

## DENTON OFFUTT OF KENTUCKY: AMERICA'S FIRST "HORSE WHISPERER"?

*By Gary A. O'Dell*

The term "horse whisperer" has long been a part of equestrian vernacular, traditionally applied to persons who have an almost mystical affinity with horses, able to tame even the most cantankerous animals through sympathetic handling. Since many such persons were seen to confront their subjects face-to-face and apparently communicate with them silently or in low voices, they were designated "horse whisperers." Denton Offutt of Kentucky is perhaps best known to history as the man who in 1831 befriended and gave young Abraham Lincoln his first real job as a clerk in his store at New Salem, Illinois. While there can be little doubt that Offutt, garrulous and good-natured, often impulsive or even reckless, and an inveterate schemer, had a significant influence upon the future president, it was more likely as an example to avoid rather than one to emulate. During his own lifetime, Offutt was better known as an expert horse trainer, and he is the first American who can be identified as an authentic "horse whisperer." This aspect of his life has largely been ignored by historians, who have focused almost exclusively

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The author wishes to thank Ann Bolton Bevins for bringing to my attention the life of such an intriguing character as Denton Offutt and for her many valuable suggestions and comments during the development of this paper.

upon Offutt's brief sojourn as a merchant and entrepreneur at New Salem and his relationship to the future president. His subsequent career as a well-known horse tamer has generally been dismissed as inconsequential by historians unfamiliar with the equestrian world of the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup>

The distinguished Lincoln historian Michael Burlingame considered Offutt, in post–New Salem life, as no more than “a confidence man, peddling a magical expression that would allegedly tame horses when whispered in their ears.” William G. Greene, who was Lincoln's assistant in Offutt's store, described Offutt as “a wild, reckless [*sic*], careless man, a kind of wandering horse tamer.” Yet such worthies as Henry Clay of Kentucky and some of the most prominent horsemen of the country who knew Offutt personally praised his amazing ability with horses; such men would be difficult to deceive. Though fame and fortune always eluded the hapless Offutt during his lifetime, his methods spawned countless imitators, some genuine horse whisperers, others no more than charlatans.<sup>2</sup>

During much of history, the use of fear and pain as training methods has generally defined the human–equine relationship. The process of training a horse to accept human control, whether as a mount to be ridden or to labor in harness, has traditionally been known as “breaking” the horse. Although still in common usage today, the term is suggestive of both the philosophy and methods from which it derived, methods that would now be considered unneces-

<sup>1</sup> Following the 1998 release of the popular motion picture *The Horse Whisperer*, derived from the book of the same name and starring Robert Redford as a character loosely based upon an amalgamation of modern-day “horse whisperers,” the term “whisperer” has entered modern popular culture as a slang reference for anyone having a strong empathy for particular animals or human beings. A prolific self-help literature induced by the success of *The Horse Whisperer* now includes books offering advice on dogs, cats, husbands, and teenagers. See Nicholas Evans, *The Horse Whisperer* (New York, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> Michael Burlingame, *Abraham Lincoln: A Life*, 2 vols. (Baltimore, 2008), 1:52; William G. Greene interview with William H. Herndon, May 30, 1865, *Herndon's Informants: Letters, Interviews and Statements About Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Douglas O. Wilson and Rodney O. Davis (Urbana, 1998), 18. William H. Townsend was one of the few historians to give much notice to the life of Denton Offutt before and after his time at New Salem; see his *Lincoln and the Bluegrass: Slavery and Civil War in Kentucky* (Lexington, 1955), 30–45, 150–53, 184, 240–43.

sarily harsh, or even cruel. Horse training was intended to “break” the independent spirit of the animal through the use of coercion and render it submissive and obedient. Treatment was liable to be especially severe if the subject was a grown horse, either a feral animal captured from the wild or a domestic animal considered to be unruly or vicious. The trainer, in such cases, might resort to beatings, confinement, starvation, sleep deprivation, or even bleeding in an effort to render the horse manageable.

During the nineteenth century, more benign methods of training horses began to replace the brute-force approach, part of a larger social movement toward more humane treatment of animals that began in Britain early in the century and spread to the United States much later. Influential British equine authorities, such as John Lawrence and William Youatt, urged patience and kindness in the training of young horses, deploring the barbarity of cruel treatment. “The restive and vicious horse,” Youatt wrote, “is made so by ill-usage, and not by nature.” Contributing to this shift toward a gentler approach were certain trainers, often known as “horse-tamers” or “horse whisperers,” whose successes in domesticating notoriously ill-tempered animals brought them widespread fame and focused attention on their methods. These “whisperers” often cloaked their methods with secrecy, so that many observers attributed the taming of a vicious horse to the use of mysterious charms or potions or to an occult “animal magnetism” unique to the trainer. Only gradually came the realization that such men relied upon a keen understanding of equine psychology and an approach based upon sympathy and kind treatment. Such methods, known today as “natural horsemanship,” are intended to cultivate trust and harmonize with the natural instincts of the horse.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Diane L. Beers, *For Prevention of Cruelty: The History and Legacy of Animal Rights Activism in the United States* (Athens, Ohio, 2006), 21-25; John Lawrence, *The Horse, His Varieties and Uses* (London, 1829), 31-36; William Youatt, *The Horse, With a Treatise on Draught* (London, 1831), 223-26. In May 1838, in a lengthy article on “Taming Wild Horses,” John S. Skinner, the editor of the *American Turf Register*, announced that he had obtained a secret “arcanum” or potion from a reliable source that he had successfully used to tame several unruly horses and mules. Skinner promised to obtain permission to publish the composition of the arcanum,

The designation “horse whisperer” was first applied to the Irishman James (Con) Sullivan, a horse-tamer who practiced his art in the Duhallow district of County Cork, Ireland, during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. As he was often seen to speak softly into the ear of those animals he wished to subdue, Sullivan came to be widely known as “The Whisperer” and was frequently employed by the Lord Doneraile (Hayes St. Leger) of Doneraile, County Cork, to tame obstreperous horses at his stables. According to one observer, Sullivan was able to achieve dramatic and lasting effects within a very short time spent in communion with the animal. Although sometimes he performed openly before spectators, Sullivan preferred privacy in his work. Horatio Townsend recalled,

When sent for to tame a vicious beast, for which he was paid more or less, according to distance, generally two or three guineas, he directed the stable, in which he and the object of the experiment were placed, to be shut, with orders not to open the door until a signal given. After a tête-à-tête of about half an hour, during which little or no bustle was heard, the signal was made, and, upon opening the door, the horse appeared lying down, and the man by his side, playing familiarly with him, like a child with a puppy dog. From that time he was found perfectly willing to submit to any discipline, however repugnant to his nature before.

Sullivan’s ability appeared to be so magical in nature that his parish priest feared for his soul and threatened to denounce him as a sorcerer dabbling in the black arts if he did not reveal his secret. Sullivan died some time prior to 1810, confiding his secret only to a different priest with instructions that it be passed on to his eldest son; the son, in later years, attempted to emulate his father but without

which was applied to the nose of the subject animal, in a future issue, but he never did so; see his article in the *American Turf Register*, May 1838, 193-96. See also the *American Turf Register*, February 1837, 261-63; March 1837, 316-19; and September 1837, 500-501, for more background information on this mysterious potion, which was reportedly invented by an Ohio man named Mount.

the same degree of success.<sup>4</sup>

Although Sullivan's method remains obscure and the results were doubtless exaggerated in the telling, accounts describing his activities are striking in their similarity to those of later practitioners. In the United States, Denton Offutt developed, taught, and promoted a distinctive style of natural horsemanship in the antebellum era, a style that he preferred to call "gentling" rather than the customary "breaking" of a horse. One of his early pupils was teenaged Alexander Keene Richards, a resident of Georgetown, Kentucky, who became one of the most significant thoroughbred breeders of the nineteenth century. Richards later described Offutt as "a queer genius . . . an uneducated man but full of originality." The time Richards spent with Offutt, receiving practical instruction in the care and training of horses at the hands of a master, was an important formative period in the young man's life. More than fifteen years after taking lessons, Richards still carried Offutt's book of instructions and training philosophy with him when he traveled abroad on horse-buying expeditions.<sup>5</sup>

Family records of Offutt descendants tentatively place his birth between 1803 and 1807, and so he would have been born in Kentucky shortly after his family emigrated from Maryland in 1801. Denton himself stated, "I was born on the waters of Hickman Creek, eight or nine miles south of Lexington, and raised to farming."<sup>6</sup> He grew up as part of a large family of eight brothers and three sisters in a comfortable two-story house on the Jessamine County farm of his

<sup>4</sup> Horatio Townsend, *Statistical Survey of the County of Cork* (Dublin, 1810), 435-441; Ranger [pseud.], "The Whisperer," *New Sporting Magazine* [London, England], July 1838, 15-24. This account states that Sullivan's sons were too young to understand his instructions at the time of his death.

<sup>5</sup> Hamilton Busbey, "Denton Offutt and His Book," *Turf, Field and Farm*, January 4, 1878, 8 (entire article appears on page 8). The author is working on a biography of Richards. There are scattered references to him in Alexander MacKay Smith, *The Race Horses of America, 1832-1872: Portraits and Other Paintings by Edward Troye* (Saratoga Springs, N.Y., 1981). The most complete obituary is in *Turf, Field, and Farm* [New York], March 25, 1881, 184. For information on Denton Offutt's book, see footnote 24.

