

# On Location *At* ST. BENEDICT'S ABBEY



Located high atop a hill on the west bank of the Missouri river and nestled among the trees is St. Benedict's Abbey, one of the most serenely beautiful Gothic structures in all of Kansas. Upon taking a first glimpse of the abbey, the fortunate visitor is often met with pleasant surprise at seeing this unexpected 'sleeping giant.' The original Gothic building lies largely hidden behind the more modern , and more frequently visited Abbey Church.



THE STATELY ORIGINAL GOTHIC STRUCTURE, OVERLOOKING THE EAST LAWN AND THE RIVER. - PHOTO L. SCHMELZLE



THE ABBEY CHURCH - PHOTO FR. JEREMY HEPPLER, OSB

Several years ago, Laurie Schmelzle of Al Badia Arabian Stud in Kansas had just finished giving a guest lecture on chinchilla breeding and genetics at the Benedictine College, located on the abbey grounds in Atchison. After the lecture most of the biology class, along with the professor and the abbey's retired abbot, Abbot Owen Purcell, OSB, went down to the riverfront for lunch, followed by a tour of the abbey. During this tour Mrs. Schmelzle saw for the first time the breathtaking beauty of the east side of the abbey.

A vision not to be forgotten, Mrs. Schmelzle sent some pictures of the abbey to photographer Jerry Sparagowski, followed by a request for permission from Abbot Owen to hold a photo shoot with Arabian horses on the east lawn. Fortunately Abbot Owen was encouraging and enthusiastic about the project, allowing the planning to move forward.

Fr. James Albers, OSB, who was instrumental in orchestrating the actual photo shoot years later, provided a brief history of the abbey and its architecture:

*“One of the most magnificent buildings in the state of Kansas and the Midwestern United States, St. Benedict’s Abbey was the vision of Abbot Martin Veth, OSB. Abbot Martin was the second abbot of the community, which was founded in 1857, to serve German immigrants to the United States through education and parochial work.*

*Abbot Martin, born in 1874 in Dettelbach, Bavaria, came with his family to America in 1884 where they first settled in Buffalo, N.Y., and later that year moved to Atchison, Kansas. He was trained in theology at Sant’Anselmo in Rome, Italy, where he developed lasting friendships with several monks from his home country.*

*At the time of Abbot Martin’s election as abbot in 1921, the community had grown substantially since the second monastery was built in 1893. Abbot Martin’s vision then was to build an abbey structure that rivaled the magnificent abbeys in Europe to mirror the spiritual growth he had planned for his community. Thus he began working with the architectural firm of Brielmaier and Sons, of Milwaukee, Wisc., to develop plans for a Gothic structure that would include the new Abbey, an Abbey Church, guest house and library. The location would place the beautiful building on the river bluff 100 feet above the Missouri River with a view over the expanse of the four-mile-wide river valley. Such an imposing structure would of course require great resources, and so the abbey community decided to move forward and took on a \$300,000 loan to begin construction.*

*To celebrate the breaking of ground for construction, Abbot Martin’s good friend from his Sant’Anselmo days, Abbot Fidelis von Stotzingen, oversaw the celebration. Once abbot of Maria Laach in Germany, Abbot Fidelis was then serving as the Abbot Primate of the Benedictine order at Sant’Anselmo. Ground was broken on November 11, 1926, the Feast of St. Martin, and construction began in the spring of 1927.*

*The stone for the abbey was quarried from the local Kerford Quarries south of Atchison and was brought to the building site north of town along the river on rail cars. To get the stone to the site from the rail cars located 100 feet below, a 45-degree rail was built up the side of the river bluff. The stone was delivered up the rail to the 80 to 100 stonemasons waiting at the top of the bluff to cut and mold it for construction. Construction costs, however, did not meet the architect’s estimates and the construction of the Abbey Church, guest house and library had to be postponed. Only the first two floors of the interior were completed and additional loans had to be taken out bringing the cost of the new Abbey to \$780,000.*

*Even with this hardship, the new Abbey was blessed on August 5, 1929, with the hope that construction would resume again soon to complete the Abbey Church. However, a few months later the United States experienced what would later be called “Black Monday,” a crash of the stock market, and the onset of the Great Depression that plagued the country during the 1930s. Construction on the Abbey Church had to be put off indefinitely.*



**ST. BENEDICT’S ABBEY DURING CONSTRUCTION, 1927-29**  
(Incidentally, famed aviator Amelia Earhart’s birthplace is located just blocks from the abbey. As construction began on the new Gothic abbey in 1927, Ms. Earhart was about to be named the first female officer of the National Aeronautical Association.)



