



Gloria and her imported Spanish horses compete at Walnut Hill, a highly esteemed annual carriage-driving competition in Pittsford. Because "turnout" (her outfit and her horses' gear) is so important, Gloria has more than 100 hats.

She Has It All

story and photos by Laurie Mercer

Gloria Austin could live comfortably anywhere in the world, but she chooses to spend about half the year in Upstate New York, in a modern but modest rental in Canandaigua. While it is true she attended Prince Philip's birthday jubilee, she can also be found shopping in Walmart. Family meals are often bring-a-dish-to-pass.

The former farm girl from Troupsburg is also fluent on the topic of horses of all descriptions – they've been central to her existence since childhood.

While Gloria is centered, focused, and determined, her former husband, Tom Golisano, is an exuberant soul. Together, the two created an iconic American success story, Paychex.

Today, her business success helps fund a complex and expensive undertaking – four-in-hand coach driving. She freely admits to having a competitive spirit, which today is satisfied by driving with her best friends in the "box" of a



fine coach pulled by four beautiful gray horses. A frequent passenger is Gene Serra, a retired physician, whom Gloria calls her "man friend."

After shopping for horses in the U.S., Belgium, and southern Spain, Gloria hand-selected her new team of grays from Spain. The horses are a color departure from her previous team of blacks, in part so that people would notice she had new horses.

Four-in-hand coach competitions are not for the timid or financially insecure, and so it remains a world of male exclusivity – almost. "Horses have allowed me to travel around the world and to be accepted in a primarily male culture," Gloria explains. "I recently sat at the table of the European Private Driving Club – all men – and toasted them

for accepting me and my horses and carriages into their world.”

Like so many brilliant people, Gloria Austin is something of a contradiction in terms. Recently, I had the chance to meet her and we talked about her childhood, her study of horses and the beginnings of Paychex. Here is what she told us.

You were born and raised in rural Steuben County in the Southern Tier – how did that affect your life? Do you ever visit the family farm?

I am definitely a “local girl” born in Hornell. The area is full of green grass, trees and beautiful views. I do go by the farm sometimes, but I don’t actually visit. I can see the hills and fields where I used to ride my horse, and the little gully where I played cowboys and Indians – that was the big thing then. I was a cowgirl with little pistols in my holster! Between Dale Evans (her horse was Buttermilk) and Roy Rogers (his horse was Trigger), I was never sure which one was my favorite.

I grew up on a dairy farm with a couple-hundred acres and maybe 40 cows and a garden, orchard, and fresh spring water. It was a very loving family. My father was a cattle dealer. I often tell people I knew which day of the week it was according to where he was, from Knoxville, Pennsylvania, to Bath and Pavilion, New York.

I begged my father for a horse. He had grown up with work horses, and everything was very utilitarian: if you fed an animal it had to be useful to you, so my job was herding the cattle using my horse.

My father was an experienced horseman. I didn’t know it at the time, but he chose the oldest and safest mount named Duke as my first horse. He was an 18-year-old American Saddlebred who had been all over the show-ring circuit.

I had two friends I could ride with. My grandmother’s house in town had a carriage house out back so I could ride there, put the horse in the barn, and visit the soda shop. The horse gave

me freedom; horses still do. If a young man invited me out, I was questioned endlessly, but if I said I was going riding, I could go anywhere. I look back on it as a signal from my parents – if I travel with my horses I will be safe.

As a girl I did gymkhana, barrel racing, and flag races; all the kinds of things kids love to do with horses in the Southern Tier. During my second year of college, I sold my last childhood horse to pay for books: two semesters worth at Alfred University.

You and Tom created Paychex based on a very simple idea: bookkeeping for small businesses. Tell me about its early days.

What attracted me to Tom, as one would guess, was his desire to succeed. When he proposed, he said, “I think together we could be very successful, and I would like to propose a challenge to you.” If you read about Aries people, you’ll find that when you mention “challenge,” that’s it.

We both worked very hard. I started out at Alfred studying math and science. Tom attended Alfred Tech. Later, after we were married with two children, I finished my undergraduate work at Empire State College, and then went on to work on my master’s at Brockport. Tom and I have a developmentally disabled son, and I got a job in that field.

By the time I earned my master’s, I was already part of Paychex. I started the first office in Mountain Side, New Jersey. The territory was massive. Technically, I was responsible for an area that had at least 250,000 businesses with between one and five employees – that was our target market. We couldn’t miss.

During that critical period when Paychex was started, I was still working elsewhere, which was fortunate. All new businesses take awhile to create income.

Growing a company like Paychex is a lot like working with horses. You just do not know where it is going to lead you. I got back into riding at age

40. I spent much of my adult life in Rochester and developed the Mendon Equestrian Center in Honeoye Falls.

You once said you wished for perpetual summer.

Growing up, summer was always my favorite time of year. I am reminded of my very happy childhood every summer when I stay in the Canandaigua area. My roots are here. I have friends and family here.

In the winter, I live in Florida. I developed a museum there devoted to carriages. The collection, nearly 200 vehicles strong, illustrates my progress from pony, miniature horse, single horse, then pairs, and finally four-in-hand coach driving, a lifelong goal I have seriously worked toward.

Horses remain the single most-important animal in history. Horses helped wage wars, drag fields, ran our industrial equipment, provided transportation, and fulfilled our dreams. My study of equines has enabled me to speak about the history of the horse and carriage on three continents and I don’t remember how many different countries.

While breeds of horses differ worldwide, driving remains the same. Harnesses haven’t changed for the past 1,500 years. I first began driving in 1997, frankly because of age – sitting on a carriage is a lot more comfortable than riding astride. It also gives you a great sense of power; you’re controlling four horses that weigh about 1,100 pounds each, plus a 2,000-pound coach with reins. You are also responsible for the people who are with you.

Competing in an extreme equine sport requires goals supported by many hours of education in clinics. And, yes it’s true, I probably have about 100 hats. They say that the size of your hat should be influenced by the size of your carriage. Driving a four-in-hand coach requires the biggest hat.

For more information, visit gloriaaustin.com.