<sup>6</sup> Denton Offutt, *A New and Complete System of Teaching the Horse on Phrenological Principles* (Cincinnati, 1848), front matter.

father, Samuel (1751-1827) and his mother Elizabeth (1761-1831). Andrew was the eldest of the Offutt boys, followed by Tilghman, Otho, Samuel, Rezin, Azra, Zedekiah, and Denton, the youngest son. Sisters Eleanor and Arah, the oldest Offutt children, had already married by the time Denton was born, and the last Offutt sibling, Sarah, was born in 1807.<sup>7</sup>

The Offutts had been prosperous horse breeders in Maryland for generations, and on his Bluegrass farm Samuel raised not only fine horses but also mules, sheep, cattle, and hogs, which were shipped down the Ohio and Mississippi rivers to southern markets. His son, Tilghman (1786-1862), also became a successful horse breeder in Logan County. Once Denton was old enough, he began to work for Tilghman as a horse handler. Twice each year, Denton and Tilghman's son Joe took large herds of livestock to market, the mode of transport depending upon the season. In March, when the stream flow in Kentucky was elevated by spring rains, Denton and his nephew loaded horses on flatboats and took them down the Green River to the Ohio and thence down the Mississippi to New Orleans. In the dry months of autumn, the two young wranglers drove stock overland to market at Natchez.<sup>8</sup>

When Samuel Offutt died in February 1827, the terms of his will left a life interest in the home place and the bulk of his estate to his

<sup>7</sup> James S. Offutt, "Denton Offutt: Employer and Friend of Lincoln at New Salem," (typescript, n.d., n.p.). Multiple copies of this typescript exist, one in the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library in Springfield, Ill. A note on the typescript states that James Offutt was the great-great-grandson of Denton Offutt's uncle, the brother of Samuel Offutt. Offutt, *A New and Complete System*, front matter; Townsend, *Lincoln and the Bluegrass*, 30-32. Both James S. Offutt and Townsend drew upon the same source—family records of Offutt descendant Martha B. Check of Lexington, for information about Denton Offutt's early life. Townsend, however, unlike James Offutt, placed Denton among the Offutt children who came to Kentucky with their parents in 1801; an error, given Denton Offutt's autobiographical statement as to his Kentucky birth. According to Townsend, Martha Check was the great-great-granddaughter of Samuel Offutt; see Townsend, *Lincoln and the Bluegrass*, 362n1. Will of Samuel Offutt, Jessamine County Will Book D, 30-32 (October 1825); see also Nellie Offutt Chesley, "The Offutt Family [typescript, 8 vols.], 3:74; 4:53, 56-57, 77, 95, 128, 130, 132-33, 162, 182 (photocopy of original at the Jane C. Sween Research Library, Montgomery County Historical Society, Rockville, Maryland).

<sup>8</sup> Townsend, *Lincoln and the Bluegrass*, 31-32

wife Elizabeth, save for a handful of slaves individually bequeathed to specific heirs. The balance of the estate was divided among the sons in equal shares. Two years later, in January 1829, Denton converted his assets to cash, selling his share of the home place to his brother Samuel, and he left Kentucky to make his fortune in the West. He was determined to follow the example of his brother Rezin (1800-86), who had become a successful trader on the Missouri frontier. Denton's activities during the next two years are uncertain, but by early 1831 he had become established as a businessman and entrepreneur in central Illinois, operating along the Sangamon River.<sup>9</sup>

Offutt had visions of great wealth to be made from the resources of the region. The fertile prairie lands of Illinois were ideally suited for production of abundant crops of grain, but there was at this time no practical way to transport produce to outside markets except by the rivers. Offutt proposed to purchase grain and pork in Illinois and take it by flatboat to market in New Orleans. To accomplish this, he needed to hire an experienced boatman and a capable crew. Through his inquiries, Offutt learned that there was just such a man in the vicinity, John Hanks of Kentucky, who lived in Macon County five miles northwest of Decatur.<sup>10</sup>

Hanks had come to Illinois in 1828, and it was his glowing reports of the region that persuaded Thomas Lincoln and many members of the closely associated Hanks family, who were then living along Little Pigeon Creek in southern Indiana, to migrate to Illinois in March 1830. Before their arrival, John Hanks selected a tract for the Lincoln family, located about five miles further west on a bluff overlooking the Sangamon River, and he cut some timber to be used in construction of their cabin. At the time of their move, Thomas Lincoln's son Abraham had just passed his twenty-first birthday.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> *Kentucky Reporter*, February 10, 1827; Jessamine County Will Book D, 30 (October 30, 1830); Townsend, *Lincoln and the Bluegrass*, 32-34.

<sup>10</sup> William E. Barton, *The Life of Abraham Lincoln*, 2 vols. (Indianapolis, 1925), 1:146. In describing Offutt's ambitions, Barton appears to be depending primarily on the John Hanks interview by William Herndon, 1865-66, *Herndon's Informants*, 456 (interview dated only to 1865-66).

<sup>11</sup> William H. Herndon and Jesse W. Weik, *Herndon's Lincoln: The True Story of a Great*

Offutt paid a call upon Hanks at his cabin in February 1831 and outlined his proposal. "He wanted me to go badly," Hanks later recalled, "but I waited awhile before answering. I hunted up Abe, and I introduced him and John Johnston, his stepbrother, to Offutt. After some talk we at last made an engagement with Offutt fifty cents a day and sixty dollars to make the trip to New Orleans." John Hanks and his cousin Abraham Lincoln set out on the first of March, floating down the Sangamon River in a canoe to Judy's Ferry, five miles east of Springfield, where they met up with Johnston. From the ferry, the three men walked to Springfield, where they found Denton Offutt comfortably settled in "The Buckhorn," the best inn in town. According to their agreement, Offutt was to have arranged for the building of a flatboat at Springfield, but, dallying in the congenial company at the inn, he had neglected to have this done.<sup>12</sup>

Offutt was contrite over his failure to provide the boat, and engaged the three men to build the boat themselves at wages of twelve dollars a month each. They spent two weeks cutting timber on public land and floated the logs down the river to old Sangamo Town, about seven miles northwest from Springfield, where they were sawed into planks at a local mill. Within four weeks, the newly constructed flatboat, eighty feet long and eighteen feet wide, was ready to launch. With a cargo of pork packed in barrels, bacon, corn, and live hogs, Offutt and his three employees set off down the Sangamon River, but they ran into trouble on April 19 when they reached New Salem and the boat hung up on a milldam. They had to unload most of the cargo into another boat and then transfer it back again once their flatboat had been freed from the dam.<sup>13</sup>

*Life* (Chicago, 1889), 66-70; John Hanks interview by William Herndon, 1865-66, *Herndon's Informants*, 456.

<sup>12</sup> John Hanks, interview with Herndon, 1865-66, *Herndon's Informants*, 456; Abraham Lincoln, "Autobiographical Notes," May-June 1860, series 1, general correspondence, 1833-1916, Abraham Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; Herndon and Weik, *Life of Lincoln*, 61. Judy's Ferry is the present-day village of Riverton, Illinois.

<sup>13</sup> Lincoln "Autobiographical Notes"; John Hanks interview by Herndon, June 13, 1865, *Herndon's Informants*, 44; John Hanks interview with Herndon, 1865-66, *ibid.*, 456-57. The exact date of their departure is not known, but it was probably April 17 or 18.



A few miles farther downriver, they put in to shore at a place known as the Blue Banks, about a mile above the confluence with Salt Creek and eight miles north of Petersburg. Here Offutt purchased a herd of about thirty hogs from Russell Godbey, but the experienced stock-handler was confounded in trying to drive the balky swine back to the flatboat. The young men managed to herd them back into their pen and were rather at a loss as to what to do next, until reportedly Offutt conceived the bizarre idea to sew their eyelids shut. "Abe held the head of them, I the tail," John Hanks recalled, "and Offutt sewed up their eyes." Even after this drastic expedient, the hogs refused to be driven, so they at last loaded them, a few at a time, onto a cart. Johnston and Hanks hauled the hogs to the flatboat where Lincoln received them and cut the stitches from their eyes. Although Lincoln himself recalled the incident in his brief autobiographical notes, many historians consider this to be no more than a frontier "tall tale." Even if wholly fabricated by Lincoln tongue-in-cheek, the story certainly provides insight on Lincoln's perception of his employer as wildly impulsive on occasion.<sup>14</sup>

With the hogs safely aboard, the flatboat continued its voyage, passing from the Sangamon to the Illinois River and then into the current of the Mississippi. At St. Louis, Lincoln recalled, John Hanks decided go ashore and head back home, "having a family and being likely to be detained from home longer than at first expected." The three remaining men floated down the great river, stopping briefly at Memphis, Vicksburg, and Natchez, and they arrived at New Orleans early in May. They remained in the city for a month, disposing of their cargo and enjoying the sights and attractions of the city. In June, the Offutt party boarded a steamboat bound upriver to St. Louis. Offutt remained behind at St. Louis while Lincoln and his stepbrother John Johnston set out on foot across Illinois to Coles County, where Thomas Lincoln had recently moved. Lincoln did not remain long at his father's home but came to New Salem in late July to await the

<sup>14</sup> Hanks, interview with Herndon, 1865-66, *Herndon's Informants*, 457; Lincoln, "Autobiographical Notes."

arrival of Denton Offutt. During the leisurely flatboat voyage down the Mississippi, Lincoln recalled (writing in the third person) that Offutt “conceived a liking for A. [and] contracted with him to act as clerk for him, on his return from New Orleans, in charge of a store and Mill at New Salem.”<sup>15</sup>

The community of New Salem at this time had been in existence for less than two years. The plan of the town was laid out in October 1829 by John M. Camron and his uncle James Rutledge. The town site was on the high ground overlooking the Sangamon River, near the grist and sawmill erected by Camron and Rutledge during the previous year. The first store building opened in the autumn of 1829, and the post office was established on Christmas day of that year. In July 1831, after parting company with Lincoln and Johnson, Denton Offutt purchased a stock of merchandise at St. Louis for his proposed store, arranging for it to be shipped to Beardstown, located on the Illinois River near its junction with the Sangamon. Offutt then came up the Illinois on a boat to Beardstown and continued on to Springfield by stagecoach. On July 8, he obtained a merchant’s license from the county commissioners court of Sangamon County to keep store at New Salem.<sup>16</sup>

Offutt returned to New Salem soon after Lincoln’s arrival there, having been delayed by the need to return briefly to Kentucky to assist in the settlement of his mother’s estate; she had passed away in February 1831. On September 2, he was back in Illinois and paid ten dollars for a town lot in New Salem on which to erect his store building, located on the east bluff overlooking the Sangamon River. Lincoln began his new service in Offutt’s employ by assisting in the

<sup>15</sup> Hanks, interview with Herndon, 1865-66, *Herndon’s Informants*, 457-58; Lincoln “Autobiographical Notes.” The Hanks and Lincoln accounts of the flatboat voyage are directly contradictory concerning the movements of John Hanks. Hanks claimed to have traveled to New Orleans on the flatboat with the other men, stating, “Abe & myself left NO in June 1831. We came to St. Louis on the Steam boat together walked to Edwardsville 25 N.E. of St. Louis, Abe, Johnson, & myself.” Hanks was apparently attempting to inflate his role in the historic journey.

