

Stable Views--Voices and Stories from the Thoroughbred Racetrack
Archie Green Fellows Project, 2012-2013
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**Lorna Chavez interview, 2012-07-17 : interview conducted by Ellen E.
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INTERVIEW LOG

Interview with Lorna Chavez, The Horseshoe Restaurant, Nelson Avenue, Saratoga Springs, NY. July 17, 2012 Log

00:15 Lorna Chavez introduces herself.

00:27 Explains what a day looks like for an exercise rider. Lorna works with about eight horses a day. She is a free-lance rider that goes from barn to barn. She works for four different trainers: Glenn DiSanto, Eddie Miller, Bill Higgins, Desi Farrell. She bicycles from barn to barn and presently she works only on the Grandstand Side of the Saratoga race track. [Saratoga has two tracks, the main track and the Oklahoma Training Track. The two tracks are separated by Union Avenue and have their own barns and dormitory housing.] Lorna comes in May to Saratoga and then she winters in Florida.

02:49 She was a steeplechase rider in England and came over in 1996 to work at a farm. She was a professional at home (in England). After six months she began to ride thoroughbreds in Delaware and she chose to remain in this country and rode throughout the country as a freelancer. She had to decide whether she would go back to England or stay in Florida and she decided to stay. She purchased a house in Saratoga and has remained.

04:30 Lorna rides "flat horses" and no longer rides steeplechase horses. She is in Saratoga until November the 1st. She talks about the problems of home ownership vs renting a house.

05:25 Her father had a riding school in England so shes always been around horses. At 18 years old she wanted to be a professional show jumper. She was hired by a racehorse trainer and rode her first race at 19 years old. She wanted to be a show jumper and was working to earn enough to buy a horse. She won a race right off and has never stopped racing.

07:04 She talks about the difficulties of racing. She came here because girls are not accepted as riders in England.

07:37 She came to race horses. She said that when you work at a farm here you do all of the jobs – bathing, exercising.

08:15 Talks about the first day of working in the USA. She was very dressed in riding attire and they handed her a pitchfork and broom to muck out eight stalls. Housing conditions were bad.

09:25 She was at the farm for a year and then moved on as she had met people by then. 09:45 She talked about riding as a freelancer. She gets a wage and it depends upon how many horses she rides. She can go wherever she wants. 10:35 She describes a typical day. It starts at 4:15 and goes until 10:00 a.m. During the meet she does the pony work, taking the jockeys to the gate. 11:20 She rides the same sequence of horses every day, more or less. The track is best at 5:30 a.m. and at 8:45, when it is first conditioned. The fast work outs are around those times.

She tries to change out the horses some so they are trained on different track surfaces. She also works around whether or not the horses are nervous. From riding, she goes to look after her own pony (a loaner she treats as her own) and then goes home and showers and is back for the first race at 12:30 p.m.

13:20 She talks about the long hours.

13:46 I ask about dress when riding. Lornas 'colors' are black and pink when she rides. She is color coordinated. Some just ride whatever they want. When she worked for Jonathan Sheppard she had a black hat with a green lightning bolt. She changed to a black cap with a pink playboy bunny and a pink vest. She talks about others – a man who had a boat life vest on instead of a riding vest.

16:00 I ask her about language and vocabulary. "Sets" is the time she goes out; two horses go together. A "Set List" is the list of horses to go out and at what times. 17:02 She talks about scheduling the riding.

17:25 Freelancers are most likely to get the difficult mounts. She often gets tough or nervous horses. Typically, horses spend a lot of time in the stall and get 25 minutes of exercise and about 30 minutes of walking. Being in the stall for most of the day is hard on the horses and they can get excited to get out.

18:36 She likes freelancing because it is different all the time.

19:15 Working in New York is no different than everywhere else. Same hours, except in May and June at Saratoga--the track stays open longer on the Oklahoma Track side. 19:58 The environment has changed.

They've changed the rules to limit the hours of work. Grooms like to take their time but now work has to be done only during certain times. The regimen has changed and people don't have the skills that they did. In England, one attends racing school or grooming school but here anyone can show up to work, even if they don't have the knowledge. It's not as much one-on-one as it was. In New York they are tough on being legal and they are tough on Latino workers. Latino workers don't cause trouble but they are being targeted. Current immigration rules have made it hard on the workers and have caused labor issues for the trainers.