**FRONT, OR WEST SIDE OF ST. BENEDICT’S ABBEY BEFORE THE ABBEY CHURCH WAS BUILT**



**EAST SIDE OF THE ABBEY, FACING THE MISSOURI RIVER**



**AERIAL VIEW OF THE ABBEY & MISSOURI RIVER VALLEY**

*The community endured these financial struggles, always with the thought of completing the Abbey Church. So as the community approached its 100th anniversary in 1957, the decision was made to complete the church. The problem, though, was that the needs of the community and school had surpassed the size of the original 1920s plans for the church, and the art of stonemasonry necessary to construct a Gothic structure had been lost in the area. Additionally, the cost of the Gothic structure would have put too much burden on the community, which had just come out from under the weight of the financial struggles the new Abbey building and the Great Depression had placed on it. So the community decided to move forward with the building of a new Abbey Church, however, employing a modern form of architecture that used brick and machine-cut stone. This structure, designed by the Chicago-based architect, Barry Byrne, who apprenticed under Frank Lloyd Wright, was completed in time for the St. Benedict's Abbey community to celebrate its year-long centennial celebration in 1957.”*



**TOP: 1957 ABBEY CHURCH ADDITION, DESIGNED BY ARCHITECT BARRY BYRNE  
BOTTOM: ST. BENEDICT'S ABBEY WITH THE ABBEY CHURCH ADDITION**

During early discussions of the photo shoot, either in jest or in earnest, Abbot Owen mentioned that he suffered from congestive heart failure (that much is true), and said not to delay too long with the commencement of the project because he didn't expect to live to see his 80th birthday, and couldn't guarantee the availability of the abbey afterwards.

However, due to the logistics of the project, it was five more years before everything finally came together. In the summer of 2011, Mr. Sparagowski and Mr. David Botha, trainer at Michael Byatt Arabians in Texas, were both available to travel to Kansas at a time when the monastery was also available. The next steps were to select and prepare the horses that could handle the demands of an on-location shoot, and to ask some of the (younger and more agile) monks to participate as well. Graciously, they agreed!

The morning of July 25th dawned crisp, fair, and bright! The Kansas weather had agreed to cooperate, as had the horses by traveling to Atchison in the dark pre-dawn hours without incident. Mr. Sparagowski arrived first on the scene to scout out the location and take some test shots, as the horses were prepared.

The first horse brought out was Hanaa Al Badia (\*Al Adeed Al Shaqab x Shadenn), a three year old grey mare. Hanaa was selected for the shoot because she had already been trained by Mr. Botha for the US Egyptian Event, so handler and horse were well acquainted. Additionally, even though she was a 'hot' horse to handle, she was attentive and responsive under pressure. Hanaa adapted to the scene on the east lawn quickly and put on a dynamic show.

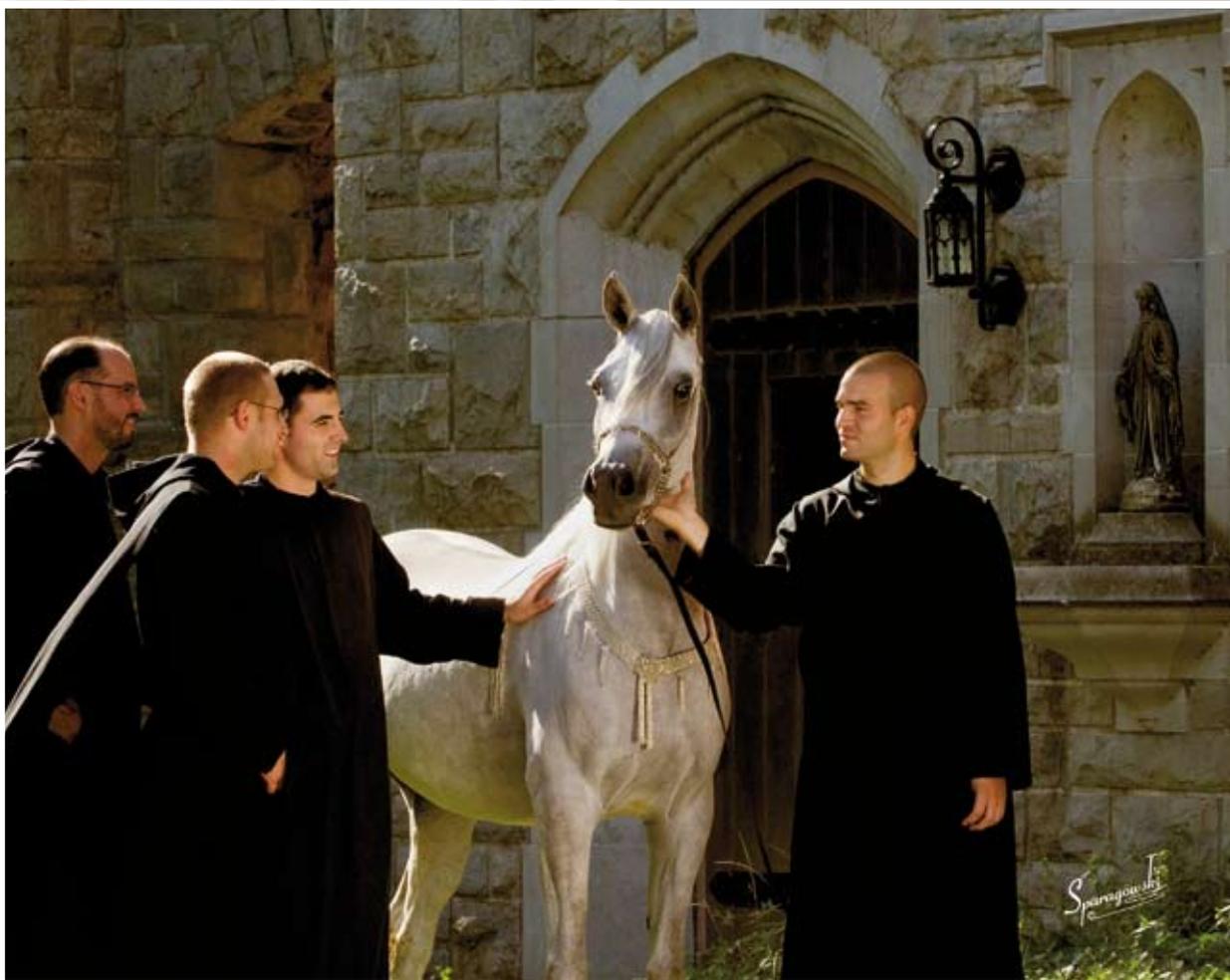
Mr. Sparagowski recounted: *"I really liked this picture (right), the mare's expression, and the movement to it. It's a vertical look. She is animated, looking right at me. The way she looked blended in with the setting. If you had a horse blowing and snorting right there, it just wouldn't fit. The most defining part of the architecture of the building, the larger arched windows, captured the feel of the monastery with this one picture."*