<sup>16</sup> Herndon and Weik, *Life of Lincoln*, 64-66; Thomas P. Reep, *Lincoln at New Salem* (Petersburg, Ill., 1927), 8-14, 19.

construction of a log store building. This accomplished, and having received no word regarding the arrival of Offutt's merchandise at Beardstown, Lincoln took temporary employment assisting a local doctor in rafting his family and possessions down the Sangamon to Beardstown. At the Beardstown freight office, Lincoln discovered Offutt's trade stock had arrived, and so immediately set out overland back to New Salem to arrange wagon transport. Halfway there, he encountered wagons on the road sent by Offutt, who had been informed of the arrival of his goods during Lincoln's absence. Lincoln gave the head carter a note authorizing delivery and hurried back to New Salem to prepare for receiving the merchandise. The store was soon open for business, and Offutt added other enterprises to his embryonic empire, such as leasing the Camron and Rutledge mill operation.<sup>17</sup>

Young Abraham Lincoln initially slept in the store building, later arranging to board with various families in New Salem. To assist Lincoln at the store, Offutt hired two local youths as assistants, nineteen-year-old William G. Greene and Charles Maltby. Offutt apparently left the day-to-day operation of the store to his employees and devoted his time to traveling back and forth between Springfield and New Salem, intent on hatching new schemes. Lincoln spent much

<sup>17</sup> *Kentucky Reporter*, March 2, 1831; Herndon and Weik, *Life of Lincoln*, 66-68; Reep, *Lincoln at New Salem*, 19-23; Barton, *Life of Lincoln*, 1:163-64; Mentor Graham interview by Herndon, May 29, 1865, *Herndon's Informants*, 9; William G. Greene interview by Herndon, May 30, 1865, *ibid.*, 17. The dam across the river at this mill was the same one upon which Offutt's flatboat had become stuck en route to New Orleans earlier in the year. Recent archaeological excavations at New Salem have altered some previous conceptions of Offutt and Lincoln's mercantile operations in the community. Recovered architectural debris suggests that the Offutt store was not a crude log building but had milled plank flooring and plastered walls. Offutt's business "was probably more extensive than originally imagined, and . . . the built environment of the property probably included more than one structure." The building known as the "Clary Grocery" may have been part of Offutt's commercial complex. Although it was believed that Lincoln did not own property in New Salem, newly discovered documentation indicates that Lincoln and Charles Maltby, shortly after Offutt's departure from the region, acquired two town lots, possibly including the former Offutt store, upon which they briefly operated a mercantile. See Robert Mazrim, Dennis Naglich, and Curtis Mann, *Looking for Lincoln's Property at New Salem: Archaeological Investigations at the "East Ridge" Locale, Lincoln's New Salem State Historic Site*, Fieldwork and Technical Reports Bulletin Number 14 (Salisbury, Ill., 2007), 102-6.

of his time tending to business at the gristmill, while Greene and Maltby ran the store in his absence. At Offutt's direction, Lincoln cut timber and split rails to build a stock pen near the mill large enough to contain a thousand hogs. Offutt purchased a great deal of corn which he stored at the mill; he intended to fatten hogs for markets downriver.<sup>18</sup>

Unfortunately for Offutt's dreams of entrepreneurial glory, none of these endeavors prospered. The Sangamon was too shallow for steamboat navigation, so that the anticipated trade never materialized, and the store location, on the outskirts of town, was poorly chosen. Offutt's store did little business, even at first, and trade fell off considerably during ensuing months. In the spring of 1832, a penniless and disillusioned Denton Offutt made a hasty departure from New Salem, leaving Lincoln behind to deal with angry creditors. Lincoln, by agreement among the creditors, was left in charge of the store to sell out the stock and other assets to pay Offutt's debts. In less than a decade, the entire community of New Salem was abandoned, many of the inhabitants relocating to nearby Petersburg.<sup>19</sup>

Many Lincoln biographers consider his early friendship with Offutt to have been an important formative influence in the life of the future president. Lincoln's law partner, William Herndon, described Offutt as an "odd character," but "good at heart and a generous friend of Lincoln." Offutt would remain in periodic contact with Lincoln for the rest of his life.<sup>20</sup>

Although Offutt did not again return to New Salem, he evidently

<sup>18</sup> Burlingame, *Lincoln*, 1:76-77; Charles Maltby, *The Life and Public Services of Abraham Lincoln* (Stockton, Calif., 1884), 26-27; Jason Duncan interview with Herndon, late 1866–early 1867, *Herndon's Informants*, 539; William G. Greene interview with Herndon, May 30, 1865, *ibid.*, 17-18; Mentor Graham interview with Herndon, May 29, 1865, *ibid.*, 9. Burlingame's extensive scholarship provides what may be the most detailed and comprehensive account of Abraham Lincoln's time at New Salem.

<sup>19</sup> Lincoln "Autobiographical Notes"; Reep, *Lincoln at New Salem*, 33; Townsend, *Lincoln and the Bluegrass*, 44.

<sup>20</sup> Herndon and Weik, *Life of Lincoln*, 81. Among the biographers who commented on the positive influence of Offutt upon Lincoln were William E. Barton, *Life of Abraham Lincoln*, 1:167-68; Henry C. Whitney, *Lincoln, the Citizen* (New York, 1907), 86, and William H. Townsend, *Lincoln and the Bluegrass*, 44.

## **\$25 REWARD!**

**E**SCAPED from the Jail in Knox county; state of Indiana, on the 13th inst. a man by the name of Denton Offutt: supposed to be between thirty and thirty-five years of age, about six feet high, dark complected, black hair; is very talkative and wishes to pass for a gentleman; one of his upper fore teeth is out. He will probably make his way to the state of South Carolina or Georgia. The above reward will be given if he is secured in any jail without this state, or delivered to me in Vincennes.

**JOHN PURCELL, Sh'ff. K.C.**

**Dec. 15th, 1834—49—1f**

Denton Offutt, The Wanted Man

credit: *Western Sun* [Vincennes, Indiana], December 27, 1834

remained in the upper Midwest region for some time afterward, as the next report of his whereabouts places him at Vincennes, Indiana, in December 1834. Knox County sheriff John Purcell placed a notice in the *Western Sun* offering a twenty-five-dollar reward for the capture of Denton Offutt, who had escaped from jail on the thirteenth of the month. The reward would be paid out to any person who was able to deliver the fugitive to the sheriff or to secure him in any Indiana jail. This advertisement provides the only known physical description of Offutt, who was reported to be about six feet tall, with black

hair and a dark complexion, “very talkative and wishes to pass for a gentleman.”<sup>21</sup> The exact nature of Offutt’s offense cannot now be determined, but it most likely involved debts he was unable to pay. Despite later detractors who described him as a “con man,” there is no evidence to suggest that Offutt ever deliberately set out to swindle anyone. Instead, it appears that Offutt was simply a well-intentioned dreamer who often naively made great plans beyond his ability to achieve and who could sometimes persuade others to invest in his harebrained schemes.

Offutt apparently never again traveled to the upper Midwest, where he had left scores of angry creditors behind. Soon after his jailbreak, he returned home to his family in Kentucky. He spent the next five years training horses and driving them to out-of-state markets for his brothers, Otha and Sam, each of whom owned a farm in the Bluegrass region. In 1840, by his own recollection, Denton embarked upon a career as a professional horse trainer and soon became well known through the region. Unlike many prominent trainers of the era, Offutt was not concerned primarily with conditioning racehorses for the track, but he worked with horses of any sort: draft horses, carriage horses, saddle horses, stock horses, and hunters, as well. His distinct specialty was to tame “unbroken” horses so that they could be safely handled and ridden. These included young horses which had yet to be saddled, formerly free-roaming feral horses which had had no previous human contact, and older horses which, from ill-treatment or bad disposition, were vicious or otherwise unmanageable. In the autumn of 1841, Offutt submitted a short exposition of his philosophy and methods as a letter to the *Spirit of the Times*, the leading sporting magazine of the day. In this essay, he revealed some of the basic methods that in later years he endeavored to guard as trade secrets. “My secret for Taming Vicious Horses is gentleness and patience,” he began, “which removes fear and gives the animal confidence in man.”<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> *Vincennes (Ind.) Western Sun and General Advertiser*, December 27, 1834.

<sup>22</sup> Townsend, *Lincoln and the Bluegrass*, 150-53; Denton Offutt, “To People a Warning Against Swindlers in the Teaching of the Art of Taming Horses Selling a Book,” *Spirit of*

Offutt's methods recognized that horses were not mere dumb brutes but sensitive and intelligent creatures, possessed of needs, desires, dislikes, and fears. Horses are genetically programmed to flee from danger when possible, and to fight when they cannot run. For a horse, the human world is filled with strange sights, sounds, and smells, and that which is unfamiliar is best treated as potentially dangerous. Through an approach that combines a soothing voice and gentle handling, Offutt believed, the horse can be conditioned to trust the trainer. "Rubbing a horse in the face will cause him to present his head to you, and talking kindly to him will attract his attention," he wrote. "I suppose in some horses it is important to whisper to them . . . you may use any word you please, but be constant in your tone of voice." Through gradual introduction and repetition, accompanied by gentle handling and reassurance, a horse can be brought to calmly accept that which once was strange or even frightening, such as blankets, saddles, or even gunfire.<sup>23</sup>

The methods described in his 1841 letter to the *Spirit of the Times* were set out more fully in a pamphlet, published during the following year, titled *Denton Offutt's Method of Gentling Horses, and Curing Their Diseases*. This pamphlet was not copyrighted until 1846, but was advertised throughout the United States by a handbill printed in Washington, D.C., in 1843, which contained endorsements from numerous horsemen in Kentucky and elsewhere in the country. In 1848, his pamphlet was enlarged to a full-scale volume, *A New and Complete System of Teaching the Horse on Phrenological Principles*. In a handbill printed in Lexington in April 1853, Offutt solicited subscriptions for a greatly expanded treatment of his methods, noting that "The work will be published as soon as a sufficient number of subscribers have been obtained to justify it, and on a large clear print, and well bound in cloth . . . offered to subscribers at the moderate price of \$5." Copies of this notice were published in a number of agricultural journals. The volume was published in March of the following year

*the Times*, June 25, 1859, 230 (entire article appears on page 230); Denton Offutt, "Secret for Taming Vicious Horses, Etc.," *Spirit of the Times* September 18, 1841, 343.

