Wadsworth Athenaeum in Hartford, Conn.

She honed her survival skills when she was the mother of a 1-year old and pregnant with twins. Fusscas, now divorced, and her husband of 25 years moved the budding family to Japan in the mid-'70s.

"We lived near Tokyo in a house with no heat, and without a car," she says. "While my husband worked six days a week night and day, I had to fend as best I could without knowledge of the language."

Five years later, they returned to the states and Fusscas opened The Connecticut Gallery, another high-stakes adventure. She helped rediscover many of the Connecticut painters of the past 150 years and became an expert on the little-known American impressionists. As the public realized the artists' value, Fusscas sold their work for six and seven figures.

That same farsightedness led her to High Prairie Farms, which now boards more than 100 thoroughbreds, warmbloods and quarter horses for \$400 each per month. She purchased the farm three years ago to establish her daughter, Amanda, now 21, in the horse business. A U.S. Olympic hopeful, Amanda is competing in stadium jumping in Europe.

It took only one visit to hook Fusscas on Colorado. She appreciated the quality of life, the western mythology, the state's central location, and the new airport, which she hopes one day will have an import/export station for horses.

"She wants this state to become the new center of international equestrian activity in the United States," says Joy Burns, owner of Denver's Burnsley Hotel and partner in a 1,700-acre property west of Fusscas's spread. "I don't see any reason why that can't be, despite the fact that most of the power in the horse world is in the East.

"A lot of activity is moving here, and a lot of things are changing," she says. "Helen has Colorado's growth corridor with her."

Douglas County is now the fastest-growing housing market in the U.S. with a 45.8% increase in homes between 1990 and mid-1994. The Colorado horse industry contributes nearly \$1 billion to the gross national product, and the state has the nation's fourth largest horse population, estimated at 200,000.

Fusscas is convinced equestrian events will grow as a spectator sport in America, as they have in Europe. "Twenty years ago, you could hardly find a soccer ball in the United States, and look what's happened to Europe's No. 1 sport here," she says.

She envisions a day when Europe's love affair with equine heroes will transfer to this side of the Atlantic. And she's doing her part to make it happen.

Her plans for High Prairie include an expansion from hunter/jumper stadium events to cross-country riding events, driving events, barrel racing and equine gymnastics. She envisions an equestrian park on her south acreage, eight world-class events a year, and a facility that will attract families of all incomes for picnics, parties, weddings, reunions, and classical music, as well as equestrian events.

In the three years she has commuted to Colorado to establish High Prairie, she's won the bid to host the U.S. Olympic Festival equestrian events, started a riding school at the University of Denver, and attracted numerous grand prix events. She also joined the Denver Metro Convention and Visitor's Bureau and became a board member of the Denver Art Museum.

She's hoping to build a relationship between High Prairie and the National Western Stock Show. While she says she has encountered an "old boy's network" there, she thinks there's room for everyone in Colorado. "If I had a 'kill the competitor' attitude," she says, "I'd still be in New England.

"I don't expect to be hugged by everyone, but I expect the same professional courtesy I extend to be returned. What angers me is negativism, whether it's mine or anyone else's."

Like others attracted to Colorado from the earliest days, Fusscas finds the state's openness and opportunity refreshing. "I can be accepted for who I am out here," she says. "I get to prove myself on my own merits, without regard for who my family is back East. And, I've found the richest pool of women here who feel empowered to do what they do."

While she does not count herself a feminist (that term is "much too strident"), Fusscas likes the horse business because it puts women on an equal footing with men.

"What other sport allows high-performance women to compete with high-performance men on the same playing field?"

"Besides, the sport is so interesting, varied and beautiful to watch," she says.

If the horse business doesn't pay, Fusscas says she'll develop the real estate she has purchased. But she's determined it will, and she's giving herself 10 years to make it.

She thrives on the challenge. "I'm a Taurus, and I guess it shows," she says, laughing at her own bull-headedness. "Has anyone ever made money on horses?"

This article is excerpted from the work portfolio of Cooper Communications.

Cooper Communications provides creative and editorial direction for strategic communications. For more information, contact Victoria Cooper at vcooper@coopercomms.com or 415-289-0595. Visit our website at www.coopercomms.com.