

# Tiburon's Famous Horse

BLACKIE'S LAST STAND LIVES ON

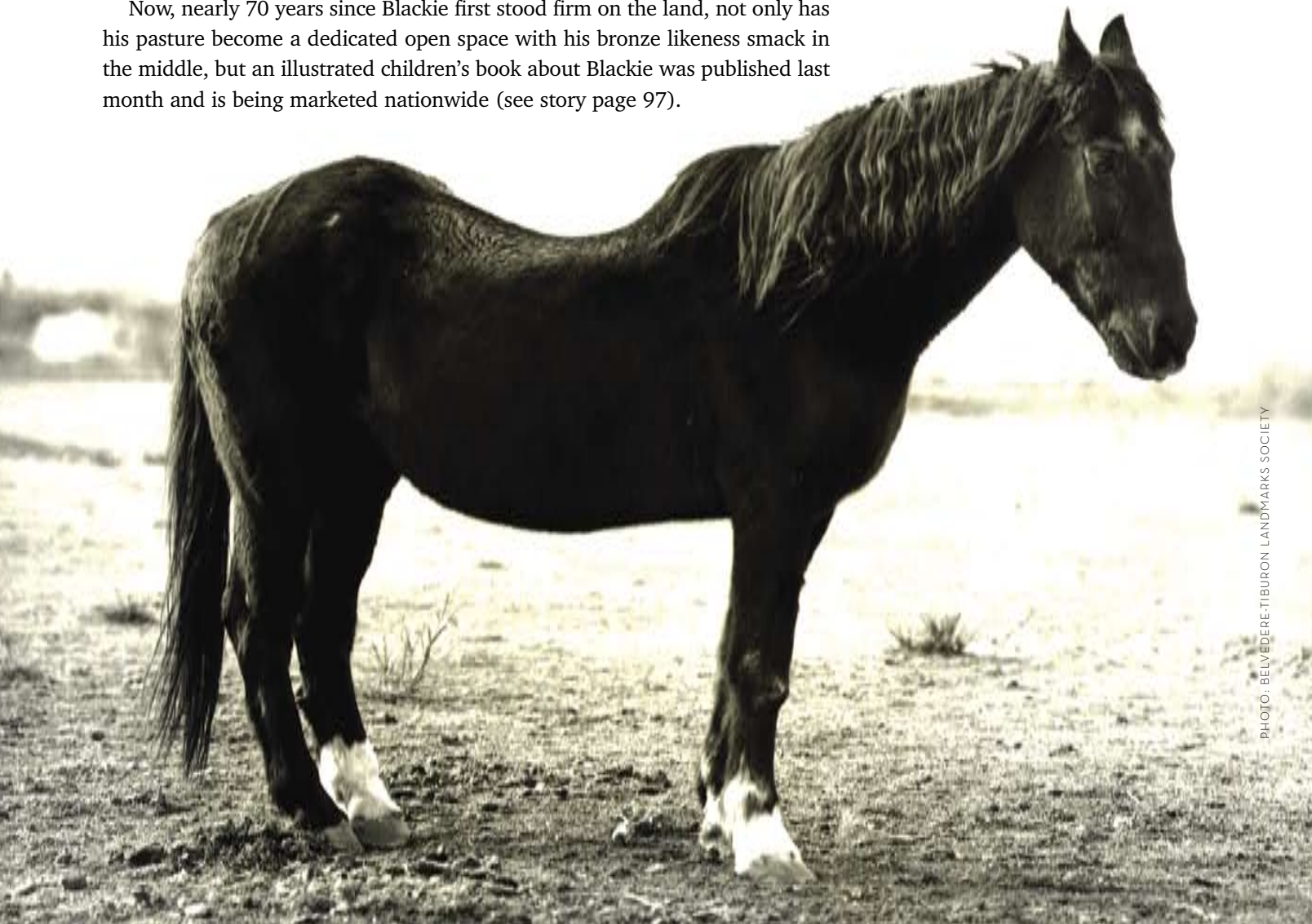
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BY JIM WOOD

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**N**o one knows exactly when the habit started. But history buffs peg 1938 as the year a bizarre, black-as-coal swayback horse was put out to graze on an open field near the corner of Tiburon Boulevard and Trestle Glen Road. It was sometime after that, according to former Tiburon mayor Larry Smith, that a habit became a tradition. “Somehow, you just couldn’t drive by that field,” he says, “without looking over to see if Blackie was there.”

Now, nearly 70 years since Blackie first stood firm on the land, not only has his pasture become a dedicated open space with his bronze likeness smack in the middle, but an illustrated children’s book about Blackie was published last month and is being marketed nationwide (see story page 97).




Years ago, there was a real-life Blackie that Marin kids could relate to. “In the 1950s, I can remember walking down from Strawberry Point Elementary School and feeding Blackie carrots, apples and sugar cubes,” Strawberry resident Jo Ann Haseltine says. She remembers Blackie’s two most prominent features: “He was really swaybacked and really sweet. And I knew he was the closest I’d ever come to owning a horse.” Back then a train regularly passed on the way to downtown Tiburon, and “seeing Blackie in the afternoon and hearing the train’s whistle at night are two of my fondest memories,” she adds.