<sup>23</sup> Offutt, "Taming Vicious Horses," 343.

under the rather intriguing title, *The Educated Horse*.<sup>24</sup>

Offutt was himself barely literate as can be seen by his later letters to Abraham Lincoln and a letter published verbatim in the *Spirit of the Times* in 1859, which lacked punctuation and were so filled with bizarre spelling and grammatical errors as to be nearly incoherent.<sup>25</sup> He obviously must have had considerable assistance in the preparation of these manuscripts, although the identity of the ghostwriter is unknown. A memorable chapter from *The Educated Horse*, titled "Dialogue between Man and Horse," presents the perspective of the horse and is intended to lead readers into considering how their actions may be perceived by a different species.

*Man* I wish to put my hands on your face, and come near you.

*Horse* If so, you must let me see that you will not hurt me, nor will have anything about you that will, nor anything that smells badly. I am a stranger to you; all that will offend any of the five senses, I will be compelled to guard against, and those senses must have the proof that you will not hurt me, before I will allow them to be on me.

*Man* I wish to put my hands all over you.

*H* This you may do, by commencing at the face. Commence rubbing on the face, and repeat it; then pass down the neck, first as slight as possible, and as I become used to it, rub the harder. Remember always to rub the way the hair lies smooth. My tail is, when I play, to be held up high; as my pride and beauty, you must be careful in handling it. But after you raise it, be sure to repeat it, and raise it and put it down several times, until it goes up quietly. It becomes habituated by use.

<sup>24</sup> Denton Offutt, "Best and Cheapest Book on the Management of Horses, Mules, Etc.," handbill, Library of Congress, Printed Ephemera Collection, portfolio 197, folder 34; Denton Offutt, *Denton Offutt's Method of Gentling Horses, and Curing Their Diseases* (Lexington, 1846); Offutt, *New and Complete System*; Denton Offutt, *The Educated Horse: Teaching Horses and Other Animals to Obey at Word, Sign, or Signal, To Work or Ride; Also, the Breeding of Animals, and Discovery in Animal Physiology, and the Improvement of Domestic Animals* (Washington, D.C., 1854); "Discoveries in Animal Physiology," *The Valley Farmer* [St. Louis, Mo.], April 1853, 144.

<sup>25</sup> "The Original Horse Tamer," *Spirit of the Times*, June 25, 1859, 234.



*Man* Then the more I rub you, and repeat it, the quieter you get?

*H.* It is so with all beasts.

The dialogue continues for some length, and is quite remarkable in its understanding of equine psychology.<sup>26</sup>

Advertisements such as the 1843 and 1853 handbills were not intended to place Offutt's book in the hands of the general public but to promote the man himself and to gain publicity, pupils, and patrons. Offutt had come to realize that his methods were a marketable product and that it might be of greater financial benefit to impart his secrets for a fee to a select group of students than to give them away freely by unrestricted publication. Accordingly, his books were made available only to his pupils and others he trusted. A notation on the flyleaf of the 1846 pamphlet reads, "Persons having received instructions of me, and one of these books, are expected not to divulge the secrets or lend the book out of their families." In a preface to the 1848 edition, Offutt instructed his students to "Place this book among your private papers, or in some place where others will not get it . . . If you lose or destroy one I hope you will not call on me for another, for those who are not careful of a few things are not deserving of many." Recipients of *The Educated Horse* were required to sign a lengthy pledge of confidentiality, bound by law and their personal honor to keep his secrets and to pay a financial penalty should they violate the agreement. Offutt retained a copy of the pledge with the signatures of all his students recorded thereon:

We, the undersigned, have each of us purchased of Mr. Denton Offutt a copy of his book in relation to educated horses, laws of mind and physiology and diseases of animals, which he has disposed of to us on the express condition that all its contents are to be kept

<sup>26</sup> Denton Offutt to Abraham Lincoln, September 7, 1859, and February 11, 1861, available at *Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress*, Manuscript Division (Washington, D.C., American Memory Project [2000-2002] <http://memory.loc.gov/ammen/index.html>, accessed August 16, 2009; Offutt, "To People a Warning"; Offutt, *The Educated Horse*, 37-46.

secret from all other persons, with certain exceptions hereinafter mentioned, and under a specified penalty.

The exceptions were limited to “a son or daughter of the paternal family” and to servants caring for horses, who might be provided with simple instructions, but not the book itself.<sup>27</sup>

By 1857, Offutt had taken up residence in Tennessee. Testimonials from his handbills and other sources indicate that he made tours through many of the southern states, including the Carolinas, Virginia, Mississippi, and Texas, where he demonstrated his ability to tame even the most bad-tempered and cantankerous horses. Writing in 1873 to Lincoln biographer William H. Herndon, Maryland physician James Hall recalled seeing Offutt in Baltimore during the 1850s,

advertising himself in the city papers, as a veterinary Surgeon, & horse tamer, proposing to have a secret to whisper in the horse’s ear, or a secret manner of whispering in his ear, which he could communicate to others, & by which the most refractory & vicious horses could be gentled & controlled. For this secret, he charged five dollars, binding the recipient by oath not to divulge it. I knew several persons, young fancy horsemen, who paid for the trick. Offutt advertised himself not only through the press, but he appeared in the streets on horse back & on foot in plain citizens dress of black, but with a broad sash across his right shoulder of various colored ribbon, crossed on his left hip under a large rosetta of like material, rendering his appearance most ludicrously conspicuous.<sup>28</sup>

His old friend Abraham Lincoln gained national attention during the 1856 presidential election when Lincoln was nearly chosen as the vice-presidential nominee to run with John C. Fremont, the first candidate of the newly organized Republican Party. Failing to secure the nomination, Lincoln spent some time campaigning for the party and then returned to his law practice in Springfield with his partner, William Herndon. A young man from the New Salem

<sup>27</sup> Offutt, *Method of Gentling Horses*, front matter; Offutt, *New and Complete System*, front matter; Busbey, “Denton Offutt and his Book” (quote).

<sup>28</sup> James Hall to William H. Herndon, September 17, 1873, *Herndon’s Informants*, 580-81.

area, Tom McNeely, came into his office one morning in August or September 1857. McNeely, who had heard of Denton Offutt from his father, had met and introduced himself to Offutt in Mississippi where the horse-tamer was giving an exhibition in the spring of 1857. According to McNeely's recollection:

When I told Offutt that I resided at Petersburg, Illinois, on the very edge of New Salem, and had frequently seen Mr. Lincoln, he lost his interest in his crowd and the horses. We had a long talk about Lincoln and the old settlers, but Mr. Lincoln was the center of Offutt's thought and conversation. Offutt had not seen anyone who knew Mr. Lincoln for about twenty-four years. He had heard something of Mr. Lincoln in politics during the Fremont campaign of the preceding year. He said that after leaving Lincoln at New Salem he had gone South and taken up the business of treating wild and fractious horses and had followed it.

As the crowd of spectators grew restless over this prolonged conversation, and called for the horse-tamer to resume his demonstration, Offutt, learning that McNeely planned to return to Illinois soon, gave him a message to pass along to Lincoln for him, should the opportunity present itself.<sup>29</sup>

McNeely told Lincoln of meeting Offutt and gave him his regards, but was rather hesitant to repeat Offutt's message verbatim. Lincoln seemed quite pleased to hear of Offutt, being instantly transported in his memories to the old days in New Salem. At last, encouraged by William Turney, clerk of the Illinois Supreme Court who was also present in the room, McNeely finally delivered Offutt's message. "He told me to say to you," McNeely said, with some embarrassment, "tell Lincoln to quit his damned politics and go into some honest business, like taming horses." Lincoln laughed out loud upon hearing this. "That sounds like Offutt" he said, and from that day on,

<sup>29</sup> Walter B. Stevens, *A Reporter's Lincoln*, ed. Michael Burlingame (1916; repr., Lincoln, Neb., 1998), 190- 91 (quote)191. The "interview" is a letter to Stevens of January 25, 1909, is in the collections of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library in Springfield, Illinois. Townsend (*Lincoln and the Bluegrass*, 243) and Reep (*Lincoln at New Salem*, 98) both place this incident in 1859, but McNeely, interviewed by Stevens, stated that he met Offutt in 1857, went back to Illinois in May, and met with Lincoln in August or September.

whenever Lincoln met McNeely, he referred to Offutt's message and laughed again.<sup>30</sup>

Grateful clients provided Offutt with numerous testimonials and accolades, which he had made up into advertisements such as the handbills of 1843 and 1853, and another printed in February 1859. The latter included a recommendation given Offutt a decade before from the noted Kentucky statesman Henry Clay, who wrote:

Ashland, Ky., Oct. 17, 1849

The bearer hereof, Mr. Denton Offutt, of Kentucky, being about to travel in other parts of the United States, and perhaps in Europe, I take great pleasure in recommending him as a person of uncommon skill in the treatment of horses and domestic animals, especially in training, breaking, and curing them of diseases.

Such is the extraordinary effect of his system in the management of the horse, that he will, in a very short time, render the wildest animal gentle and docile, insomuch that he will subject it to his easy control and direction. Mr. Offutt has been many years engaged in the study and practice of his remarkable method of dealing with the horse, and has given many satisfactory evidences of his great success.

H. Clay

It would, however, be more than a decade before Offutt traveled to Europe, and then not under the best of circumstances.<sup>31</sup>

In addition to his clients for his services as a trainer, Offutt be-

<sup>30</sup> Stevens, *A Reporter's Lincoln*, 192.

