

The Poignant Story of Jane and Fitzrada

A Cast Off Cavalry Horse Won At Madison Square Garden

By Susan Purdy



Loudoun Hunt member Jane Pohl Rust

Longtime Loudoun Hunt members may remember Jane Pohl Rust; Huntsman Ron Johnsey recalls her as an old-school horsewoman and foxhunter with a radiant smile. Since Jane was famously modest and didn't talk about her remarkable early riding career, few knew the amazing story of Jane and her horse Fitzrada. That changed in 2008 with the publication of

“Renegade Champion, the Unlikely Rise of Fitzrada,” a book written by Jane's son Col. Richard R. Rust, along with release of a documentary feature film **“The Lady and the Outlaw Horse.”**

Their story begins in 1938, when Jane's father, Col. Herman Pohl, received orders transferring the family from Fort Belvoir, Virginia to Schofield Barracks on the island of Oahu, Hawaii. Jane was 14 years old. In those days, it was not uncommon for army bases to have stables. It was at this stable that Jane first spotted Fitzrada, a chestnut cavalry Thoroughbred who had been deemed too hot-tempered and dangerous for an army horse.

Fitzrada was eleven years old, and he had not responded well to the training he received in the army. He showed natural talent as a jumper, but when pushed to jump big fences in preparation for the 1938 Olympics, over-training soured his outlook on life and he became more and more uncooperative. This resulted in increasingly severe punishment, to the point that he became completely unmanageable.

Fitzrada was sent to the Schofield Barracks stable as a last chance at rehabilitation before being put down, hoping that he might make a competitive mount for General Dan Sultan. General Sultan did not get off to a good start with the horse, and was bucked off every time he tried to ride him. The general asked Jane if she would like to work with the horse, since he knew Jane to be a good rider who wouldn't give up easily, and he thought that Fitzrada might respond better to a female. Jane was thrilled to be given this opportunity, and slowly over the ensuing months she gained his trust and was able to ride him, in the ring and on little trail rides around the base.

In the spring of 1941, Jane's father was transferred to Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Jane decided to take Fitzrada on one last trail ride through the beautiful countryside of Oahu. She asked him to canter, and then suddenly for no apparent reason, he seized the bit and lunged forward full tilt. Jane tried everything she knew to slow him, turn him, stop him, but to no avail. Flying, she knew a set of railroad tracks was approaching, and decided their best chance of survival was to bail out, emergency dismount-style. Jane hit the ground hard, and Fitzrada continued over the tracks, hit the pavement, and crashed to the ground. They both survived this accident, ending up bleeding and bruised, but no permanent damage done.

After this incident, General Sultan decided to go ahead and destroy Fitzrada. Jane was distraught, feeling that she was somehow responsible for this final decision. She found out from one of the army wives who rode at the stable that the army sometimes sold horses, and Jane set out to persuade the army as well as her father to sell Fitzrada to her. The price was \$163.57, the government's standard price for purchasing a replacement. When the Pohl family moved to Fort Bragg, Fitzrada joined them there. It would take five years of patient handling, training, and loving care to bring him back to mental and physical health.

When Jane went off to college at Vassar, Fitzrada went with her, and it was there that they received their introduction to foxhunting, courtesy of the nearby Rombout Hunt. He was not easily controlled in the hunt field, but with the kind tolerance of the other hunt members, he became a reliable field hunter.

As Fitz became more relaxed, Jane decided to try him in the show ring, starting with the annual horse show at Vassar. He didn't do well in the hunter classes, but found his calling in the jumpers. He didn't like to be rated at all, but Jane found if she just steered him around the course, he found all the spots and jumped in great form, round through his back and knees snapped up tight. In that first jumper class at Vassar, over 4'6" fences, Fitzrada and Jane finished second behind a much more experienced horse and rider.

In 1945, after the end of WWII, Colonel Herman Pohl's new orders stationed him in Washington, D.C. He and Mrs. Pohl purchased a 23-acre farm on the west sloping face of Mount Gilead in Loudoun County, and the family moved there in August 1945. This would be Jane's home for more than 40 years.

At the time of their arrival, Jane was 21 years old, a year out of college, and intent on showing Fitzrada. She worked on the pasture's stone walls and cleaned the barn, thrilled to be living in an area where the best jumpers and hunters in the country were bred, trained, and shown. Jane couldn't compete with most of these stables in terms of money, but she and Fitzrada had grit, determination, and talent that would carry them far in spite of limited financial resources.

From 1945 until his retirement in 1950, Jane and Fitzrada competed in open jumping classes that were almost exclusively the domain of men at the time. They had great success, breaking into the upper echelons of American post-war show jumping. Their astonishing achievement, as a female owner-trainer of modest means, with her backyard horse in a male-dominated arena of professional riders and wealthy owners, helped to break down the barriers that prevented women of the time from competing in the Olympics side-by-side with men.

They won blue ribbons from the local shows at Warrenton and Fairfax, and went on to wins at Madison Square Garden and the National Capital Show at Fort Myer, Virginia. Fitzrada was the Champion jumper at the Loudoun Hunt Horse Show, winning the Master's Bowl three years in a row and retiring the trophy in 1950. Jane and Fitzrada hunted regularly for nine seasons (1941 – 1950), with Rombout Hunt, New York; Moore County Hounds, North Carolina; and Middleburg and Loudoun Hunts in Virginia.

Fitzrada's remarkable life came to an end in early September, 1952 as the result of a pasture accident in which his left hock was fractured. The *Loudoun Times Herald* printed a rare obituary for an animal, headlined “Fitzrada Dies in Retirement.” It read “Fitzrada, the little Thoroughbred jumper and hunter that has been well known in Northern Virginia for the last six years, is dead at the age of 22. He died on September 11 and was buried on his favorite spot in the pasture that he has roamed since his retirement two years ago . . . The story of Fitzrada is the story of a horse which made a girl and a girl who made a horse. Jane Pohl made headlines as a horsewoman because of the great heart of the old Army horse, and Fitz would have died an unloved Army nag had it not been for Jane.”

Today, the old Pohl homestead in Mount Gilead is the Willowcroft Winery, and visitors there can see the pasture where Fitzrada is buried, as well as his old stall which still bears his nameplate. While there, raise a glass of the excellent Fitzrada's Reward, a light red wine, in honor of Fitz and Jane.