After Hanaa had settled in, Mr. Sparagowski decided it was time to try some shots with the monks. Since the posed shots involved people with little to no prior experience with horses, Mr. Sparagowski and Mr. Botha spent some time instructing the monks on what to do if the situation went awry.

When asked to expand on the shoot from a photographer's perspective, Mr. Sparagowski commented: *"You run into scenarios that you don't have on the farm. The most obvious one is that you are generally in a non captive area, so there are no fences containing the horse. The first concern is that the horse doesn't get away. The lawn on the east side of the abbey ends abruptly with a 100 foot plummet down to the Missouri River, and there is no knowing where and how far a loose horse will go. The other consideration is that when you are in a public place like the monastery with the college nearby, you have members of the public and non-horse people curiously watching. We have to keep control so no one gets hurt. And posing the horse with non-horsemen is something I would not have done without David there. You have four monks present who have no experience handling a difficult horse situation. It's all up to the handler. Additionally, we had to be conservative and not push the horse too hard with the props."*



LEFT: CANDID PICTURE OF DAVID BOTHA GIVING THE MONKS A SHORT INSTRUCTIONAL



Mr. Sparagowski continued: *"When you go to a beautiful place like this, you must have some element of the monastery in every picture. Otherwise, you may as well be at the farm. In these cases, the background is as important as the horse. For example, as with the Polish Ovation Sale in Poland, when Ray LaCroix took each horse out to stand it up, something in the background had to say 'Poland,' and then we could do whatever we wanted from there. The same thing was the case here. Something in the background had to say 'monastery.'"*