<sup>31</sup> Offutt, "Best and Cheapest Book"; Denton Offutt, "Phrenology & Physiology of Animals," handbill included in September 7, 1859, letter to Lincoln, *Abraham Papers at the Library of Congress*. The Henry Clay endorsement was also reprinted in "The Horse-Tamers in Court: Mr. Offutt's Suit Against Mr. Rarey," *New York Times*, February 5, 1861. The address heading Clay's letter, "Ashland," does not refer to the city of Ashland, Kentucky, but to Clay's estate, located near Lexington. Offutt continued to use Clay's testimonial for the rest of his life. For the handbill of 1843, see Library of Congress, Printed Ephemera Collection, portfolio 197, folder 34, titled "The Best and Cheapest Book"; for handbill of 1853, see "Discoveries in Animal Physiology," *Valley Farmer*, April 1853, 144; for the handbill of 1859, entitled "Phrenology & Physiology of Animals," see Offutt to Lincoln, September 7, 1859, *Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress*.

gan taking on pupils as early as 1840. “The perfect art of training horses,” he wrote in his execrable prose to the *Spirit of the Times* in 1859, “sens 1840 which I commens teaching it ther has now som Ten or more Teachers of Art At that time 42 to 1848 in Cincinnati Ohio.”<sup>32</sup> His handbill of 1843 stated “Other persons can be taught the same Management, as many of his pupils are equally as successful as himself.” When Hamilton Busbey, editor of the New York–based sporting journal *Turf, Field and Farm*, visited Keene Richards at his Georgetown estate in October 1877, Richards showed him a copy of *The Educated Horse*, which bore a publication date of 1854. This was probably not the first, nor the only, copy of Offutt’s book that Richards possessed. In conversation with Busbey, Richards recalled his tutelage under Offutt as among his “earliest memories.” This suggests that he learned the “gentle” methods of horse training and management as a teenager. Richards would have been thirteen years old in the summer of 1841, and very likely he began his training with Offutt at about this time and was thus among his first pupils.<sup>33</sup>

A list of Offutt’s pupils would include not just young boys and horse breeders but successful men in a variety of professions. Among the men who completed a course of instruction and received copies of his book, who signed the pledge of confidentiality never to reveal Offutt’s secrets, were Sam Houston, U.S. senator from Texas (1846-59) and later governor of the state (1859-61); Thomas J. Rusk, also a senator from Texas (1846-57); John Minor Botts, three-term U.S. representative from Virginia (1839-43, 1847-49); and John S. Rarey, who at the time of his first acquaintance with Offutt was a little-known horse trainer from Ohio.<sup>34</sup>

Born on December 6, 1827, to a prosperous farm family in Franklin County, Ohio, John Rarey demonstrated a remarkable affinity for horses as he grew up and, while yet in his teens, developed a local

<sup>32</sup> Offutt, “To People a Warning.”

<sup>33</sup> Offutt, “To People a Warning”; Offutt, “Best and Cheapest Book”; Busbey, “Denton Offutt and His Book.”

<sup>34</sup> “Horse-Tamers in Court”; “Rarey Compelled to Look After His Laurels,” *Daily Milwaukee (Wis.) Press and News*, February 8, 1861, 1.

reputation as an accomplished horse trainer. As Keene Richards later recalled, Rarey came to Georgetown in 1850 with a traveling circus, with which he was probably employed as a horse handler. When the circus moved on, Rarey remained in Georgetown to study with Offutt, and in due time “graduated” and received his copy of Offutt’s book. He then returned to Ohio, where his reputation continued to grow as he took on many more clients and began to instruct others in his methods. In 1855, Rarey traveled to Texas and spent several months there helping to capture and tame the wild mustangs of the prairie.<sup>35</sup>

In 1851, he published a book, *The Modern Art of Taming Wild Horses*. The book, which was written with greater literary skill than Offutt’s work, was by no means plagiarized from Offutt, but it described essentially the same principles and methods, working in harmony with the horse’s natural instincts and using gradual familiarization to promote acceptance of objects and situations. Like Offutt, Rarey referred to these methods as the “gentling” of horses. In his book, Rarey gave no credit to Offutt for these methods and, in fact, made no mention at all of his former mentor. Like Offutt, Rarey bound his pupils to a pledge of confidentiality in regard to his methods. Rarey was a more aggressive promoter than Offutt; his book was first published in Columbus, Ohio, and during the next three years was reprinted in several editions across the country. Later, after he had achieved considerable fame in England during his visit there from 1857 to 1860, Rarey’s book was published in London, and, in translation, in Paris and Copenhagen. Rarey released his students from their secrecy pledge after his book was published in England.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Thomas B. Thorpe, “Rarey, the Horse Tamer,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, April 1861, 616-18; Sara L. Brown, “Rarey, the Horse’s Master and Friend,” *Ohio Archaeological and Historical Quarterly* 25 (1916): 488-91; Busbey, “Denton Offutt and His Book.”

<sup>36</sup> John S. Rarey, *The Modern Art of Taming Wild Horses* (Columbus, Ohio, 1856). Rarey’s practice of requiring a pledge of secrecy is noted in the preface to an 1858 edition published in Columbus. A complete publication history for Rarey’s works, including pirate editions, can be found in Robert W. Henderson, *Early American Sport: A Checklist of Books by American and Foreign Authors Published in America Prior to 1860, Including Sporting Songs* (Rutherford, N.J., 1977), 204-9.

Despite the publication of his book, prior to 1858 Rarey was still not well known outside Ohio, nor was he financially successful. According to Dennis Magner, who interviewed many persons who had known Rarey, “he traveled alone on foot from town to town, carrying a satchel and meeting with but indifferent success. His wages were \$3.00 and he was ready to teach one or more at a time, as he had opportunity, at this rate.” Rarey decided to pursue fame and fortune by taking his methods to Europe. He secured a letter of introduction from Ohio governor Salmon P. Chase and traveled to Toronto, where he gave an exhibition before Sir Edmund Head, the governor-general of Canada, and a group of army officers. They were impressed by his demonstration, and provided him with endorsements and letters of introduction to prominent men in England. Before leaving Canada, Rarey formed a partnership with Rollin A. Goodenough, a Toronto merchant and amateur horse-breeder, described as a “sharp, hard-fisted New Englander,” who accompanied him abroad and acted as his manager and promoter in return for a share of the profits.<sup>37</sup>

Rarey and Goodenough arrived at Liverpool on November 29, 1857, bearing letters of introduction to Sir Charles York of the Horse Guards of London and to Sir Richard Airy, quartermaster general. In short order, Rarey received an invitation from Queen Victoria to exhibit his skills, and in two performances at Buckingham Palace in January 1858 quite enthralled the royal family and court. Shortly after entertaining the queen, Rarey capitalized upon the attendant publicity and acclaim by opening an office at Tattersall's (near Hyde Park Corner in what was then the outskirts of London), promising to begin teaching his methods as soon as five hundred subscriptions had been received. More than two thousand persons quickly signed up, each depositing ten guineas (about fifty dollars) to learn his system. On March 2, the *London Morning Post* challenged Rarey to attempt to tame the most vicious horse then known in the kingdom,

<sup>37</sup> Dennis Magner, *Facts for Horse Owners: A Pictorial Encyclopedia of Practical Instruction* (Battle Creek, Mich., 1894), 349, and *The Art of Taming and Educating the Horse* (Battle Creek, Mich., 1886), 378-79; Rarey, *Modern Art* (1858), 15; Brown, “Rarey, the Horse's Master and Friend,” 491.

an animal known as Cruiser. So savage was Cruiser's reputation that for the past three years he had worn a heavy iron muzzle and was kept in a brick stall. It was alleged that he had bitten an iron bar in half and torn bricks out of the walls of his stable with his teeth; he had also been known to "often lean against the side of his stall and scream and kick as if insane." Cruiser's owner, wishing to breed him, had been contemplating blinding the horse to make him more approachable. Over a period of about two weeks, Rarey transformed the homicidal beast into a horse allegedly as gentle as a kitten, and after subsequently taming a zebra at the London Zoo, there no longer remained any doubt as to his abilities.<sup>38</sup>



John S. Rarey Tames Cruiser  
credit: Harper's New Monthly Magazine, April 1861

<sup>38</sup> Thorpe, "Rarey, the Horse-Tamer," 615-22; Brown, "Rarey, the Horse's Master and Friend" 491-99, 503-25; "The American Horse-Tamer," *London Times*, January 25 and 29, 1858; "Mr. Rarey, the Horse-Tamer," *London Times*, April 9, 1858.



Rarey gave his first class for subscribers on March 21 at the Riding School of the Duke of Wellington in the Knightsbridge area of London; the list of participants read like a Who's Who of British aristocracy, including not only lords and ladies but earls, viscounts, marquises and the odd admiral or member of Parliament. Classes were held several times a week, at first hosted by the duke and later moved to the Round-House, an establishment on Kennerton Street leased by Rarey. Later in the spring, the Ohio horse-tamer began the first of his public "lectures" or demonstrations. Successful beyond their wildest dreams, in August Rarey and his manager quarreled over the division of profits, and the irate Goodenough took his share and returned to Canada. After Goodenough's departure, Rarey took his show across the English Channel, where he was feasted and feted by the courts of Europe.<sup>39</sup>

Fame and fortune, however, had so far eluded Offutt, despite his own efforts at promotion. In February 1854 he had attended a meeting of the United States Agricultural Society in Washington, D.C., where he introduced a resolution for the appointment of a committee on animal physiology, and for "the general improvement in all respects of domestic animals." Colonel Charles B. Calvert of Maryland seconded this motion and provided testimony as to Offutt's ability in regard to horses, which he had recently witnessed at the Maryland State Fair in Baltimore. Whether through "mesmerism, or magnetism," the colonel recalled, Offutt had transformed an animal well known for its vicious nature "almost instantaneously" to "gentleness and tractability." The motion was referred to the committee of the society, which later reported that Offutt "possessed wonderful powers over untamed animals," but they "had not been able to understand enough of the plan to report favorably in recommendation."<sup>40</sup>

Offutt made several determined efforts to promote his unique methods and obtain sponsorship from government at both state and

<sup>39</sup> *London Times*, March 22, April 22, November 15, 1858; Brown, "Rarey," 514-18.

