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Kentucky comes to Clawson

By Beverly Hatcher
Staff Writer

A Clawson man is now a Kentucky colonel.

That honorary title was bestowed on Al Terwilliger, 53, who sports a colorful life, especially in the sport of horse racing.

As a young man, he acted in Broadway productions, rubbing

elbows with the likes of Andy Devine, Dan Daily, Ann Southern and Walter Brennan.

He also met an obscure actor, Ronald Reagan, who later helped in Terwilliger's campaign for the position of lieutenant governor of Michigan.

Although Terwilliger was defeated for political office, he went on to gain fame in harness racing with his safety devices for horse and rider.

Two of these inventions — a wheel disk that keeps a horse's legs out of the spokes and a fender that prevents flying mud from blinding a driver — have become mandatory racing safety devices throughout the world, said Terwilliger, who manufactures in Warren under the name Protecto Horse Equipment.

Terwilliger's latest honor of Kentucky colonel is the highest awarded by that state. Colonels are ambassadors of good will and fellowship, and Terwilliger joins an impressive list of colonels, including Lyndon B. Johnson, Winston Churchill, Bing Crosby, Red Skelton and Harland Sanders (of Kentucky Fried Chicken fame).

Though these events are memorable in Terwilliger's life, more cherished are his friendships.

Among his circle of friends is Don Currier of Belleville, a driver and trainer of horses. And like Terwilliger, Currier enjoys telling tales.

"Did he (Terwilliger) ever tell you about the time he and Mark Wamp went down to



Staff photo by Dick Hu

Al Terwilliger of Clawson, at his horse equipment business

Columbus, Ohio, to demonstrate a Protecto vest he made?" said Currier. The vest fits over the shoulders and rib cage and is worn under riding colors. It protects riders in case of an accident. Before the vest could be marketed, it had to be approved by the U.S. Trotting Association.

Currier recalled, "Al had a baseball bat to demonstrate to the association how strong the vest was. But Mark didn't have the vest on when Al struck him with the bat.

"After the blow, Mark just stood there smiling so the invention would be approved, even though he had two broken ribs."

That's friendship.

The vest ended up a big seller to skiers and such but it is too uncomfortable to wear in racing, added Currier.

Although he doesn't do much driving anymore, Terwilliger once traveled the circuit, racing mainly at fairs and in cold stakes.

He's primarily an inventor who "got into manufacturing to fulfill a need for people who were getting hurt or killed." He is married with two daughters. His wife Myra helps him at his business, he said.

Helping others through safety equipment is one reason Terwilliger was nominated for Kentucky colonel by Brooks Wells, a past chairman the U.S. Trotting Association and current president of the Kentucky Horse Racing Association.

Wells said Kentucky colonel honors are bestowed on people who have done a service. He said Terwilliger's largest contribution is his safety equipment for harness racing.