24:00 I asked about "Being on the clock." She says you can only work 40 hours/week and that is hard to do because the schedule is erratic. The labor department has limited the hours.

24:58 There is workman's comp as long as you are receiving a paycheck. The New York Racing Association offers the workman's comp and there is a backstretch hospital. As a freelancer, she doesn't have health insurance. 26:10 A good rider is someone who loves the horses. She talks about losing your nerve. She says that some people ride too long. One has to have a feeling for a horse. She talks about the love of riding. (27:41 The waitress at the Horseshoe breaks in).

28:05 Lorna says that she makes a living. She gets \$15.00/mount and her afternoon work at the racetrack helps with the wages. She has some rental income. She talks about saving money and not having a lot of needs.

28:30 We discuss betting (and not betting) on the horses.

31:20 In England, the racetrack world is very male chauvinistic. She talks about womens success on horses – female riders do well. In England she was the first professional, licensed steeplechase jockey. There are a lot of female riders in Saratoga. The trainers accept it. She talks about women being quieter, which some horses appreciate. There aren't that many female grooms. The grooms live on the backside which isn't very nice.

34:02 When one starts working at the race track, one begins as a "hot-walker" – call the horses out, walk the horses around, hold them for a bath, wash the bandages, clean out the feed tubs. If you progress to "groom" than you tack the horse – brush it and take care of it. You can move from there to an assistant trainer where you're overseeing everything and then you marry one and you become the trainer's wife and thats as far as you go. If you want to ride as a jockey you have to go to jockey school. Not that many people go from rider to jockey. Lorna learned in England and learned on the farm. Most jockeys come from Peru or somewhere else and they come as jockeys. Here there aren't that many trainers that apprentice and give boys a first try as a jockey. There are riders who want to be jockeys but there are not that many who move up. Jockeys come ready made. (In other countries, they receive jockey training on the farms.) There might be a difference with old school vs. now. Alan Jerkens (the chief) is old school and he has some riders who have moved from exercise rider to jockey. Most jockeys aren't American.

36:54 Horses used to be bigger and have more stamina. Now theyre bred for speed and need to have fast racetracks. Lorna says that she hates the stop watch. Do they really have to have speed? Horses don't last. In England, they might not start the horse until it's five years old. They give

it time to mature. Here they start as soon as they can. The horse doesn't have any time and it's rushed unless it's injured. The bigger trainers have big turn-over. Smaller trainers try to keep the horses as long as they can. If you don't do what the owner wants than he'll find another trainer. Lorna raced horses in England that were 14 years old. The only trainer that runs horses when they're 10-11 is Roger Attfield, who is English and trains in Canada. He does come to Saratoga and Lorna has known him since she was a baby.

(40:00 Lorna answers her phone).

40:10 40:44 She races horses that ship in. She talks about a horse arriving that day from England from her old trainer. That horse comes with a groom and an assistant trainer. Lorna will exercise it. It will stay in the Stakes barn, which is for horses that are just there short term stays.

42:18 In Florida, Lorna goes to Gulfstream Park. She works on a first-come, first-served basis. She rides for different people in Florida than those in Saratoga.

43:13 An outrider has to have a sprinting pony, or a quarter horse. You have to have a fast horse. Lorna has helped out doing that but she couldn't do that because she couldn't help with a hurt horse. Lorna is a pony person. An outrider just sits and waits for trouble and then catches the horse. A pony person guides the horse to the gate and waits for the next race. There are pony people in the morning – they are assistant trainers in the morning. You are like a driver. You're helping the jockey to get where theyre going. Some of the horses are too pumped up. They don't have pony people in England.

46:45 We talk about age. Lorna says that she will know when its time to stop. She's 53 and she enjoys it. She talks about retirement in an abstract way.

47:40 Lorna says it's common to lose your nerve. It's difficult out there and you have to be attentive all the time. You do get on some bad horses. Maybe she'll come across a horse right that and she'll lose her nerve. She's met people like that. Lorna's been riding since age 4 and she doesn't know what shell do if she doesn't ride. You never know what's around the corner. She talks about a friend who was trail riding and had a boy on a BMX bicycle come around a corner, slide under the horse and it fell and the rider broke her neck. You never know what will happen.

50:50 We talk about age. Fifty-three years old is considered old when you hang out with the young ones. She usually lies about her age. The average age of an exercise rider is 20s to about 35. 35 is beginning to be considered too old

52:26 End of Interview.