<sup>40</sup> "United States Agricultural Society," *New England Farmer*, April 1854, 178; "United States Agricultural Society," *Horticultural Review and Botanical Magazine*, 4 (1854): 196.

federal levels. While in New Orleans on December 31, 1850, Offutt wrote to the governor of Texas, offering, for an unspecified financial consideration, to improve the various breeds of livestock in the state, horses, mules, cows, hogs, and sheep, using a superior breeding system he claimed to have discovered. He requested the governor to place his request before the Texas legislature and enclosed a printed copy of a similar petition he had recently submitted to the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Kentucky.<sup>41</sup>

In the Kentucky petition, Offutt asserted that he had devoted many years of his life to the study of domesticated animals. "By patient investigation and numberless experiments," read the document, "he has become perfectly master of the secret laws that control their action; and that those animals so essential to the various wants of human life, can be greatly improved in all their physical adaptations, their social affections and mental habitudes, whereby they can be rendered perfectly submissive to the will of man." Bad temperament and vicious habits, he observed, were caused by want of proper knowledge and kind feeling in their owners and keepers. Offutt, being "anxious to do all the good within his limited power for the advancement of science, the welfare of his fellow-man, and the prosperity of this great and noble Commonwealth," offered to teach this "perfect science" if "a reasonable and just compensation" were to be granted to him out of the public treasury. Offutt may well have submitted petitions to the legislatures of other states in addition to Texas and Kentucky, but, given the fantastic and unsubstantiated nature of his claims, apparently no action was taken in any case.

Offutt had no more success in gaining the support of the United States government, which he petitioned on three separate occasions, offering to disclose the particulars of his system of improving "the breed of all domestic animals" for an appropriate financial compensation. These petitions were all virtually identical in wording to that sent to the General Assembly of Kentucky in 1850. His first petition

<sup>41</sup> "Petition of Denton Offutt, Relative to Improving the Breed of Domestic Livestock." Records, Governor Peter H. Bell, box 301-20, folder 16, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, Texas.

to Congress was introduced in the Senate on December 9, 1850, by Senator Joseph R. Underwood of Kentucky; his second, by Senator Sam Houston of Texas on March 13, 1854, and his final attempt, which included an offer to provide copies of his book for five dollars each, was introduced in the House on December 10, 1858, by Representative Humphrey Marshall of Kentucky. This latter petition would have been in reference to the new edition of his book, *The Educated Horse*, which had just been published. In each case, the petitions were referred to the Committee on Agriculture, and eventually tabled without further action. Although Offutt without question possessed a genuine gift for handling horses, he simply could not resist grandiose exaggeration and so those who had not witnessed his skills at firsthand could not take him seriously. In all his efforts to profit from his abilities, Offutt truly was his own worst enemy.<sup>42</sup>

By the time of his latest petition to Congress, Denton Offutt had been hearing of Rarey's English celebrity with increasing anger, no doubt fueled by reports of the enormous sums garnered by his former pupil. He had never released Rarey from his pledge of secrecy, and so he considered Rarey's public performances to be a serious breach of contract. Finally, he had enough, and in mid-April 1859 boarded a ship for England, armed with a bundle of endorsements, intending to denounce Rarey as a fraud and villain. The *Spirit of the Times* took note of his departure, referring to him as "the original horse-tamer of the United States," whose purpose in traveling abroad was to "teach his art of taming vicious animals to the nobility and gentry of Albion, and he claims that he can do all that was ever accomplished by Rarey, and something more."<sup>43</sup>

Unfortunately for Offutt's ambitions, the British public gave little attention to his presence, viewing him as just one more of the many

<sup>42</sup> *Senate Journal*, 31<sup>st</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., December 9, 1850, 27; 33<sup>rd</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., March 13, 1854, 251; May 2, 1854, 357; *House Journal*, 35<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., December 10, 1858, 57; January 4, 1858, 131; Senate Committee on Agriculture, 33<sup>rd</sup> Cong. 1<sup>st</sup> sess., S. Rept. 253, May 2, 1854, concerning the memorial of Denton Offutt; Denton Offutt, "To the Hon. the Senate and House of Representatives," 1858 petition, original copy in archives of the Library Company of Philadelphia.

<sup>43</sup> "Look Out, England!" *Spirit of the Times*, April 23, 1859, 26.

imitators who had sprouted there in the wake of Rarey's fame. Perhaps the only man in England who recognized his true worth was Keene Richards, then in the country to purchase thoroughbred horses for his stable in Georgetown. Having arrived when the Rarey mania was at its height, Richards may have attended one of Rarey's performances out of curiosity. He acknowledged that Rarey's system was of value, but certainly took every opportunity to set the record straight where his former teacher was concerned.<sup>44</sup>

At the height of the excitement about Rarey, Richard Ten Broeck came to visit Keene Richards in his rooms in London. Ten Broeck was a personal friend of Richards, the former manager of the Metairie Race Course in New Orleans, and had generated quite a bit of excitement among American horsemen when, in 1856, he became the first American to bring native-bred thoroughbreds across the Atlantic to pit against English horses. Ten Broeck asked Keene Richards what he thought about the idea of taking lessons from the celebrated horse-trainer Rarey. As Richards later recalled,

I frankly told him that I thought the system which Rarey taught would prove of great assistance to him in the management of his stable, but added that it was not necessary for him to go to Rarey for instruction. I then explained to him what I knew of Rarey and Offutt, and wound up by placing Offutt's book in his hands. He took it home with him, and he afterwards informed me that he sat up all night reading it. He also pronounced it a wonderful book.

If Offutt and Richards were able to renew their acquaintance while in England, the reunion was brief, since Richards departed not long after Offutt's arrival.<sup>45</sup>

Denton Offutt became increasingly embittered by the indifference of his reception, even as John Rarey continued to be lionized in the British press and was invited to visit the estates of

<sup>44</sup> Busbey, "Denton Offutt and His Book."

<sup>45</sup> Busbey, "Denton Offutt and His Book"; Richard Ten Broeck, "Some Personal Reminiscences, Incidents and Anecdotes," *Spirit of the Times* December 27, 1890, 872-75; John Dizikes, *Sportsmen and Gamesmen* (Boston, 1981), 141-57.

the nobility. So invisible was Offutt during his stay in England that, only three years later, one British commentator, reacting to the news of the Offutt–Rarey lawsuit across the Atlantic, wrote, “Does Denton Offutt exist? or is he the vain offspring of some penny-a-liner’s brain? Has he vanished into thin air? We can make nothing of him, we admit. We can get no information upon the subject.”<sup>46</sup>

While in England, Offutt dashed off several angry letters to the *Spirit of the Times* which were not published, but in mid-June a missive was received whose contents were just too juicy to resist. Well aware of his literary deficiencies, Offutt included a request for the correction of his text, but the editors of the *Spirit* reproduced the letter verbatim with all its grotesque spelling and structure. Offutt’s letter, titled “To People a Warning: Against Swindlers in the Teaching of Art of Training Horses Selling a Book,” was a lengthy and nearly undecipherable diatribe against Rarey. He declared that he had begun teaching and published a book on his methods long before Rarey, and that “sens that time he has taken all that is worth any thing in his Book is min and he not smart enough has changed and in every leson maid it wors.” Rarey was guilty of “Robing my copy right,” Offutt wrote, and reported that he had confronted Rarey at the state fair in Richmond, Virginia, with an offer to compare their respective books. “He wold not show it I compard it to many all say he is copped from mind I publickly declared him a Rober to his fase and Advertst him with the bove, Rober, swindler and Ignorant.”<sup>47</sup>

Why the editors of the *Spirit* chose to embarrass Offutt in this manner is rather puzzling. Despite the publication of Rarey’s book in several American editions, he was still relatively unknown in this country prior to visiting England since, like Offutt, his book was

<sup>46</sup> “The Biter Bitten,” *Baily’s Magazine*, January 1862, 97.

<sup>47</sup> Offutt, “To People a Warning,” *Spirit of the Times*, June 25, 1859, 234. There was no reciprocal agreement between the United and Great Britain regarding copyrights at the time. Offutt, therefore, had no legal standing to bring suit against Rarey regarding any works published in Great Britain. Rarey had, however, published editions of his *Art of Taming Horses* (allegedly plagiarized from Offutt) in the United States beginning in 1856. These could be attacked as possible violations of copyright law. See Siva Vaidhyanathan, *Copyrights and Copywrongs: The Rise of Intellectual Property and How It Threatens Creativity* (New York, 2001), 34-55.

made available only to his students who were bound by a pledge of secrecy. Possibly, the editors were reacting to the frenzy of adulation stirred up among their English cousins, expecting to ride a similar wave of Rarey-worship in this country. A glib commentary upon Offutt's letter was published in the same issue of the *Spirit*, in which the editors acknowledged him to be the "original" horse tamer, but at the same time rather smugly insisted, "We do not care to involve ourselves in the controversy." After making a number of sarcastic jokes concerning Offutt's tortured prose, they concluded that, beneath all this "brilliancy," was the "hardest kind of horse sense." Certainly, Denton Offutt never again contributed any item to the *Spirit of the Times*.<sup>48</sup>

Offutt returned to the United States shortly after his letter was published, reaching New York on August 13, 1859, aboard the steamer *Liverpool*. From a hotel in Paris, Kentucky, on September 7, he wrote to Lincoln asking for his assistance in collecting a debt of fifty dollars owed to him for demonstrations made at the 1858 Agricultural Fair in Richmond, Virginia, offering to split it equally if Lincoln could collect. Rarey, in the meantime, left England again in autumn 1859 and gave a series of lectures in Paris, France. Having a great desire to see Arabian horses in their native land, Rarey continued on to Rome, and thence to Alexandria, Egypt, visiting Cairo briefly, and he finally ended up in Jerusalem. From Jerusalem, Rarey made an excursion to the Dead Sea, and northward up the Jordan Valley to Damascus. He concluded his Eastern tour with a visit to Constantinople, and returned to England in spring 1860. Rarey gave a farewell lecture on October 27 at the Crystal Palace in London to a crowd estimated at eight thousand and took passage to New York, accompanied by the now-famous horse Cruiser. Arriving at New York on December 8, he received a hero's welcome, and then hurried off to Ohio to spend the Christmas season at home.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>48</sup> "The Original Horse Tamer."