It’s somewhat hazy when Blackie was born—somewhere in Kansas and sometime in 1926. “As best we can tell,” says Piper Berger, archivist for the Belvedere-Tiburon Landmarks Society, “his early years were spent as a cavalry horse taking part in summer expeditions from the Presidio to Yosemite National Park, then as a cutting horse in rodeos down around Salinas.” Retired at 12, Blackie was brought to Marin in 1938 by Anthony Connell, an entrepreneur intent on developing oyster farms in the Richardson Bay tidelands, directly off the plot of land known today as Blackie’s Pasture.

And it was there that Blackie stood—rarely moving, by all accounts—for the next 28 years (he lived to age 40, rare for a horse), being fed by youngsters and automatically drawing a glance from all who drove past. “When there was no longer a horse standing there for everyone to look at, there was a real sadness in the community,” Haseltine says. Blackie died on Feb. 27, 1966, and he now lies, appropriately, under a simple cross and memorial plaque in the pasture that bears his name.

In 1969, Sam Shapero, Tiburon’s first town treasurer and a man of some personal means,



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took steps to keep Blackie's memory alive. "He bought a third of Connell's land," says Smith, the former mayor, "with the proviso that the Tiburon Peninsula Foundation had to also buy a third, and the town of Tiburon had to convince Caltrans to give up the third it owned." But that was only a start. "The land was a mud hole in winter, a dust bowl in summer," says Smith, "and it was way too expensive to do anything about it."

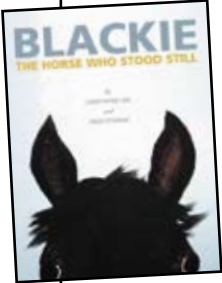
The railroad disappeared and 25 years passed before Smith—no longer Tiburon's mayor, and retired from his advertising firm—organized "Blackie's Brigade." The group's goal was simple: to transform the nearly four acres of land into a pasture befitting the legendary swaybacked horse. "Getting proper drainage, adequate parking, farmlike fencing, and attractive trees and shrubs," Smith says, "took a combination of community volunteers, city crews, donations and various grants."

Next came the question, How can there be a Blackie's Pasture without a Blackie? After a brief search, Blackie's Brigade volunteers found Hillsborough sculptor Albert Guibara, whose initial estimate for a bronze life-size likeness was \$65,000. " 'Ouch,' was our initial reaction," Smith says, "but after the family of Tiburon's first mayor, Gordon Strawbridge, said \$35,000 was all they had for a memorial, Guibara graciously agreed that would be his fee."

That wasn't the end of the matter. "There was controversy over where Blackie should be placed," says Smith. "And once a center-of-the-pasture location was finalized, the issue of positioning arose. A horsewoman on the parks commission insisted that 'a horse would never stand with his rear end into the wind,' and so that too was resolved." Finally, with a big-as-life, bronze Blackie properly in place, and a 1995 dedication ceremony but hours away, a loyal Tiburon volunteer located three fresh horse turds and artistically placed them near Blackie's hindquarters, out of the prevailing winds.

## Blackie, the Horse Who Stood Still

This 36-page book may become a children's classic



Finally, a children's book that celebrates the virtues of standing still. The protagonist is Blackie, a horse born in Kansas who saw duty in the U.S. Cavalry (reportedly posing for tourists) before becoming a swaybacked fixture in a Tiburon pasture. *Blackie, the Horse Who Stood Still* is by Christopher Cerf and Paige Peterson, illustrated by Peterson. These names may sound familiar. Cerf, an originator of PBS's hugely successful *Sesame Street*, is the son of the '50s humorist Bennett Cerf; Marin-born Peterson, who fed carrots and apples to the real-life Blackie, is the daughter of former Belvedere mayor Connie Wiley. Friends for years, Cerf and Peterson brought the concept of their book to the Tiburon Peninsula Foundation, which, in conjunction with Welcome Books and Random House, wound up publishing *Blackie*.

Using rhythmic verse, the book traces the good fortune—from Kansas to California, Yosemite to Tiburon, swayback to community icon—that befell Blackie as a result of his stationary stance. Along the way come lessons of patience, observation, and determination. *Blackie, the Horse Who Stood Still* (\$18.95) is available at Book Passage in Corte Madera and the Book Depot in Mill Valley as well as all major bookstores and Amazon.com. In a tribute to Blackie's Pasture and its life-size bronze statue, the closing lines read:

*Well, the statue was built, and if you stop and stare  
Out at Blackie's old pasture, you'll feel he's still there...  
He fought against change; now his field never will...  
Thanks to Blackie, the wonderful horse who stood still*

*Well, the statue was built, and if you stop and stare*

*Out at Blackie's old pasture, you'll feel he's still there...*

*He fought against change; now his field never will...*

*Thanks to Blackie, the wonderful horse who stood still*

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