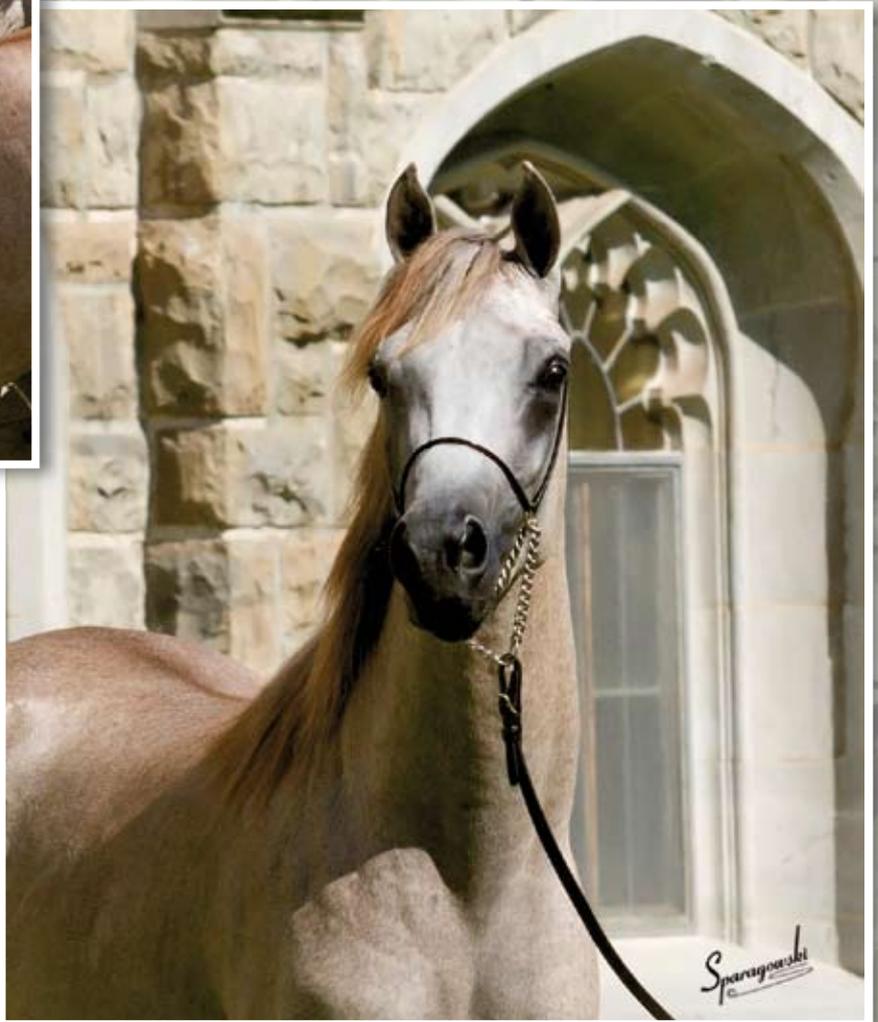
*In this picture (above), I loved the lighting. It still had the monastery's feel to it. I changed spots to make sure I had the statue. The monks were so much a part of the whole thing that they defined where we were. Otherwise, it could have been anywhere. I liked the monk's expressions, especially Brother Christopher's who was touching the mare. It really lit his eyes up and showed in his smile. I thought it was interesting that they just jumped right in there. It was like they wanted to be around the horse, and they wanted the experience. They might remember this for a long time coming. We don't think of these things because we do this all the time. We are around the horses all the time. But, I don't think there have been too many Arabian horses back where we were."*

**TOP: (L TO R) PRIOR JAMES ALBERS, OSB; BROTHER LEVEN HARTON, OSB; BROTHER CHRISTOPHER START, OSB; AND BROTHER SIMON BAKER, OSB**

The next horse photographed was the two year old colt Namir Al Nazarra (Ansata Sinan x BSA Nazarra). Although Namir didn't have the same level of show training that the mare had, he was generally easy to work with and enjoyed interacting with people. Namir especially seemed undaunted with the situation, and enjoyed his day away from the farm. This was to be Namir's last photo shoot on US soil, before embarking on another adventure. He departed shortly afterwards for his new home near the Julian Alps of Europe.



NAMIR INSIDE THE NORTHEAST VERANDA



Mr. David Botha commented on the challenges of handling horses 'on location,' while also setting the horse up to photograph well:

*"Taking pictures of horses on a site without fences and confinement is risky business. For safety a good number of people helping is always a good idea, and more is better in case a horse gets loose. Good, strong halters, leads, and chains are a necessity. Taping lead buckles to prevent them from opening in the heat of the action is important. A barn halter at hand just in case might also be a good idea as even the best equipment can break and usually at the worst moments.*

*Most horses behave differently in the strange environment. Giving horses sufficient space and starting things at low intensity and building the intensity is a good idea. Sometimes you get more with less. Getting a horse focused on something to look at might be harder, so it is important not to over stimulate a horse, and try one thing at a time.*

*It is the handler's job to make it a good experience for a horse. The handler should not be too restricting and forceful so to structure the horse too much, but to help the horse feel comfortable at the location. Happy comfortable horses transpose in the pictures."*

By the time the photo shoot was well under way, it had drawn a small crowd of observers including students, visitors to the college and abbey, and even the current abbot (Abbot Barnabas Senecal, OSB) looked in on the proceedings. But the day's events culminated when Abbot Owen, who originally made the project possible, walked out onto the lawn and happily announced to all "It's my 80th birthday!" Not only was Abbot Owen able to attend the photo shoot on a day he previously suggested might not come, but he looked very well spry enough to see his 90th too!



ABBOT OWEN  
PURCELL, OSB

Photographs by Jerry Sparagowski ([www.sparagowskiphoto.com](http://www.sparagowskiphoto.com))

Additional images provided by: Fr. Jeremy Heppler, OSB, St. Benedict's Abbey historical archives ([www.kansasmonks.org](http://www.kansasmonks.org)), and Laurie Schmelzle ([www.albadia.com](http://www.albadia.com))

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