<sup>49</sup> Passenger list for the *Liverpool*, August 13, 1859, *Passenger Lists of Vessels Arriving at New York, New York, 1820-1897*, NARA microfilm publication 27, roll 194, Records of the U.S. Customs Service, Record Group 36, National Archives, Washington, D.C.; Denton Offutt to

At the beginning of the new year, Rarey was back in New York, beginning a series of lectures before overflow crowds for an admission of fifty cents to a dollar a person. His first performance was on January 5 at Niblos Garden, a theater on Broadway, to a crowd of approximately 3,200 persons. He gave four more lectures at the Niblos and then changed venue on January 23 to the Brooklyn Academy of Music. A “typical” Rarey lecture consisted of, first, the introduction of Cruiser, who stood quietly while a long discourse was delivered upon the habits and tendencies of horses in general and of the specific history of this once-so-wicked creature. Next, a relatively mild-mannered horse was led in and put through various paces to display Rarey’s complete control. After this, two Shetland ponies were brought onto the stage, the smaller carried in the arms of an enormous African American assistant and the other, larger, pony led in on a halter. While the audience admired these miniature horses, Rarey would explain “how and why” they became so small. The eagerly awaited climax came after the Shetlands were taken away, the introduction of a true hellion, “some terrible and outrageous horse, whose vile tendencies, evil disposition and fiendish propensities are vouched for in a letter by some consummate wag.” For the performance at the Academy on January 23, the *New York Times* reporter noted that the “last fight was a good one.”

The contest with this animal was terrific. His heels were in all directions three minutes out of every four; his mouth was savage, his tail was very whiskey; his mane was stiff, and his eye was like that of a maniac. For ten minutes he and his opponent struggled, twisted, fought, kicked, squealed, snorted, stamped, ran, wheeled, and wrestled. His physique was very powerful—his limbs were unbendable except for their own purposes, and his intelligence was keen and quick. His time had come—he was conquered, he yielded,

Abraham Lincoln, September 7, 1859, *Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress*; Brown, “Rarey, the Horse’s Master and Friend,” 521-27; “Rarey the Horse-Tamer in New York,” *The World*, December 10, 1860.

and with one wild outcry, he laid himself down, while RAREY, with tumbled hair, saw-dusted clothes, and an agitated voice, announced a second performance for Friday evening at 7-1/2 o'clock.<sup>50</sup>

Denton Offutt was still hopping mad over the whole Rarey situation, and now that his nemesis was back in America, he took legal action against his former pupil for breach of contract. In a suit filed with the New York Supreme Court in late January 1861, Offutt asserted that he was the originator of the system of horse-training publicized by John S. Rarey. The plaintiff's petition stated that "previous to the year 1850, [Offutt] had discovered and perfected a new and before that time unknown method of taming unruly or wild horses, mules and other animals." His secret method was made known to others only upon payment of a stipulated fee and a pledge of secrecy secured by a bond providing a penalty of fifty dollars for each violation of the agreement. "On or about the 16th day of September 1850 John S. Rarey . . . applied to Plaintiff to be instructed in his misterious and wonderful art of Taming horses mules &c" and executed and delivered his bond to Offutt. Offutt charged that "said Rarey has from the date of said bond up to the present time constantly and daily violated said agreement by imparting the said secret to Twenty thousand persons in Europe and America." As a further cause of action, Rarey, who had been provided with a copy of Offutt's book under the same bond and pledge of secrecy, "soon thereafter published what he claimed to be a book containing his Rarey's System of Horse Training, of which the said Rarey was the discoverer, but that in truth and fact said book . . . contained in detail, substance and effect the said System of Plaintiff for taming horses." Offutt asked for a judgment against Rarey in the amount of one hundred thousand dollars in damages, with Rarey to be enjoined from selling any more copies of his book or from making any public demonstra-

<sup>50</sup> "Mr. Rarey's First Lecture," *New York Times*, January 5, 1861; "The Horse-Tamer in Brooklyn," *New York Times*, January 24, 1861. Additional notices and reviews of Rarey's initial New York lectures are found in the *Times* for January 7, 9, 14, 26, 28, and February 1, 4, 1861; see Brown, "Rarey, the Horses's Master and Friend," 521-27.



tions of horse-taming. In a carefully worded card placed in the *New York Herald* in response to these allegations from “a person from the South,” Rarey asserted that a lifetime of “assiduous labor and study” had gone into the development of his own skills. “I have been constantly beset by [those] claiming to be the originators of the system I teach and to have taught me all I know about horse-taming,” Rarey stated, but he did not specifically deny having been Offutt’s pupil.<sup>51</sup>

On Saturday, February 2, Rarey gave his “farewell performance” at the Academy. Five thousand persons paid a dollar apiece, and, as advertised, half of the proceeds were donated to the New York Asylum for Widows and Orphans. During the performance, something new was added, the exhibition of two Arabian horses, a stallion and a colt, belonging to U.S. senator William H. Seward. While on vacation in the Holy Land in 1859, Seward had expressed an interest in acquiring Arabians to Ayoub Bey Trabulsky, a high-ranking Syrian official, as a personal favor that would also be to the agricultural benefit of the United States. When Rarey attempted to apply his methods to the stallion, the result was both “interesting and amusing. The horse seemed to understand his intentions, and more in fun than in anger, resisted all attempts to entrap him.” Once Rarey had succeeded taking the horse off its feet, it “betrayed singular intelligence—placed his forelegs about RAREY’S neck—drew him up close to him, while with his nose he fondled and caressed him.” At the conclusion of the show, Rarey announced his immediate departure for Philadelphia and other cities of the seaboard.<sup>52</sup>

Aware of Rarey’s intention to leave the state, Offutt’s attorney, Edward W. Packard, filed a motion on February 1 to require Rarey to give testimony before the court prior to his departure. In a letter to the *Times*, Packard disclosed that he had in his possession cop-

<sup>51</sup> *Denton Offutt vs. John S. Rarey*, New York Supreme Court, index no. LJ1863O24, Division of Old Records, New York County Clerk, New York, N.Y.; *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 31, 1861; “The Secret of Horse-taming—Rarey’s Case Before the Court,” *New York Times*, February 2, 1861; “The Great Rarey Suit,” *Wilkes’ Spirit of the Times*, February 9, 1861, 365.

<sup>52</sup> “Rarey’s Farewell,” *New York Times*, February 4, 1861; “These Arabian Horses,” *New York Times*, August 6, 1860; *Transactions of the New York State Agricultural Society for the Year 1860* (New York, 1861), 13-15

ies of both Offutt's and Rarey's books, as well as the original bond signed by Rarey and would welcome a public examination of the evidence to determine which of the two men was the originator of the horse-taming system practiced by Rarey. On the fifth, the Court denied Offutt's motion to examine Rarey before his departure from New York on the grounds that, as Rarey had not yet made answer, there was as yet no issue in the court between the parties.<sup>53</sup>

On February 11, writing from Baton Rouge, Louisiana, Offutt contacted Lincoln again, apparently hoping that his friend, now the president of the United States, might be able to give him some assistance. "My prosperity I have lost," he wrote, and he noted that "I have sued John S Rain [*sic*], of Ohio at N York for \$100,000 Dollars he has large mounts." If the courts ruled against him, he hoped to obtain an appointment as "Physiologist of this State," which would allow him to remain in a warm climate. Should this not be possible, perhaps Lincoln could find him a position in his administration? "I hope you think me worthy of the Trust of office. I hope you will give me one Patten office or the office of Agriculteral Department or the Commisary for Purchais of Horses Mules Beef for Army or Mail agent I can do more for the Advansment of Selecting good Animals all others And more to Improve the breads of Animals." Lincoln's reply is lost to us, but, as much as he might wish to help his old friend, he had more sense than to place Offutt in any position of responsibility. Offutt's suit worked slowly through the court system; two years after the action was filed, the complaint was dismissed on April 18, 1863.<sup>54</sup>

Other than indirectly through the existence of the New York legal action, Denton Offutt disappears from the historical record after the spring of 1861. The simplest explanation is that Offutt may have died during 1862, and this may, in fact, be the primary reason for

<sup>53</sup> "The Horse-Tamers in Court—Mr. Offutt's Suit Against Mr. Rarey," *New York Times*, February 5, 1861; "Decision in the Rarey Horse-Taming Case," *ibid.*, February 5, 1861.

<sup>54</sup> Denton Offutt to Abraham Lincoln, February 11, 1861, *Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress*; "Decisions: Supreme Court," *New York Times*, May 13, 1862; *Denton Offutt vs. John S. Rarey*, New York Supreme Court.

the termination of the suit. Lincoln biographer William Townsend notes that Offutt was “old, broken financially, and in the late stages of consumption [pulmonary tuberculosis]” in February 1861 when he penned his last letter to Abraham Lincoln. Townsend did not provide a citation for this information, and confirmation could not be found through other sources, save that in Offutt’s previous letter to Lincoln in September 1859, Offutt mentioned that “I am in good helth but lean recovering from Cough.” Offutt appears to have spent most of his last years as a resident of Louisiana, apparently seeking a warmer climate for his health. Hamilton Busbey, editor of *Turf, Field and Farm*, wrote in 1878 that “Denton Offutt has been in his grave a good many years,” suggesting a date of death at least a decade prior to his observation.<sup>55</sup>

Rarey, as always with the legendary Cruiser as his opening act, continued to give performances to sellout crowds in the northern states throughout 1861 and 1862. Using a significant part of his newly acquired wealth, Rarey built a fine mansion on the site of the house in which he had been born, on the farm near Groveport, Ohio, not far from Columbus. On December 12, 1862, at the request of Major General Henry W. Halleck, Rarey traveled to Virginia to evaluate the condition of the horses and mules of the Army of the Potomac, there finding himself in the middle of the battle of Fredericksburg. Under the circumstances, he later reported to the general, he was unable to assess the general management of army horses, but “I had the opportunity to see them on duty.”<sup>56</sup>

For the last three years of the war, Rarey remained closer to home and performed only occasionally, but in the summer of 1865 he gave what proved to be his final farewell at Zanesville, Ohio. The local paper announced his imminent arrival with “Rarey is Coming! The Great Innovator and World Renowned Tamer of Wild and Vicious Horses!” Soon afterward, in December, Rarey suffered a severe stroke which left him partially paralyzed, and from which he

<sup>55</sup> Townsend, *Lincoln and the Bluegrass*, 263; Busbey, “Denton Offutt and His Book.”

<sup>56</sup> Brown, “Rarey, the Horse’s Master and Friend,” 539; *New York Times*, December 24, 1862.

never fully recovered. On October 5, 1866, while visiting friends in Cleveland in the company of his niece, he went outside for a walk and returned shortly, complaining of a pain in his head. His niece assisted him in taking a seat, and after a few moments he said, "I am dying." Less than two hours later, John Solomon Rarey was dead at the age of thirty-eight; his remains were conveyed to his home at Groveport. Cruiser survived him by nine years, dying at last in his twenty-third year on July 6, 1875, at the Rarey farm.<sup>57</sup>

When Hamilton Busbey visited Keene Richards at Blue Grass Park in Georgetown, Kentucky, in October 1877, dinner-table conversation turned to the subject of horse-taming, and he became "deeply interested" in what he was told about Denton Offutt. Richards, one of the most influential horsemen in Kentucky, claimed Offutt was "the founder of the horse-taming school." Richards agreed to loan his copy of *The Educated Horse* to Busbey if it would be used "in doing justice to a former citizen of Georgetown." Busbey took it with him back to New York, and was so impressed by its contents that he mentioned the book to Robert Bonner, editor of the *New York Ledger* and one of the richest men in America. Bonner was an expert horseman with a sizable stable of trotting-horses who had taken lessons from John S. Rarey. Bonner took the book with him when he left the offices of the *Spirit of the Times*, and on the next day, Busbey received a note that stated, "There are some very interesting things in Offutt's book—some things that are entirely new to me and well worth copying. The 'Dialogue between Man and Horse' contains the substance of all that Rarey ever taught. He evidently based his system on that." According to Busbey, Bonner kept the book for ten days, and read and reread it numerous times.<sup>58</sup>

Hamilton Busbey took Robert Bonner at his word, also believing that Offutt's book was "worth copying." On January 4, 1878, he announced the forthcoming serialization of *The Educated Horse* in the

<sup>57</sup> *Zanesville (Ohio) Daily Courier*, June 28, 1865; "General News," *New York Times*, December 20, 1865; "Sudden Death of Prof. J. S. Rarey," *New York Times*, October 8, 1866.

<sup>58</sup> Busbey, "Denton Offutt and His Book"; E. J. Edwards, "Robert Bonner," *American Monthly Review of Reviews*, August 1899, 161-65.

pages of *Turf, Field, and Farm*, noting that whereas Offutt's students had been bound by a pledge of confidentiality, "The time has come for the veil of secrecy to be torn aside. The claims of Denton Offutt to the foundership of the horse-taming school can be established in no other way." The first installment appeared in the January 11, 1878, issue of *Turf, Field, and Farm*<sup>59</sup> The byline was attributed to Denton Offutt of Georgetown, Kentucky, "the preceptor of Rarey." Offutt, who had been unable to establish his claim during his lifetime, was at last vindicated.

A brief postscript is in order. The successor to Offutt and Rarey as America's most famous tamer of "wild and vicious horses" was Dennis Magner, who came to national attention shortly after the Civil War. Magner's book, *The Art of Taming and Educating the Horse* (1886) is considered to be one of the best of the numerous horse-training books published in the nineteenth century. Unlike Rarey, Magner openly acknowledged the debt that he and all other trainers of the "gentling" approach owed to Denton Offutt. Magner had a similar flair for the dramatic and was every bit as accomplished a performer as Rarey, giving demonstrations across the country and taking on pupils. While giving homage to Offutt, Magner considered Rarey to be a fraud and did not hesitate to say so in print. "[Rarey's] great pretended secret was the same as that known and practiced long before him by Fancher, Offutt, and others," Magner wrote, "and was obtained by him of Offutt. He was simply a bold pretender." He had observed that horses "tamed" by Rarey had a disturbing tendency to revert to a bad disposition after some time, and so undertook some rather extensive research to determine the truth of the matter.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>59</sup> The book was serialized in thirteen installments in consecutive issues from January through March 1878.

<sup>60</sup> Robert M. Miller and Rick Lamb, *The Revolution in Horsemanship, and What it Means to Mankind* (Guilford, Conn., 2005), 200-203; Magner, *Facts for Horse-Owners: A Pictorial Encyclopedia of Practical Instructions* (Battle Creek, Mich., 1894), 34. Dennis Magner (ca. 1837-19??) came to America from Ireland at the age of fourteen. He was first employed as a carriage maker in New York and Pennsylvania. He began working with horses and published his book on horse training in 1862. He retired because of poor health in 1878 and settled in Berks County, Pennsylvania, and later at a sanitarium in Michigan. See Magner, *Facts for Horse Owners*, 521-53 and the 1880 U.S. census. Little is known about O. H. P. Fancher who wrote a book on horse

Magner took the opportunity to witness one of Rarey's last performances at Pittsburgh in the early summer of 1865, having given a series of demonstrations of his own methods during the previous week. Rarey's technique was much as he had expected, a method already well-known: the use of a strap attached to a fore-leg, which is used to bring the horse to its knees and then forced to lie down, after which "handled and caressed . . . until submissive to control." Three years later, when in Columbus, Ohio, Magner made a side trip to the Rarey farm and spent several hours studying the aging Cruiser, who had again become unmanageable after the death of Rarey. In 1872, while giving demonstrations in New York, Magner unexpectedly made the acquaintance of Rollin A. Goodenough, who was then living in the city and had come to the exhibition. Upon his return to North America in late 1859, Rarey's former promoter came to New York and used his share of the profits to establish the Goodenough Horse-Shoe Company, manufacturing a patented new style of shoe which was applied cold and better designed to fit a horse's foot. The Goodenough horseshoe was widely adopted and enjoyed several decades of popularity in the United States and abroad.<sup>61</sup>

Magner asked Goodenough whether Rarey had, indeed, subdued Cruiser using the methods described, and was told there was little truth in the published reports. He had been with Rarey at the time, and it had taken the two men two days to subdue the horse by putting him on the ground and leaving him to struggle bound and helpless until he was exhausted: "his fore-legs tied up . . . a collar put on, and his hind legs tied forward to it." Magner again interviewed Goodenough in 1881 and was given more details on Rarey's career, obtaining a signed statement attesting to the truth of the account. Magner observed that any method aimed at lowering the strength of the horse, "bleeding, starving, depriving of sleep, etc." may temporarily subdue the animal for a time, but "after the strength is regained, the character is liable to become as bad as before." With

training entitled *The American Farrier and Horse-Trainer* (1852).

<sup>61</sup> Magner, *Art of Taming the Horse*, 368-77; "The Goodenough Method of Shoeing Horses," *London Times*, December 10, 1868.

such evidence, and given that Rarey's public performances were often described in the press as violent struggles or "fights," Rarey's actual methods, despite his claims, were apparently anything but "gentle" and bore little resemblance to the natural horsemanship practiced by Offutt. In 1869, one British writer commented that Rarey was "a lion tamer, not a horse educator, as his dupes discovered." Offutt's results, in contrast, were attested to by men such as Henry Clay, who had observed his efforts over a period of years.<sup>62</sup>

Neither Goodenough nor Magner, of course, can be considered strictly impartial in their accounts. Goodenough parted company with Rarey, not on the best of terms, and returned to North America while his former partner remained in England to glory in public acclaim. Goodenough's claims that he was himself as much responsible for Rarey's greatest triumphs may contain little truth. Magner, on the other hand, was a tireless self-promoter, and any thing that might diminish the lingering shadow of Rarey could only work to his own benefit and position as America's newest celebrity horse-tamer. Fraud or not, Rarey's most significant legacy—and through him, his teacher Denton Offutt—was a heightened sensitivity by the public on both sides of the Atlantic for animal welfare in general and horses in particular. Support for societies for the prevention of cruelty to animals was strengthened as a consequence of the great publicity attendant upon Rarey, and cavalry horses in the military received better treatment.

The origin and development of the philosophy and methods of natural horsemanship into its modern form was not a simple linear process descending from a single innovator, but has been part of a larger social movement toward more benign treatment of animals. There were those before Offutt who advocated and practiced humane treatment of horses, and since Offutt's time there have been many persons who have independently developed empathetic systems of horse training. There are today many different systems of

<sup>62</sup> Magner, *Art of Taming the Horse*, 368-82; Anon., "The Goodenough Method of Shoeing Horses," *Country Gentleman's Magazine*, February 1869, 170-74. See Magner, *Art of Taming the Horse*, 368-77, for the interviews.

natural horsemanship that vary in details but share common themes, foremost among them a rejection of methods involving fear and pain. There can be little doubt that Denton Offutt had a significant influence on the American horsemen of his era. Although modern practitioners of natural horsemanship express a similar philosophy and use many of the methods he developed, the man himself is seldom acknowledged and is largely forgotten. Offutt's historical legacy is that he was the first person, on either side of the Atlantic, to formulate and publish a system of training based upon principles of natural horsemanship. For this accomplishment, he has truly earned the title of America's first "horse whisperer."<sup>63</sup>

<sup>63</sup> Examples of modern systems of natural horsemanship developed and described by their practitioners include: Buck Brannigan, *Believe: A Horseman's Journey* (Guilford, Conn., 2004); Bill Dorrance and Leslie Desmond, *True Horsemanship Through Feel* (Guilford, Conn., 2001); Klaus F. Hempfling, *Dancing With Horses* (North Pomfret, Vt., 2001); John Lyons, *Lyons On Horses* (New York, 2009); Mark Rashid, *Considering The Horse* (Boulder, Colo., 1993); Robert M. Miller and Richard A. Lamb, *Revolution in Horsemanship* (Guilford, Conn., 2005); Monty Roberts, *The Man Who Listens To Horses* (New York, 1997).